



Opinion... Leadership needed to plant trees now

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After returning from a conference New Zealand, where I spoke about reversing the worldwide trend of declining urban tree canopy cover, my thoughts were on the seven tonnes of CO₂ my flight pumped into the atmosphere.

The ethical dilemma is complex – balancing the benefits of disseminating innovative ideas against the harm of flying to do so. Realistically, flying is not going to disappear, so society needs to find another way. The principle of carbon offsetting already exists, and if our new Government is to seriously address the climate crisis, then a credible scheme with a realistic price for carbon must be a priority.

There is an undeniable scientific consensus that we need more trees, and the planting must start now. If there is serious intent to turn aspiration into reality, then ministerial oversight must be applied. The current farce of weak policies saying all the right things but delivering absolutely nothing can only be addressed by strategic Government leadership through proactive intervention.

For example, the Ministry for Housing, Communities & Local Government is obsessed with housing density. Quite right too because every bit of land should be used efficiently, but not at the expense of good-quality design for urban greenspace. The standard of new urban development across the UK is uniformly dreadful and it's easy to put right, but experience proves it cannot be left to local councils often lacking the skills and support to remedy it.

Another example is highways, one of the most powerful departments at the local level but with a mindset dominated by a presumption to remove and not replace trees because they cause operational difficulties. Highway authorities regularly obstruct tree planting on new developments and remove roadside trees to reduce costs, all to the severe detriment of local communities. Highways offer great opportunities for increasing canopy cover and yet it is not happening because of failed Government oversight.

What is extraordinary, and shaming Government in the process, is that ordinary people are taking climate-emergency leads by developing their own local initiatives. Visionaries in Cornwall are promoting an ambitious reforestation strategy, while individual communities are pushing for early carbon neutrality. A key role of Government must be to identify these early adopters, support them, and promote the best ideas as mainstream.

The previous Government was on track with its Tree Champion, but he is hopelessly stretched. If the new Government has any real ambition to tackle the climate crisis, then it needs a Minister for Trees, with the power to break the current blocks to progress.

