

Has Labour duped environmental NGOs over its Planning Bill reforms?

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The government's Planning and Infrastructure Bill has been described as a 'licence to kill', as risking breaking international law, and as representing a 'regression' in environmental law. But how did we get here? Catherine Early explores whether the government has spun green NGOs a line, and what happens next.



Steve Reed and Angela Rayner set against Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament, and butterflies



When former prime minister Liz Truss announced weakening environmental protections through planning reforms, the anger from the environmental movement was palpable. NGOs spoke furiously of an “attack on nature”, launched a social media campaign, and warned of mobilising members in direct action and marches.

But when Labour started to talk of planning reforms, NGOs were more muted in their responses. Though some organisations have individually launched campaigns with members, there has been no coordinated public response other than a joint letter to government, with an emphasis on working with ministers rather than taking to the streets.

This has raised some eyebrows. In an article headlined *Why are green groups giving Labour a free pass?* for *The Spectator* in March, Iain Carter, formerly a Conservative party political director and DEFRA special adviser, observed that Labour's proposals had "barely caused a ripple of dissent" among environmental campaign groups.

"By providing support for glossy social media content on high-profile smaller projects like beaver reintroductions, some risk looking more like cheerleaders than watchdogs," he wrote.

Sophus Zu Ermgassen, environmental economist at the Oxford Nature Positive Hub, blames the sector's slow response partly on the way the bill has been presented. "It's couched in such positive language – how could a conservationist be against a Nature Restoration Fund? The bill potentially undermines all our protections, but couches it in the language of 'restoration'. That's so dangerous," he says.

Due process?

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill was introduced without consultation via a green or white paper, impact assessment, or piloting – an unusual approach, according to Alexa Culver, legal counsel at environmental consultancy RSK, who coordinated a letter on behalf of leading academics, ecologists and lawyers calling for MPs to oppose Part III of the Bill, where the most controversial reforms sit.

A very brief working paper was published just before Christmas. While it invited "views", it was not run as a formal consultation, and as Culver notes, it was closed a few working days before the bill was then laid before parliament.

Several NGOs that ENDS has spoken to report that they were promised in meetings with ministers that the proposals were a 'win-win' for nature. "NGOs have tried to work in close partnership with government to show how you can have a win-win on this, how you can build new houses and you can build

infrastructure in a way that is nature positive,” says Craig Bennett, chief executive of the Wildlife Trusts.



The heads of some of the UK's biggest NGOs met with DEFRA secretary Steve Reed (centre of image) within Labour's first month in office, sharing this photo on X (Twitter). Credit: DEFRA

However, the bill as it stands “is going directly against constant assurances we’ve had from ministers,” he says. “It is now tone deaf on this issue, and is just saying that it is right and we’re wrong. Either the government doesn't have a clue what it's doing, or it is lying to us,” he says.

Ali Plummer, director of policy and advocacy at the Wildlife and Countryside Link, echoes this sentiment: “We feel the bill as published doesn’t meet the rhetoric we’ve had from ministers behind the scenes.”

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The RSPB's head of policy Gemma Cantelo, says: "We were certainly promised that the bill would be a win-win for nature. Currently, that is just not the case."

There was very limited time to work on proposals for the Nature Restoration Fund, she adds. "We had a pretty rushed period of time from the very back end of 2024 into when the bill was tabled early this year."

Bennett says it was unclear whether the government had deliberately tried to dupe NGOs. "Are they trying to mislead not just NGOs but the British public, or do they just not understand [the implications of what it's proposing] themselves?", he says. "If they're trying to present their working in partnership with NGOs as a way of covering up that they're actually doing something really bad, that's a real slap in the face."



Liz Truss (pictured)'s 45-day premiership oversaw what green NGOs termed an 'attack on nature' through proposed planning reforms. Credit: Getty Images/Carl Court

Culver believes that in holding informal consultation via meetings with NGOs, the government was likely seeking to avoid the mistakes of the Truss government, which launched changes to nutrient neutrality without any

consultation either behind closed doors or openly, leading directly to NGO opposition.

“The government held out an olive branch of engagement by saying that it was planning to get developers to pay big pots of money, and that it would be great for nature, without showing the full picture to the NGOs... there was no consultation to shed light on all the elements that were really bad for the environment so the large NGOs were strung along,” she says.

Bill ‘endorsements’

A briefing paper provided by the Labour Party to its MPs on 24 March ahead of the second reading of the bill portrays support from NGOs speaking positively about its proposals. The paper, seen by the ENDS, contains a page entitled “Endorsements: Nature Restoration Fund”, with quotes praising the bill from senior figures of several NGOs including the RSPB, Green Alliance, and the Aldersgate Group.

RSPB chief executive Beccy Speight was quoted as saying: “With bold leadership, collaboration, and smart planning through initiatives like the Nature Restoration Fund, we can build a future where nature, climate, people and the economy thrive together – the right kind of growth.”

A quote from Shaun Spiers, chief executive of the Green Alliance, stated: “These proposals show what can be achieved when [the] government works constructively with civil society to come up with solutions to thorny problems.”

However, Spiers tells ENDS that he had not been informed that his quote was to be used in a briefing to MPs, and was “disappointed” to find out that it had. DEFRA had requested it on 7 March for use in a press release ahead of the bill being tabled. At the time, NGOs had been in broad discussions with the government about the nature restoration fund but the full bill had yet to be published.

The RSPB’s quote, while initially provided to DEFRA in the same way as Spiers’, was never used, and the NGO instead issued it as part of a fuller statement in a press release sent to media by the Wildlife and Countryside Link, ahead of the bill’s publication. In a statement, the RSPB said: “From the outset, we have been willing to work with the UK government to make sure the bill delivers the best outcome for nature and people. The opportunity to restore nature at scale while allowing sustainable growth remains, but any

attempt to spin our desire to see nature-positive planning reform into tacit approval for this bill is utterly misleading.”

A spokesperson for the Ministry for Housing, Communities, and Local Government said that it did not recognise claims that it had misled NGOs, or used quotes as endorsements in the MPs’ briefing without permission.

“We have followed normal process, and leading environmental groups have expressed support for the approach taken by the bill,” they said, adding: “This government has inherited a failing system that has held up the building of homes and infrastructure, blocking economic growth and doing nothing for nature’s recovery.

“Our Planning and Infrastructure Bill will deliver a win-win for the economy and nature, introducing the Nature Restoration Fund to unblock the delivery of much-needed homes and infrastructure, and introducing robust protections that will create only positive outcomes for the environment.”

Getting a place at the table

Smaller environmental NGOs are also angry with what they see as a timid response to the bill from larger NGOs. Rosie Pearson, co-founder of the Community Planning Alliance, calls the response so far coming from individual organisations “schizophrenic”, rather than a coherent rallying of members, as happened with the Truss proposals.

Campaign groups are feeling the pressure to not be seen as the “blockers, obstructionists and zealots” blamed by the prime minister and chancellor for holding back growth, she believes. “Instead of standing up to the bully and saying, stop the rhetoric and let’s talk sensibly, they’re saying ‘no we don’t want to be seen as blockers, we have to be really careful’ – it’s almost like they’re frightened,” she says.

“ It’s a civil service tactic as old as the hills – you get them in gracefully so you can get them out gracefully ”

Rosie Wood, chair of the Badger Trust

Some believe that the large NGOs have fallen into a trap of believing that a Labour government would be an ally on environmental issues following years of relationship building while the party was in opposition, and due to assumptions associated with it being on the political left.

Speaking at a webinar held by Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trusts, Dieter Helm, professor of economic policy at Oxford University, said: “I was horrified in the run-up to the election when environmental groups almost completely took the view ‘Conservatives bad, Labour good’ ... it’s completely naïve to think that because Labour is left it’s therefore pro-environment.”



Housing secretary Angela Rayner (left) and chancellor Rachel Reeves (right) have made building 1.5 million homes in five years a major Labour pledge. Credit: Getty Images/Cameron Smith

Long-standing members of the movement believe this is a mistake NGOs have made before. Rosie Wood, chair of the Badger Trust, and formerly a senior civil servant at Natural England, recalls that when New Labour came into power, environmental NGOs thought they had “arrived” with a place at the table.

“They never had a place at the table. They were being kept entertained so [the] government could get on and do what it wanted. It’s a civil service tactic

as old as the hills – you get them in gracefully so you can get them out gracefully,” she says.

But NGOs need to understand that in government they are dealing with “political deal makers” rather than scientists or long-term policy makers, she says. “Going in all wide-eyed and optimistic because a party said X in opposition is naive beyond belief,” she says.

Jonathon Porritt, sustainability campaigner and author, and former director of Friends of the Earth, says that an assumption that a left-leaning government is going to be easier for environmental NGOs to deal with than a right-leaning government is long standing. “That has led to some complacent thinking, and often it takes them a while to get fully into action.”

Change of tack

Overall, RSK’s Culver believes that NGOs now find themselves in a very difficult position, rapidly drafting amendments to the bill that Culver believes “do not even come close” to maintaining environmental protections. “The debate has been on how much to regress, rather than stopping regression at all and holding firm to our current protection,” she says.

Plummer, however, is still hopeful: “We still think that there are amendments that can be made for the bill as it stands that could deliver better for nature and deliver the outcomes that developers and government have been looking for.”

“Part of the parliamentary process is to analyse the bill, to make sure it is drafted as intended, if not, then that’s why the amendment process is in place - this is democracy in action,” Plummer says. “The current system isn’t working either for nature or for planning so it’s always right to listen and to try and advance the win-wins when you can, so I think it’s right that the sector took the government at their word on that.”

However, NGOs warn they will change their approach if they feel the government is not listening. The bill is currently part-way through committee stage, with line-by-line analysis of the controversial Part III yet to come. The government wants to complete committee stage by 22 May, after which it will pass to the Commons and the Lords.



The Planning and Infrastructure Bill is making its way through Parliament, with committee stage set to complete by 22 May. Credit: Getty Images/Hans-Peter Merten

The OEP's conclusion last week that the bill represented a regression in environmental standards will strengthen NGOs' voice, many believe. But if the government still does not listen, and the bill moves into report stage unamended, it will be "a big moment to really push, and push hard," says the RSPB's Cantelo.

"That's something that we'll be doing as the RSPB, and with our wider partners, not just in the environment sector, but more broadly as well," she adds.

Bennett is clear that NGOs will change tack if the government does not amend the bill, and sticks to its current approach of claiming the bill is good for both nature and growth, which is "deeply duplicitous", he says.

"If it fails to bring forward these amendments, that suggests there's no point working with it, and you can be damn sure that we'll move into a very different phase of relationship with the government, and we'll be much more hostile," he says.

NGOs feel that they have had good working relationships with the government so far, but the outcome of those conversations is what matters, he says. “Unfortunately, I think the Planning and Infrastructure Bill is the first test of what comes out, and it's deeply worrying.”

Many in the movement are watching closely. Environmental NGOs’ credibility is on the line, Porritt warns. “The NGOs have nothing to lose at all in going absolutely full frontal right now and drawing a line here, saying ‘This bill is unacceptable. We are not going to simply talk about tokenistic amendments which don't change the thrust of the bill,’” he says.

Starmer and Reeves’ rhetoric that nature is in competition with economic development is going to test NGOs far more than the “really rather incompetent efforts” of the Tory party to dismantle environmental protections, he believes.

“The NGOs are going to have to realise that they've got a bigger fight on their hands now than they ever imagined possible – I don't know how long it will take to wake up to that, because if the Planning and Infrastructure Bill goes through more or less as it is now or with a few minor tweaks, then that's a total and utter disaster for the environment here in the UK, and absolute humiliation for the environmental movement.”



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