

Climate change Opinion

Recalling Michael Gove is an act of environmental vandalism

Ed Davey

I used to sit in cabinet meetings with the new environment secretary. He couldn't help playing to his Tory climate-sceptic audience

245 303 Tuesday 13 June 2017 19:31 BST



Michael Gove arrives for a cabinet meeting this week. Photograph: Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

Perhaps Theresa May has a sense of mischief after all. Putting Michael Gove in charge of the Department of the Environment is much like putting a wolf in charge of the chicken coop. To say that the Gove pulse is unlikely to race too much faster over environmental concerns would, from my experience of working with him, be an understatement. He probably regards global warming as an excuse to reduce winter fuel payments.

May bringing in her old enemy demonstrates her crippling weakness. This desperate attempt to buy off those who might bring her down may help her own survival for another few months. Sadly, it will do nothing to help the survival of the planet. As an act of environmental vandalism, it sure beats the mischief of her youthful run through a wheat field.

Gove's appointment is a threat to the British fight against climate change. Uniquely for a cabinet minister, Gove turned the word "expert" into a snarling insult. Truly, Donald Trump would have been proud. The public outcry over the US president's rejection of the Paris agreement shows us that people have little time for politicians refusing to listen to expert scientists on such a vital issue.

When I was energy and climate change secretary I sat around a cabinet table with Gove, and he couldn't help playing to the Tory climate-sceptic audience. As education secretary, he tried to ban climate change from the geography curriculum. After an angry exchange of letters with me, he eventually backed down.

On another occasion, he stopped Amber Rudd - my then junior minister - from attending a critical climate change conference under the pretence of needing her for a vote in parliament. The Lima conference Rudd missed laid the groundwork for the Paris agreement, and I attended as secretary of state. However, given the significance of these annual UN talks, the minister for climate change had always attended in the past. For Gove, as chief whip, to hold her back prevented the UK reaching out to many more nations, and shocked everyone involved with the UK delegation. The move was as petty as it was cynical.

Thankfully, Gove will not have primary responsibility for Britain's climate change efforts, which fall mainly to the energy department. But he will take charge of our environmental and land management policies - including designing a British replacement for farming subsidies - and drawing these up without a genuine commitment to tackling climate change would be a huge mistake. After his promise for £350m a week extra for the NHS, we wait to see whether he seeks to keep EU farming subsidies.

He could also be a danger on transposing EU environmental regulations into British law. We know he has a natural inclination to reduce regulation. This could endanger efforts to reduce air pollution or protect habitats if he fails to keep the protections on which we rely.

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I call on Gove to release a clear statement acknowledging climate change is real; that he'll do everything he can to tackle environmental problems, such as air pollution and flooding; and that, on this at least, he might humbly listen to experts.

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RickM17 25m ago Perhaps Theresa May has a sense of mischief after all. Putting Michael Gove in charge of the Department of Environment.

Or she is just stupid, like making the most undiplomatic person she could find, Boris, the chief diplomat.

madrupert 1h ago Will the treacherous and incompetent Gollum never be flushed down the toilet of history? I can only hope he becomes Tory leader. His weirdness would guarantee a Labour victory.

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