

Speech by Environment Secretary Michael Gove – 16th July 2019

“How late it was, how late - why the earth asks us to act now”

A special place

It is a particular pleasure to be here at Kew - one of the greatest examples of the UK's soft power that I know. As we all know, it is a centre of scientific excellence, it's a home for nature in all its bounty and beauty, it's a magnet for visitors and an example of government, civil society and private investment making a decisive difference to improve our global environment.

And I would like therefore to thank the director Richard Deverell, and in particular the outgoing chairman of this amazing institution, Marcus Agius, for Marcus' inspirational leadership here and in his ten years here has seen it flourish and grow. I would also like to congratulate Marcus' successor, the hugely accomplished Dame Amelia Fawcett on her appointment - I know she in turn will be a brilliant leader of this wonderful place.

A warning that echoes every day

When I was a much younger politician, I was fortunate enough to meet the deputy prime minister of New Zealand. Now for me at the time it was a privilege – less so, I imagine, for him.

I asked him, 'What is the one golden rule in politics?'

And he said, 'Well, Michael, remember this: it's always later than you think.'

It is indeed.

'It's always later than you think' is a powerful challenge for all politicians. The only certainty about holding ministerial office is that one day you won't. So don't waste that precious time when you can make a difference. There are diversions and distractions in political life, there are those who will counsel delay and argue the time is not ripe for the change you want to make. But unless you drive change from the beginning, pull every lever you can, make the case for reform again and again, you will find that the clock has run out on your time in office and your chance to make others' lives better has been left too late.

But if the injunction to remember that it's later than you think applies to all ministers, it applies with special force to all those of us who care about the environment.

Because time is running out to make the difference we need. To repair the damage we as a species have done to the planet that we have plundered.

Nature is everywhere in retreat - we have seen a catastrophic loss of biodiversity across the globe as a result of man's actions.

- An estimated 80% of the original forest that covered the Earth 8,000 years ago has been cleared, damaged or fragmented.
- While the rate of forest loss has slowed since 2000, this is distributed unequally. Across much of the highly biodiverse Tropics, with 32 million hectares of primary or recovering forest lost between 2010 and 2015.

- Some scientists estimate that the rate at which species are now becoming extinct is 1,000 to 10,000 times higher than the natural rate and evolution would provide.

The landmark global assessment from the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [IPBES] makes for particularly sombre reading. The average abundance of native species in most major land-based habitats has fallen by at least 20%, mostly since 1900.

More than 40% of amphibian species, almost 33% of reef forming corals and more than a third of all marine mammals are now threatened.

The picture is less clear for insect species, but available evidence supports a tentative estimate of 10% of all insect species threatened. We know that at least 680 vertebrate species had been driven to extinction since the 16th century and more than 9% of all domesticated breeds of mammals used for food and agriculture had become extinct by 2016, with at least 1,000 more breeds which are threatened today.

And the situation here in the UK is particularly challenging.

- We have lost about 97% of our wildflower meadows in England and Wales since the 1930s.
- We have seen a decline of over half since 1970s in our farmland bird indicator, with some individual species falling by over 90 per cent.
- Overall, more UK species declined than grew between 2002 and 2013.
- Insects and other invertebrates, which make up 97% of all animal species, are particularly struggling in the UK. Across Great Britain our insects are less widespread – our pollinator indicator has fallen more than a fifth since 1980.

The United Kingdom is now among the most nature-depleted nations in the world.

The factors driving these losses are various and inter-connected - urbanisation, unsustainable agricultural intensification, deforestation, water stress, pollution and, of course, climate change.

And just as Nature is in retreat so global warming is accelerating.

We know that climate change has driven rising sea levels.

In the 20th century the oceans rose around 20cm. The rate of increase has only grown faster since.

The global sea level is currently rising by about 3.2mm a year, nearly double the 20th century average of 1.7mm.

Our seas are storing increasing amounts of heat: around half of all ocean warming has occurred since 1997. Even as we take action to slow carbon dioxide pollution now, physics dictates that the climate will keep heating up for decades to come.

And it is not just the physics which underlines the scale of the challenge we face, so does the hard economics. Insurance data shows that between 1980 and 2016, the number of climate-related natural catastrophes, like flooding, rose several times faster than disasters with a geological source such as erupting volcanoes, tsunamis, or severe earthquakes.

And the impact of this climate change on humanity is inescapable.

In India, piped water has run dry in Chennai, capital of Tamil Nadu – last year, the city had 55 per cent less rainfall than normal after the monsoon ended early. A further 21 cities on the sub-continent are facing the spectre of what's been called Day Zero – when municipal water supplies will not be enough to meet demand and rationing has to be enforced; a problem both Cape Town in South Africa and Sao Paulo in Brazil have only managed narrowly to escape in recent years.

In Africa, the Sahara Desert has grown in size by 10 per cent since 1920. Scientists believe that about two-thirds of the change might be down to natural cycles, but the rest is almost certainly due to climate change. The desert's edges – defined by rainfall, or the lack of it – have crept northward and southward, reducing some countries' ability to grow food. In winter months, for example the Sahara has encroached 500 miles into Libya.

And it was hot air coming from the Sahara and a weakened North Atlantic jet stream that caused June's unprecedented heatwave and record temperature spikes in northern Europe: dry soil conditions meant there was less evaporation, which ordinarily cools the ground.

All these examples bring the scientific findings to life, which now conclude that that human activity is responsible for these changes. The special report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change last year – compiled by 91 authors from 40 countries, including the UK – charted climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security and water supplies, as well as human security and economic growth.

If we manage just to restrict warming to 1.5°C, those risks are gravely serious. Beyond 2°C, they are potentially crippling for the way we live now.

So these twin challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change are massive, and urgent. And we cannot say we have not been warned. From Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* to Margaret Thatcher's address to the UN General Assembly in 1989 alarms have been sounded but the action taken has not been sufficient.

But, late as it may be, there is still time.

The scale of action required may be daunting, but the need to act is imperative.

There is a political need to act - because we cannot leave this planet to the next generation more polluted, more dangerous, denuded of its natural riches and increasingly inhospitable to all life.

There is an economic need to act - because unless we restore our natural capital then we will have depleted soils incapable of yielding harvests or sustaining livestock, we will have oceans with more plastic than fish, we will have dried up or contaminated water sources and we will have severe weather events increasingly endangering lives and livelihoods.

And of course as Steve reminded us, there is a moral need to act – because, as Margaret Thatcher pointed, we do not have a freehold on this planet, it is not ours, this generation's, to dispose of as we wish. We are partners in the great chain of evolution with the rest of nature and endowed as we are with reason we therefore have the responsibility to steward and protect.

Finding our way forward

Now these two particularly pressing problems: the catastrophic decline in biodiversity and the accumulating impact of climate change are both as consequences of an attitude towards nature, our planet and its resources which has for too long been short-term, exploitative and unsustainable.

And we also must recognise neither the climate change crisis nor the global decline in biodiversity can be solved by a single nation alone. But determined action at home in the UK can help us provide the momentum to help persuade the world to work together to change the way that we operate in order to safeguard this planet.

2020 visions

And next year, 2020, there are three critical opportunities for progress.

Firstly we are bidding to co-host with Italy the 26th Conference of Parties – the key UN climate summit at which the Paris Agreement on climate change will be formally adopted. If we succeed in our bid then we will ensure we build on the Paris Agreement and reflect the scientific evidence accumulating now that we need to go further and faster. And we need at COP26 to ensure other countries are serious about their obligations and that means leading by example. Together we must take all the steps necessary to restrict global warming to at least 1.5°C.

To help meet that target, the UK has accepted the recommendation of the independent Committee on Climate Change that by 2050 we should reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions – indeed, we are the first major economy to legislate to do so, following Parliament's welcome declaration of a climate and environment emergency.

We have recognised that that now needs action on many fronts.

We are investing in ultra-low emission vehicles for the future, which will both reduce greenhouse gas emissions and contribute to lowering air pollution levels.

We have reformed our entire approach to energy generation to use more renewables, and are committed to phasing out the use of coal completely by 2025.

And we will take the steps required to decarbonise other parts of our economy - from heavy industry to home building and aviation - in order to create cleaner greener growth.

And we will also ensure that the investment and incentives are there to create more carbon sinks - many more trees, healthier peatland and more organic content in our soils.

The second significant moment in 2020 where we can show leadership is at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in Beijing.

The plan is that new, international targets for nature conservation will be agreed in Beijing.

And we must agree those targets if we are to reverse the global loss in biodiversity and we must show that we are leading the way.

And that is why in our drive to protect wildlife at home and across the globe we have, among many other measures, re-introduced native species to the UK, mandated that new housing developments must be accompanied with investment to increase biodiversity where those homes are built, and we've also led calls to ban those products, such as neonicotinoids, which pose a risk to critical species such as our pollinators.

In advance of Beijing 2020 the Treasury have also commissioned the environmental economist, Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta, to lead a UK government review into the economics of biodiversity -

which will explicitly echo the work of Nick Stern on climate change - to show how safeguarding our natural capital is in all our economic interests.

And of course the UK has already been taking assertive action to defend endangered species worldwide.

To protect vulnerable species from poaching we have introduced one of the world's strictest ivory bans. Last autumn we hosted the world's biggest conference on fighting the illegal wildlife trade. And just this week I announced the steps we will be taking to look at the deeply troubling issue of killing some of the world's most iconic species to create so called "trophies". If we treat endangered species as expendable sources of our entertainment we demean ourselves and we undermine our planet's health.

And that takes me to the third opportunity for us in the UK to show our commitment to environmental transformation in 2020. The UN Convention on the Laws of the Sea will meet to negotiate a new Global Oceans Treaty.

The UK Government is committed to demonstrating leadership on restoring our seas and oceans to health. We have been inspired by the efforts of the heroic campaigner and endurance swimmer, Lewis Pugh, the UN Patron of the Oceans. We have been convinced by the evidence of environmental degradation which occurs without adequate protection. And that is why the United Kingdom has taken the lead in ensuring at least 30% of the ocean we are responsible for is protected by 2030 – a trebling of the present target. We will be asking all nations to sign up to that goal.

At home we have taken action to deal with the threats to the marine environment by tackling the scourge of damaging plastic pollution head on. We have banned some of the most common single use plastic items and are introducing measures to drive up recycling rates, including a tax to increase the demand for recycled plastics in packaging and reduce the demand for virgin plastics.

We have also extended Marine Conservation Zones around the United Kingdom so they now protect an area eight times the size of Greater London – the most recent expansion was in May. And taking account of the criticism some have mounted about the level of protection, we have announced a review into whether, and how, the strongest possible protections for areas of sea, known as Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs), should be more widely introduced across the UK.

Beyond 2020

Since the decision to leave the European Union, we have clearly shown that we are determined to lead in all the international forums which will set higher ambitions for the environment. Far from joining in a race to the bottom, as some feared, we have taken steps towards establishing world-leading standards, striving to continue be an example for other nations.

Above and beyond what the EU demands and expects

And one of the strongest examples of that ambition is the 25 Year Environment Plan.

Our plan has detailed proposals to clean our air, restore our rivers and seas to health, make space for nature, reverse species decline, increase afforestation, farm more sustainably and ensure whole of Government thinks and acts ecologically.

In areas previously covered by European legislation, we have shown our ambitions to go above and beyond.

We have shown how we can replace the EU's Common Agriculture Policy, with a more enlightened approach towards the environment and our Agriculture Bill will reward farmers with public money for public goods to ensure they get the support they deserve to deliver environmental improvements.

And outside the EU we can also replace the Common Fisheries Policy with a more environmentally enlightened approach. Our new Fisheries Bill includes measures to restore fish stocks to better health and take new management powers for our marine environment.

And also, because in improving the state of Nature we should also improve the lives of the animals with which we share the planet, we have made CCTV compulsory in all slaughterhouses, we have banned by law the commercial third party sale of puppies and kittens, and legislated to provide better protection for service animals such as police horses and dogs.

We are also legislating to ensure that this will be the last generation of wild animals forced to perform in travelling circuses, and to increase the maximum prison sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years. And we will enshrine the principle of animal sentience in law.

But of course to really capitalise on this moment, this 'unfrozen' moment, we must go further.

Later this year we plan to integrate and elevate our new environmental ambitions into law.

The Environment Bill: targets + principles + accountability

Of course, it will be the new Prime Minister who will have the ultimate decision on the content of the Environment Bill but our party has collectively agreed should be the flagship measure of the next Queen's Speech.

And I am greatly encouraged that both candidates to be our next Prime Minister have made clear they will not dilute our environmental ambitions – indeed they would seek to raise it where possible.

It has been a pleasure for me to serve alongside both Boris Johnson and Jeremy Hunt in Theresa May's Government and I know both care deeply about our environment. Jeremy has worked with me and others to safeguard our oceans and help devote more international development assistance towards environmental projects.

And I know Boris has been passionate about the environment for decades. When I first met him in the 1980s he described himself to me without prompting as a passionately green Tory, and in every role he has had he has championed the environment. As Foreign Secretary he has been a powerful and persuasive voice on safeguarding wildlife from exploitation, further protecting our oceans and fighting climate change.

I know that both would be great Prime Ministers and I want to affirm today that we can trust them both to do the right thing on every critical issue facing us all – and of course, most critically the environment.

The action we must take

And I am delighted that both candidates to be Prime Minister have been such enthusiastic advocates for the new Environment Bill.

The Bill will ensure that, for the first time, we in the UK take a coordinated, long-term, system-wide approach to the environment.

Now I want it to set the world's first legally-binding commitment to comprehensive environmental improvement in the areas where we as a country can make a decisive difference - air quality, water management, waste reduction and wildlife revival.

The Bill seeks to emulate and complement the world-leading Climate Change Act of 2008, which both set the level of national ambition on carbon reduction and established strong institutions to hold the government to account.

Behind this framework, it laid out the policies needed to deliver, by decarbonising our energy system.

In the same way, the Environment Bill is designed to put environmental ambition, principles and governance at the heart of government.

It should also create the right dynamic in all the practical areas where the UK Government can create the most powerful difference - in the restoration of nature, in planting millions more trees, improving the quality of our air and water, and improving how we deal with waste

Setting our sights high

In order to ensure our shared ambitions endure I want to ensure we have an Environment Bill which won't just hold this government, but future governments, to account for environmental improvement. Which is why I believe that the Bill must create a robust, legally sound, framework for a comprehensive and integrated set of environmental targets which taken together can 'bend the curve' on environmental decline.

And to ensure that the targets are informed by the latest science and evidence, we must make arrangements for independent, authoritative advice on the level at which they should be set.

That will be critical if we are to ensure we properly tackle each of the environmental threats we face.

Sceptical voices may, reasonably, point out that Governments have set targets before, and that some of them were isolated and weak.

That's why I believe it's important that we ensure all our targets are robust, underpinned by the best available evidence from science, that they are developed holistically and Government is then to be held to account for meeting them.

If we get the right framework, we can ensure that ours is the most complete set of environmental targets set by any government.

And that's also why it's important that the duties on others which accompany the targets are the right ones. When they are suitably rigorous, companies can have confidence that the targets are there to stay and they can plan their investments accordingly and deliver, clean, greener growth.

In developing our Environment Bill we should learn from the success of the Climate Change Act. It set a clear double duty: for the Government to achieve its climate change aspirations, and to publish a plan for doing so. I think it is to Ed Miliband's, and David Cameron's, credit that legislation established transparent mechanisms that are world-leading. And that is what our Environment Bill must have.

OEP: enforcement

But, of course, any law is only as strong as its enforcement.

That's why to underpin our commitment to change, we have to create a new Office for Environmental Responsibility to hold government to account.

The OEP will offer a free-to-use complaints system, and also have the power to undertake its own investigation. It will be able to take central Government and public bodies to court for a failure to abide by environmental law.

Since we published draft proposals for the OEP last December, we have heard many compelling arguments of how to ensure its teeth are properly sharpened.

I am grateful in particular to the Environmental Audit and EFRA committees who were united in proposing a truly independent governance structure for the OEP.

And that is what I want to see as well. There is obvious merit in their argument that anybody which is designed to hold the Government to account is independent of ministerial interference.

Among the many possible models, the Office for Budget Responsibility stands out, because in offering Parliament the chance to have a say in crucial appointments of senior officers it is also underpinned by upfront, multi-year budgetary guarantees.

The Select Committees have also recommended that the OEP should have a role in enforcing climate change law, as well as wider environmental law. I believe the case is compelling. Of course, that role would have to protect the specialist advisory functions of the world-leading Committee on Climate Change. But I am convinced that if we want a watchdog with teeth on every environmental issue it should be able to bite on climate change.

An Act that combines compelling and comprehensive objectives with strong enforcement powers and policies to drive innovation and investment will, I hope, enable us to demonstrate appropriate leadership.

Policies

And the targets will of course be backed up with detailed policies equal to the scale of the environmental challenges we face.

In future, there will be a legal obligation for all Government policy-making to pay due regard to a policy statement which will outline the core principles of environmental protection: a precautionary approach; the principle that the polluter should pay; the principle harm should be prevented or rectified at source; and environmental considerations should be integrated across government policy areas.

This will constitute a baseline - against this greener backdrop, we can strengthen and reform our approach where we can make the biggest improvements.

Let me say a little about our ambitions in each area that I mentioned earlier which are integral to the UK's contribution to improving our global environment.

Nature

The first priority in our bill is to make more space for nature.

And the first part of that is action to extend and improve our protected sites.

In our 25 Year Environment Plan, we committed to restore 75% of our protected sites to favourable condition and to creating or restoring 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat in the wider landscape.

Critical to that ambition are our National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. They are homes to a startling array of wildlife.

But we must do more.

And Julian Glover's review of designed landscapes has already uncovered huge potential for these special places to provide more for all of us. I am, in particular, excited by his emerging proposal that the current network of National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and other designated landscapes should benefit from the additional support that could be provided by a single National Landscape Service, focused on promoting wildlife, beauty and access. I look forward to his report being published later this year.

But any thoughtful approach towards making space for nature must recognise the most important people of all – our farmers and other land managers.

Because the overwhelming majority of our landscape - 70% - is farmland. The first priority of farmers must always be food production - that is the heart of their business and essential for our economic future and human flourishing.

But we know that as well as producing food, farmers have a critical role to play in our environmental transformation: in sequestering carbon; in cleaning up our water; and in supporting wildlife.

Farmers just haven't been appropriately rewarded for this work in the past. The system of financial support for farmers which has operated under the common agricultural policy has been based on the size of the productive agricultural landholding. That has worked against the natural desire of farmers to invest in the environment.

We are going to change that, with the introduction of a new environmental land management scheme which pays farmers - and other land managers - for restoring and enhancing the habitats critical for wildlife flourishing.

Our payments will be focused on rewarding truly transformative change – collaborating to create landscape scale improvements such as wildlife corridors, or helping farmers to adopt in-field measures such as min-till to enhance and maintain higher soil quality.

And these contracts will also help pay for the planting of millions more trees - a vital component of the action we need to create new carbon sinks.

Planning

Changing how we support farmers and other land managers is not the only step we need to take to restore nature to health.

We also need to change how we build and provide for new homes.

In the Environment Bill, we will legislate to mandate biodiversity 'net gain' in future developments. We will ensure that the environmental impacts of new commercial and residential developments are more than made up for, by ensuring money is invested in improving existing habitats and restoring depleted environments to health.

Mandating biodiversity net gain will secure tens of millions of pounds a year in additional revenue for nature.

And by legislating for conservation covenants, we can ensure that land owners have the opportunity to lock in the benefits generated by policies like net gain and our farming reform.

And, critically, to ensure that money is spent as coherently and wisely as possible we need to make sure we have the information we need about the state of nature across the country.

We need to be able to define the most effective ways to maximise carbon sequestration or to improve water quality in particular catchments.

That is why I welcome the compelling case the Wildlife Trusts have made for including a new system of environmental spatial planning in the Environment Bill.

We can combine the detailed local knowledge communities have with national datasets to give our collective investment the best chance of succeeding. With the right knowledge we can identify exactly where best to focus on reducing the use of pesticides and fertilisers, in order to minimise unwelcome drift of nitrates in our water; or where best to pay for better slurry storage in order to reduce the ammonia emissions that contribute to air pollution.

We will, therefore, legislate for a new framework of Local Nature Recovery Strategies in the Environment Bill, to help support greener communities, bring greater benefits from biodiversity net gain and create wild places that are bigger, better, and crucially, more joined up.

And in that spirit I want to act on the recommendations of the Select Committee on the Natural Environmental and Rural Communities Act and strengthen the duty of public bodies to pay heed to the environment.

The old duty on them to "have regard" to nature conservation is not enough. So, I would like to amend the law to require all English public authorities not just to conserve but to enhance nature.

Let me refer for a moment to a specific example where national policy and local feeling coincide.

For many of us, the trees around us, whether on urban streets or rural forests, which are some of most vivid examples of nature in our lives.

Because they are so important, both as a wildlife habitat and carbon sink, I am determined that we must raise our level of ambition and plant more trees – not just meet our commitment to plant 11 million trees by the end of this parliament, and also plant a further 1 million trees in urban areas.

We need to go further

That's why we will be consulting on a new English Tree Strategy later this year, in which we will propose new measures to increase forest cover in England from 10% to 12% by 2060.

And as well as planting more trees we must safeguard those already have. As we saw with the arrogant and insensitive decision by Sheffield Council to cut down their community's trees, local people are currently powerless to stop acts of environmental vandalism.

So we will fulfil our manifesto commitment with a clear legal duty to consult before any street trees are felled. I also want to see a new duty on local authorities to report the felling of street trees to ensure transparency and accountability to local people.

But it is not only irresponsible local authorities who have responsibilities they must live up to.

Water

The water companies of this country have an essential role in all our lives. They manage our most precious natural resource - and, of course, they also enjoy the economic benefits of a natural monopoly. We are captive consumers and their return on capital is guaranteed.

Their performance, however, isn't just a matter for their shareholders to judge. The regulators Ofwat, the Environment Agency and the Drinking Water Inspectorate also assess how well the companies are serving us as consumers and how well they are protecting the environment.

At present, 16% of our rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters are in a 'high or good status'. Our target is to improve this to 75% as soon as is practicable. Of course this cannot be achieved by water companies alone, but the role water companies are playing is simply not good enough. The recent Environmental Performance Assessment by the EA described water companies' record in 2018 as 'simply unacceptable'.

Around 3.1 billion litres of water still leak out every day – more than a fifth of the total supply. On the demand side, we as a government will soon publish a consultation on how to reduce household water use – for example, how to move towards increased metering.

But water companies must bear their share of responsibility. And in particular on pollution.

Southern Water has recently been penalised £126 million by Ofwat for transgressions including the dumping of untreated effluent into beaches, rivers and streams –aggravated by Southern's failure to confess to them. For these transgressions, Southern said it was 'deeply sorry'. Yet they still went on to have even more serious pollution incidents in 2018.

We need to take action and so do they.

The government's priorities for the water sector, in line with the 25 Year Plan, are clear: we should be securing long-term, resilient water and wastewater services, we should protect customers from potentially unaffordable bills and must make sure that we have a cleaner, greener country for the next generation.

So in the Environment Bill, Defra will support the regulators in ensuring that customers and the environment are protected. We will legislate to strengthen Ofwat's powers to update water companies' licences, in order to make sure that they can do their job.

Making sure the air we breathe is healthy

Clean water is essential for human flourishing and environmental health, but even more important is clean air.

Air pollution is the biggest single environmental cause of poor public health. Thousands of lives are shortened or impaired because of the particulate matter and toxic gases we still produce.

And it's the vulnerable in society – children, whose lungs are less developed, and elderly people suffering from existing heart and lung problems – who are most susceptible to poor air quality. There is an economic cost to air pollution too, from work days lost to illness and higher demand for NHS services.

Let's be honest, in the past we as a country have failed properly to live up to our obligations to improve air quality.

That's got to change.

As we leave the European Union I want us to be pace-setters not laggards in the drive to improve the air we breathe. And that means we have to take into account, I believe, the advice of the World Health Organisation.

Air quality has been improving recently, thanks to our £3.5 billion plan to clean up vehicle emissions and our Clean Air Strategy, which the WHO praised as an example for the rest of the world to follow.

But there is more to do.

We have got to ensure our Environment Bill includes a legally binding commitment on particulate matter so that no part of the country exceeds the levels recommended by the WHO. And because we know that air pollution has a disproportionate impact on more disadvantaged members of society, we have to ensure when public bodies draw up their plans to achieve air quality targets, pay particular attention to the condition of vulnerable groups. So we have to update our National Air Quality Strategy to specify that obligation for local authorities to take additional action to protect children and the elderly.

As well as setting stronger targets, we must also improve the local framework for delivering cleaner air. In the past, local authorities' obligations have been confused and in some cases they have lacked the necessary powers. So we will bring clarity, we will designate a 'lead' local authority to monitor local air quality and to write a local air quality plan.

I also want to create a new duty to cooperate so that all local bodies with powers to control emissions act together in a coordinated way. We will give local authorities the powers they need in order to meet these new stretching targets – powers to reduce emissions from wood and coal burning, also provide more powers to address pollution from dirty machinery such as diesel generators and construction equipment.

Waste

And just as we must tackle air pollution so we must be more energetic than ever in tackling the pollution generated by industry overall.

We must ensure that we exemplify a core principle of environmental economics.

We cannot go on using natural resources at the rate we have; we cannot afford to allow so much of what we use to be discarded, polluting rivers and seas; we cannot allow so much waste to be disposed of through landfill or other methods which contribute to climate change.

We want producers to pay for the environmental consequences of their processes and production methods – covering the entire costs of dealing with problem packaging.

Our new legal powers will also set resource- efficient standards for products, driving a shift in the market towards products that are lasting, can be repaired and can be recycled.

Where waste cannot be avoided, we will introduce a consistent and simplified approach to recycling across local authorities, making it simpler for everyone to recycle, with a consistent set of materials to be collected from all households and businesses, and clearer labelling on packaging so we all know what we can recycle.

We will ensure producers pay the full cost of disposing of their packaging. At the moment, producers currently pay only 10% of the cost of household waste. We will make them responsible for 100% of the net cost incurred in dealing with their waste.

Alongside action on recycling there will be new powers to introduce deposit return schemes for drinks bottles. The government's waste reduction partner, WRAP, have persuasively argued that the deeper that deposit return schemes drill into the value chain – extending to cover full life cycle costs under producer responsibility, and an 'all in' standard – the clearer the financial and social signal will be to recycle.

We need to work with business to make deposit return schemes as effective as possible and I believe an 'all-in' model will give consumers the greatest possible incentive to recycle.

The courage to change

Every step we take as a government to improve our environment and safeguard the natural world will be met by the arguments of some cynics and sceptics that we are regulating where we should leave well alone, taxing where we should let rip, prescribing where we should back off.

I understand all those impulses, I am a liberal Conservative and I hope properly humble about the capacity of central Government direction to direct the individual actions of millions.

But Government can, and must, lead at critical moments. Whether to guarantee civil rights, provide the universal education that is a precondition of a healthy democracy, to safeguard the rule of law on which all contracts and liberties depend, to provide the insurance of decent healthcare that civilisation rests on or protect the most vulnerable when misfortune strikes.

And what more critical duty can Government have than to protect our nation and so far as we can our planet from those forces that will deprive future generations of their birth right and leave them a world dirtier, more degraded and more divided?

Whatever we can achieve in the UK, of course, will only be one part of what Governments across the world must do to safeguard our planet.

But, in that global conversation, what role do we want our country to play? Do we want it to be a Silent co-conspirator with those who privilege present gain over duties to others? Or a leader in the fight for a better world?

I know that destiny is truest to our past, and to our character. And that is why I will always argue for Britain to lead the fight for a better world.