



# Future Generations and the UK 2015 Election Campaign – looking ahead?

Provocation

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## Summary

John Lotherington audits the election campaign to find how far discussion about future generations and sustainable development could be heard above the electoral din.

Future generations were important in the election if all that mattered was the national debt. The crucial, broader issues of sustainable development were largely side-lined, buried in unread manifestos. Some issues, like support for climate change, were agreed in a cross-party pact, with the perverse effect of removing it from debate and from the vital, participatory, consciousness-raising weeks of an election campaign.

We need to work out how better to represent the long-term and the voices of future generations in our constitutions, our institutions, our democratic practices and our elections. Maybe then they can be heard above the din?

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In the days after the 2010 election a now-familiar refrain began doing the rounds: 'The people have spoken, we just don't understand what they said.' Despite a Conservative win in 2015, we're still not much the wiser. Amidst the din of the campaign, voters were not offered the chance to think about future generations or how economic development, social justice and environmental limits can work at the same time.

All parties focused on the deficit – couched, to be fair, in moral language about a burden on future generations. As the Conservative manifesto put it, 'We should not be piling up and passing on unaffordable levels of debt to the next generation'. No party dissented, though there was a spectrum of opinion on how quickly the debt should be reduced, and whether it should depend more on cuts or economic stimulus.

Cuts have won out. Most of that reduced spending will affect today's younger citizens, leading [David Kingman of the Intergenerational Foundation](#) to ask: 'Will the pain inflicted on the younger members of today's society ultimately be worthwhile if it means we pass a smaller burden on to generations

who are as yet unborn?’ It’s an open question, though we shouldn’t assume the answer has to be zero-sum, where one generation wins and another loses. We need a dialogue about the interests of living and unborn generations, an issue rarely touched on during election campaigns.

Fifty years ago such questions scarcely seemed to matter. After the horrors of the Depression and two world wars, and despite the threat of nuclear conflict, it was assumed that economic growth and ‘the white heat of technology’ would fix all our problems and continue to improve our lives through continuously rising GDP. Whatever else happened in the 2015 election campaign, we lost that optimism. In the week before the election an [Ipsos-Mori poll](#) (should you choose to believe it) found that 51 per cent of respondents thought the coming generation would have a worse future, and only 12 per cent reckoned it would be better. This result almost reversed 2003 responses, when 43 per cent thought that the future would be rosier, and only 12 per cent thought things would get worse. This could cut two ways. It might be that we’ve lost a naïve optimism that permitted thoughtless, unsustainable development. Or it could indicate a new fatalism, a disengagement from exploring how to build a better future in the face of growing hopelessness and insecurity.

The insurgent parties were predictably the most upbeat. The Greens, with a promise they would tackle the three great crises of our age –the planet, equality and the state of our democracy – increased their support, winning more than a million votes for the first time in a general election. But the key measure they proposed to replace GDP – ANP, Adjusted National Product (which factors in unpaid work, environmental costs and other externalities) – never gained traction during the election debate.

For UKIP, as long as we lived within our means and reclaimed our sovereignty, the future could pretty much look after itself. They called for the Climate Change Act to be axed along with the Department of Energy and Climate Change, and for DFID to be rolled back into the Foreign Office, while slashing spending on overseas aid. Insecurities and disdain for mainstream parties brought them close to four million votes.

The SNP in contrast swept the board in Scotland, promising measures to limit growing inequality, an increasing emphasis on renewable energy, economic growth that won’t compromise social solidarity, and the best possible start for the next generation. They had a surge of popular engagement and a prospectus for the future – even if, for the most part, they did it with rounded aspirations rather than detailed roadmaps.

The Liberal Democrats placed the greatest emphasis on sustainable development, and particularly environmental protection. They proposed an Office for Environmental Responsibility along the lines of the Office for Budget Responsibility. The Natural Capital Committee, established in 2012 to advise government, should, they argued, be placed on a statutory footing to set natural capital targets for biodiversity, clean air and water, and to produce an equivalent to the Stern report on climate change for resource use. Meanwhile, a Public Sector Sustainability Duty should require all public authorities to act in a sustainable manner. Ambitious though they were, these ideas largely remained buried in the longest manifesto. Rather than being convinced that some of these measures stood a chance of being implemented through a Coalition government, many of their previous voters had lost trust in the party, seeing the compromises of coalition as just so many broken promises.

The Labour Party, trying to regain voters’ trust, ran a defensive campaign, emphasising budgetary responsibility. Labour made commitments similar to the other mainstream parties around mitigating

climate change as, 'the most important thing we must do for our children, our grandchildren and future generations'. They emphasized a plan to de-carbonize the electricity supply by 2030, establish an Energy Security Board, and arranging a million interest-free loans for energy efficient home improvements. However, these policies were eclipsed by the SNP surge in Scotland, and the overriding theme of the campaign, 'It's the economy, stupid.'

The Conservatives did not campaign, as in 2010, to 'vote blue, go green', though their policies contained a number of environmental protection measures on air quality, water and forests, framed as a crucial part of our national identity to be handed on to future generations. They promised to strengthen the Green Investment Bank, as other parties did, and committed £1 billion to carbon capture. They pledged that almost all cars and vans should be zero emissions by 2050, and to double the number of journeys made by bike. And they announced plans for a 'Blue Belt' to protect marine habitats, including around British territories such as the Pitcairn Islands. Still, it was never entirely clear where the money would come from. Instead cuts were promised – to the work of Defra, for instance – along with tax cuts rather than green taxes. And 'the longest [fuel] duty freeze in 20 years' might lessen a financial burden, but not the use of fossil fuels.

These were the promises. Come 2020 we can at least hold the Conservative Party to account for theirs. But few of these were prominent during the election campaign, and even fewer were tested in debate. There were far more current anxieties to preoccupy voters, still insecure after the 2008 crash. Some argue this will always be the case, and that it is impossible to fix on the longer term during an election. But from the [1987 Brundtland Report](#) onwards, magnified by the Rio Summit in 1992, and partially rebooted by Rio +20 in 2012, all parties have had to pay attention to sustainable development. The irony is that those policies that all parties agree on receive little public attention. In February before the election, there was cross-party agreement among the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats to support a global climate deal with the aim of restricting warming to 2°C, establish a national carbon budget, accelerate lower carbon energy, and end coal use. Such unity is rare outside war. But while a cross party agreement must be welcomed, it has the perverse effect of taking the issues out of the participatory, knockabout, consciousness-raising weeks of an election campaign.

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