



## Second Reading debate on the Environment Bill

House of Commons, February 26, 2020

Speech by James Murray MP (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op)

Since becoming an MP, the Environment Bill is the piece of legislation that I have been contacted about by more of my constituents than any other. The constituents who have been in touch recognise the urgency to act and the opportunity that this Bill offers to make a real difference. The Government could take decisive action through the Bill to protect the environment. However, as currently drafted, the Bill misses this vital chance to act at a crucial moment.

The Bill proposes to replace the EU's comprehensive framework of environmental protections with long-term targets over which the Secretary of State has nearly complete discretion to change at any time. Alongside that, the new Office for Environmental Protection that the Bill establishes is not, as we have heard many times today, fully independent from Government, and lacks the strong enforcement powers it would need for us to be certain of its effectiveness. It is hard to disagree with Greenpeace UK's assessment that Ministers have just given themselves a licence to fail.

We have the opportunity to widen the Bill's ambition and strengthen its approach, and it is vital that we do so to ensure that this chance to set us on the right course for many years to come is not squandered. I urge the Government to listen to calls from my constituents and many others to strengthen the Bill—to ensure that it strengthens and certainly does not lower existing levels of environmental protection in future laws and policies; that future Governments are legally compelled to take action to meet long-term targets for the recovery of nature and the environment; and that the new Office for Environmental Protection is truly independent and can hold the Government and public bodies to account over environmental commitments.

Alongside those general principles, my constituents have also contacted me about specific areas of the Bill that need strengthening, such as provisions on deforestation, oceans and air quality. I urge Ministers to listen to their voices and to those of environmental groups on such crucial issues.

First, my constituents want specific targets to end deforestation in the production of commodities, including food, that the UK imports. Mass deforestation is accelerating climate change and is a leading cause of wildlife extinction. We must take responsibility for the impact of our actions around the world, yet the Bill does not currently address the UK's role in harming nature overseas.

Secondly, my constituents want the Bill to do more to protect the oceans, including through legally binding targets on plastic pollution and through measures to reduce how much plastic is produced and consumed. We are still waiting for the Government to take the promised action on that front, and the Bill makes no firm commitment to prevent the ex-

porting of waste which can lead to plastic littering our seas around the world.

Thirdly, my constituents want a firm approach on tackling poor air quality. It affects everyone, but it has been felt acutely in recent years by many people living in Ealing North and across London. Poor air quality stunts the development of children's lungs, which everyone will agree is a truly awful legacy to leave the next generation. Of the 650 constituencies, in 2018 Ealing North had the 41st-worst concentration level of the harmful pollutant PM2.5. Particulate matter affects everyone and means that people living with heart or circulatory conditions are at a higher risk of a heart attack or stroke. It is time for the Government to step up and help my constituents and people across the country.

Decisive action can make a difference, as the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan is showing here in London. The Mayor has been taking a lead on cleaning up the capital's air, including by introducing the ultra low emission zone. In 2016, air at the Hanger Lane gyratory monitoring station, which is just outside my constituency in Ealing Central and Acton, exceeded the hourly legal limit for nitrogen dioxide for a total of 45 hours. Last year, that had fallen to just two hours—a drop of 95%.

I give that example because it shows that change is possible. The Government have an opportunity to make it clear that clean air is a priority. They can give the Mayor and councils, including mine in Ealing, the resources they need to go further in tackling poor air quality, and they can use this Bill to commit to introducing higher standards nationwide. As we have already heard, the current legal air quality limits for England are less stringent than the World Health Organisation's guidelines. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to adopt World Health Organisation limits and to make a real difference to the quality of our air.

We know urgent action is needed to respond to our climate and environmental emergency. The Environment Bill provides an opportunity to do so, yet the Government appear to be doing all they can to resist solid protections and to avoid introducing standards that are equivalent to, or better than, those in EU regulations. That should set alarm bells ringing on the Government's approach to post-Brexit regulation generally, and it is an immediate and urgent concern that means we risk missing the moment to set high environmental standards as we face the coming decade.

On behalf of my constituents who have contacted me, of all those around the world who are affected by our actions and of the future generations who will be impacted by the decisions we take, I urge the Government to seize this chance to show true global leadership on protecting our environment.