



# The challenge of sustainable aviation policy in the UK: A framework for consensus-building

A Fabian Society Discussion Paper

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## About the Fabian Society Environment & Citizenship programme

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## Executive Summary

This discussion paper explains why greater consensus in aviation policy is desirable and then explores what a strategy for such consensus-building could look like.

The paper argues that:

- Consensus in the aviation debate is not only possible but necessary for long-term challenges to be met effectively and to survive changes in government.
- A process of reframing the aviation debate must be undertaken. This reframing process requires broad policy objectives to be identified for securing sufficient co-operation from the range of actors involved.

The policy objectives outlined here are:

- Understanding the climate impacts whilst valuing the economic benefits
  - A concern with how progressive policy options are
  - The fair distribution of responsibility
  - An open-minded approach to policy options
- Consensus on these issues will limit polarisation on the localised impacts of airports, a major flashpoint of the debate in recent years.
  - Public engagement with, as well as endorsement of, the policy objectives is a central part of any effective consensus-building strategy. Understanding public attitudes is a current gap in the evidence base required to build consensus.
  - Short-termist, adversarial politics presents a major barrier to effective consensus-building and policymaking. Politicians and indeed all stakeholders must demonstrate responsibility in the context of long-term challenges.

## Introduction

Government policymaking on aviation has grown more complex in the context of climate change. This is due to the need for both a delicate balancing of trade-offs and an equally delicate management of interests: the attempt to reconcile climate change objectives with the maintenance of a vibrant and profitable aviation industry. With well-organised and effective campaigning from a range of different groups in the sustainable aviation debate, it is fair to say that government policy has at times been hostage to an emotive and polarised public policy debate. A desire to move on from this state of affairs is a clearly stated objective of the current administration:

*I want to move the aviation debate on from the polarisation which has characterised it in recent years, towards a consensus which balances the benefits that aviation brings with its impacts, both global and local.*

*Phillip Hammond MP<sup>1</sup>, former transport secretary*

In March 2012 the UK government will consult on its sustainable aviation framework, with a view to adopting this framework in March 2013. As part of this consultation process the government mentions a number of policy priorities including one to generate more consensus amongst “those who rely on and are affected by aviation”<sup>2</sup>. Whilst this is an important priority, the document fails to recognise (or at least does not explicitly address) the importance of setting out a clear strategy for creating such consensus.

Drawing upon evidence from the study of consensus-building from political science literature, as well as previous research undertaken by the Fabian Society, this paper argues that there are three essential phases necessary for a mature debate on aviation:

- 1) A clear set of policy objectives must be spelt out and receive ‘buy-in’ from the various stakeholders involved in sustainable aviation debate.
- 2) Public attitudes need to be better understood in the context of these objectives and the policy options involved.
- 3) Finally, for such consensus to facilitate a politically deliverable aviation policy, it must be underpinned by a move away from oppositional, short-

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Transport website, written statement, 30th March 2011

<sup>2</sup> Developing a sustainable framework for UK aviation: scoping document (Department for Transport, 2011)

termist politics that seek to place electoral gain above the long-term interests of policy.

The rationale for this strategy is explored in the sections that follow. Whilst this paper does not claim to provide a once-and-for-all solution to the problem of aviation policy, it does seek to represent a positive contribution to the discussion of how to move the debate to a less polarised space.

### **Consensus: possible, desirable or necessary?**

The main argument against placing an emphasis on consensus is that a plurality of ideas and disagreement actually serves a critical function in scrutinising policymaking and enhancing the decision making process. Dryzek and Niemeyer<sup>3</sup> address this tension between consensus and pluralism by suggesting that, taken to their logical extreme, neither is desirable. Their work then argues that a plurality of values, beliefs and preferences in a policy-making dilemma is compatible with what they define as a 'meta-consensus' in one or more of these areas. This contribution is important firstly because it recognises that there are different forms and levels of consensus. Secondly, it demonstrates the possibility of reconciling a plurality of positions in policy dilemmas with sufficient consensus so as to facilitate progress in decision-making.

In a UK context, the All Party Parliamentary Climate Change Group (APPCCG) undertook an inquiry<sup>4</sup> to investigate how useful consensus would be. The inquiry concluded that consensus would *not* have to be an 'all or nothing' settlement to work but should include agreement on emission targets and a long-term policy framework that would facilitate the meeting of such targets.

Anthony Giddens reviewed the work of the APPCCG and echoed its conclusion that "the large majority of contributors accepted that a consensus across the parties was not only possible, but necessary."<sup>5</sup> Whilst recognising the reservations of some that consensus may stifle debate, Giddens argued that the main argument in favour of such a consensus was that, due to the long-term nature of the challenges involved with climate policy, decisions and policy-frameworks would have to have a 'core stability'. This concept of 'core stability' is essential to ensure that policy frameworks can successfully withstand changes in government.

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<sup>3</sup> Reconciling Pluralism and Consensus as Political Ideals (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2006)

<sup>4</sup> Is a Cross-Party Consensus on Climate Change Possible – Or Desirable? (Clayton, Pidgeon, & Whitby, 2006)

<sup>5</sup> The Politics of Climate Change (Giddens, 2011)

Giddens argues that in achieving such core stability, what is important is a “clear statement of principles that are publicly endorsed.” This paper will examine if such an approach is applicable to aviation policy in the context of climate change.

An important danger warned against in the APPCCG and the Giddens discussion of consensus is that political parties playing short-term electoral politics is a danger for environmental policy. The APPCCG and Giddens also reflect on the relationship between consensus and public acceptability of policy. Both of these issues are seen as central to aviation policy and will be returned to later in this paper.

## Reframing problematic policies

Having established the desirability of consensus building in aviation policy, it is important to investigate the practicalities involved. Again, the literature from political science offers some useful lessons. The dynamics of the aviation policy debate point to a wide range of stakeholders with different interests in the short, medium and long-term. At its worst, the aviation debate is presented as a zero-sum choice between saving the planet on the one hand and promoting economic growth on the other. Martin Rein suggests that in such cases, diverging interests can be addressed in policy-making terms by a process of reframing.<sup>6</sup>

Reframing what Rein refers to as problematic policies can be done in a number of ways. Gibson and Goodin take a position which they call the ‘veil of vagueness’.<sup>7</sup> What this means in policy terms is that in the case of numerous competing and difficult interests, vagueness of means or of ends can be useful in securing sufficient co-operation to allow for subsequent agreement. Gibson and Goodin argue that even policy stakeholders who strongly disagree on issues can at least agree at “some higher level of abstraction about what should be done.”

The essence of the efficient use of vagueness in consensus-building is sequencing. The logic in the argument is that because of prior polarisation, attempting to agree objectives in too much detail early on could see certain stakeholders move from contributing to actively obstructing mature debate. The aim of such a strategy is therefore to agree objectives at a level sufficient for maturing the debate, reassuring stakeholders enough to commit to being active partners in the policy-

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<sup>6</sup> A detailed exploration of policy-making processes in the context of problematic choices can be found in *Reframing Problematic Policies* (Rein, 2009). The work of Gibson and Goodin is identified in this chapter as one particular method for policy-making strategy in problematic debates.

<sup>7</sup> The veil of vagueness draws upon the famous work of John Rawls’ ‘veil of ignorance’. For an in-depth exploration of this approach see *The veil of vagueness: a model of institutional design* (Gibson & Goodin, 1999).

making process. It is of course crucial that policy frameworks eventually discuss the means of policy implementation in great detail. But failing to understand the sequencing of when such level of detail is appropriate will not see greater consensus achieved.

This 'veil of vagueness' approach compliments what the earlier work of Dryzek and Niemeyer refer to as a 'normative meta-consensus'.<sup>8</sup> This means that whilst there remains disagreement on the preference of different policy options or the validity of the claims made by different stakeholders, there is sufficient recognition of the legitimacy of the different values held by stakeholders. This concept of normative meta-consensus is arguably sufficient to generate progress in policy-making whilst also containing space for a plurality of views and interests to play-out through negotiation and compromise. The paper now examines the case of aviation policy in the UK in order to define the actors and policy concerns involved in order to explore what abstract policy ends and objectives could look like.

## Polarised space: UK aviation policy

In 2003, the Labour government published a white paper on aviation. The transport secretary at the time, later chancellor, Alistair Darling delivered a white paper that looked at the UK on a region-by-region basis to examine the possibilities for growth in the aviation sector. The white paper was confident in its assessment of its own success in reconciling economic and environmental concerns:

*"The policies set out in this white paper will support economic prosperity throughout the United Kingdom, will enable ordinary people to make flights at reasonable costs, and will manage and mitigate the environmental impact of aviation, in particular noise, air quality and the contribution to climate change."*<sup>9</sup>

The white paper was well received by the aviation industry. The following press statement from British Airways highlights the recognition of Heathrow's key role as a major international airport as a major positive aspect of the white paper:

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<sup>8</sup> Dryzek and Niemeyer argue that there are three main types of policy consensus. These are normative consensus, epistemic consensus and preference consensus. They argue that each form of consensus has a 'meta' counterpart. The authors argue that an important element of a 'normative meta-consensus' is that the values agreed as legitimate should not be positioned in a necessary zero-sum tradeoff. This compliments well the idea of identifying of vague policy objectives in the earlier cited work by Gibson and Goodin. See *Reconciling Pluralism and Consensus as Political Ideals* (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2006) for more information on the discussion of consensus.

<sup>9</sup> *The Future of Air Transport* (Department for Transport, 2003)

*“For the first time, we have an effective forward-looking aviation policy which recognises Heathrow’s key role as Britain’s main gateway airport. Its continuing development has been guaranteed with Terminal Five, the opportunity to introduce mixed mode in peak periods and a third runway with a dedicated terminal. That is excellent news for the aviation industry, customers, national and regional businesses and tourism”.*<sup>10</sup>

Environmental campaigning groups were not as enamoured. Friends of the Earth claimed that it represented an abdication of environmental responsibility:

*“Today’s aviation white paper is worse than we feared. The government has sacrificed its environmental responsibilities to satisfy the demands of the aviation industry. Alistair Darling’s decision to massively expand aviation will not only be felt by people living near airports, it will affect people worldwide and impact heavily on generations yet to come. Today’s announcement is yet another missed opportunity to put the air industry on a sustainable course.”*<sup>11</sup>

An interesting aspect of the environmental opposition to the white paper was that it also contained more traditional conservation groups, not usually associated with climate campaigning, joining the opposition. The National Trust statement was clear in its condemnation of airport expansion at Stansted:

*“Today’s announcement of a proposed extra runway at Stansted is symptomatic of the massive damage that the government’s airport expansion plans will create.”*<sup>12</sup>

Both traditional conservation groups as well as campaigning organisations more focused on climate began to echo each other to reinforce the argument against airport expansion. This led to a broad-based anti-expansion narrative, primarily aimed at Heathrow, which became totemic for the aviation debate.

The range of different stakeholder voices is what makes consensus so important so difficult. Three of the stakeholder groups at play in aviation policy in the UK are represented in the reactions<sup>13</sup> to the white paper cited above: the aviation industry; large environmental campaigning groups such as Friends of the Earth, WWF and Greenpeace; and groups focused on localised conservation issues, which include large organisations such as the National Trust as well as smaller groups often

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<sup>10</sup> British Airways Corporate Press Statement (British Airways, 2003)

<sup>11</sup> Friends of the Earth Press Statement (Friends of the Earth, 2003)

<sup>12</sup> National Trust Press Statement (The National Trust, 2003)

<sup>13</sup> For a longer list of responses to the 2003 White Paper see [http://www.stopstanstedexpansion.com/white\\_paper\\_responses.html](http://www.stopstanstedexpansion.com/white_paper_responses.html) (Stop Stansted Expansion, 2003)

representing local communities. There are also groups such as the Aviation Environment Federation which do not neatly fit into either category but focus both on climate and more localised impacts of aviation. In addition to these industry and environmental campaigning stakeholders, there is also the political class – whether that is EU, national or local government. Academics also have an important role in contributing to the evidence base underpinning the debate. Most importantly, there is the general public. Finally, it is important to consider the role of the media in presenting the terms of the debate in the public sphere. These are the core stakeholder groups amongst which consensus is hoped to be generated.

Whilst the Committee on Climate Change’s 2009 report brought increasing consensus on aviation’s climate impact and the policy options available, the noise, air quality and infrastructure aspects of the debate grew increasingly polarised. This was particularly pronounced around the expansion of Heathrow. An oppositional and adversarial parliamentary political process failed to contribute to any emerging consensus and the 2010 election was fought with a pledge by the two main opposition parties (now both in a governing coalition) to abolish the plans for a third runway at Heathrow Airport.

This paper is not concerned with the relative merits of an argument for a third runway at Heathrow. The point of interest here is that the manner in which the decision was taken does not represent an ideal context for policymaking in issues relating to both the stability of our environment or our economy. If polarised debate around expanding or building a new airport is ultimately about the localised impacts, then the debate should reflect this. As seen in the evidence from reaction to the 2003 white paper, bringing local impacts in with wider questions of climate and long-term economic performance blends a range of competing interests to such an extent as to make the context of discussion one that is increasingly polarised. It is this polarised context which the current administration has expressed a desire to move away from.

## Arriving at the policy objectives

Based on the evidence reviewed so far as well as being informed by discussions with a range of policy experts from different sides of the aviation debate<sup>14</sup>, this paper now outlines the key policy objectives around which consensus in the UK aviation policy debate could coalesce. These objectives are purposefully abstract –

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<sup>14</sup> For the sake of brevity, an exploration of the literature on aviation and its links with environmental and economic issues has been omitted. Some of the key texts reviewed are to be found in the list of references included at the end of this discussion paper. A text which received particular focus and served as the authority for the links between aviation and climate was Meeting the UK aviation target – options for reducing emissions to 2050 (Committee on Climate Change, 2009)

as seen above, a non-dogmatic approach to setting policy parameters is required to allow for the widest range of stakeholders in the biggest possible tent. The objectives are not ranked or competing; they are interdependent and mutually contingent on each other being met.

These objectives relate most explicitly to the importance of both the climate and economic impacts of aviation policy. As we have seen earlier, the localised impacts of airports were a major source of polarisation in the aviation debate. With current talk in the UK of a possible new airport in the Thames Estuary, it is likely that this will be a continuing source of polarisation. This paper argues that in the consideration of consensus-building, if abstract ends on climate and the economy can generate sufficient consensus then these in turn can limit the polarisation of the debate around airport expansion and local impacts. Through reaching consensus on these points, the residual polarisation of localised impacts can be reframed to address this specifically. This argument is explored further in the sections that follow which suggest that successful consensus will be reliant on meaningful public engagement and a less adversarial political process.

### 1) Understanding the climate impacts whilst valuing the economic benefits

In light of the zero-sum presentation of aviation (i.e. a choice between saving the planet on one hand and economic growth on the other), the importance of first two policy objectives is immediately apparent. It is clear that a key policy objective for aviation policy should be to avoid what scientists refer to as ‘dangerous climate change’. In simplified terms this refers to ensuring that the atmospheric build of greenhouse gas emissions does not breach a threshold that would then trigger the more hazardous impacts associated with climate change. It is also clear that there are huge economic benefits brought to the UK economy by the aviation industry. As well as the direct contribution to GDP, this also includes the direct employment of about 150,000 people and supports many more indirectly. Even in the most positive economic climate, it would be unwise to dismiss such a contribution to the economy. In the current downturn, this is almost unthinkable.

In addition to the benefits that aviation provides to the economy, we should also incorporate an understanding of the benefits to society. The ability to travel abroad at low-cost and easy convenience is clearly an important part of life for many people in the UK. In addition to holidays, other reasons for flying – such as visiting family, the distribution of perishable goods or flying for medical emergencies – represent an important and valued contribution to society. This suggests that the societal benefits as they currently stand would need to be protected (or satisfactory substitutes found) as part of any publically accepted

aviation policy. So it is important to bear in mind a wider sense of value than purely economic: policy needs to maintain (or develop effective and accepted alternatives to) the positive contribution of the aviation industry to society<sup>15</sup>.

#### 2) A concern with how progressive policy options are

In the sense that the term is used here, progressivity means that those on low-incomes or with a low ability to bear economic burdens should not be disproportionately affected by measures to achieve our policy objectives. For example, in the event that air travel became more expensive for people in order to pay for policy measures to limit the possible impact of dangerous climate change, these increases should not price those on lower incomes out of air travel. Policy measures that are regressive will, as well as being objectionable in their own right, be more likely to draw widespread opposition and protest, fatally undermining all other policy objectives. As well as further highlighting the importance of putting public attitudes at the centre of any strategy for building consensus, it could be argued that progressivity is in fact crucial to successful policy making in this context.

#### 3) The fair distribution of responsibility

Another objective concerns the distribution of responsibility for implementation of policy. It is clear that government, industry, the public and environmental campaigning groups all have a responsibility for ensuring policy objectives are met. It is important though that responsibility is seen as proportionate, fair and legitimate. If too heavy a burden is placed on one of the groups mentioned, it could cause this group to stop co-operating with efforts to design policy and in certain cases lead to a policymaking gridlock. Additionally, no group should escape the need to contribute to wider efforts to meet the objectives outlined.

#### 4) An open-minded approach to policy options

A final further policy objective is that all policy options should be considered in an open-minded manner. Given the importance to human welfare associated with meeting the primary objectives, the full range of policy options available should be open for consideration. Everything should be on the table. The policy objectives relating to progressivity and responsibility outlined above ensure that such policy options meet important tests before being viable. These objectives also point to a need enhanced procedural fairness which could be crucial to limiting polarisation of the debate around airport expansion and localised impacts.

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<sup>15</sup> Although the focus of this paper is very much UK based, it is worth mentioning the work done on quantifying the positive benefits brought by aviation in facilitating pro-poor economic growth through tourism in the Global South. For more on this issue see *Tourism and Poverty Reduction: Pathways to Prosperity* (Ashley & Mitchell, 2010)

## Importance of public attitudes

There is a wealth of evidence that public deliberation of problematic and polarised policy can be instrumental in limiting such polarisation and at times adding democratic legitimacy to difficult political decisions. Examining a case of expanding a road through prized rainforest in Australia, Simon Niemeyer argued that by the very nature of the information sharing phase of deliberative processes it helped to "...brush away those highly polarised attitudes, dispel(ling) the myths and symbolic posturing on both sides that had come to dominate the debate."<sup>16</sup>

The extremes of opinion in the aviation debate do little to engage the public and efforts to generate consensus must be based upon the principle of democratic consent. This paper therefore argues that public engagement with, as well as endorsement of, the policy objectives is a central part of any effective consensus-building strategy. In order for this to be possible, there must be further research undertaken to better understand public attitudes in the context of the policy objectives.

Current understandings of public attitudes to aviation demonstrate that both the long-term stability of the climate and the right to fly as access to cheap and convenient travel are of great importance. Whilst this understanding is well established in attitudinal work such as that done by NatCen<sup>17</sup> or the Commission for Integrated Transport<sup>18</sup>, there has been little or no work that attempts to explore attitudes through a framework of principles seeking to build consensus.

Previous work undertaken by the Fabian Society<sup>19</sup> has demonstrated that public attitudes can be harnessed to build support for sustainability policy. This research challenges the conventional wisdom that attitudes merely act as a constraint on sustainability measures. An important element of building such public support is a greater understanding of the social and environmental context of carbon-intensive behaviour.

Furthermore, research has shown that public perceptions of what government and businesses are doing to further sustainability measures plays an important part in levels of public acceptability for policies.<sup>20</sup> Whilst research consistently shows that an 'I will if you will' attitude between members of the public prevails in reference

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<sup>16</sup> Niemeyer's argument is a chapter in a book by Robert Goodin exploring in great detail the strengths of deliberative processes in political decision making. (Goodin, 2008)

<sup>17</sup> Flying Decisions Research Report (Humphrey & Robinson, 2008)

<sup>18</sup> Transport and Climate Change: Public Attitudes to Climate Change (IPSOS MORI, 2007)

<sup>19</sup> Climate change and sustainable consumption: what do the public think is fair? (Horton & Doron, 2011)

<sup>20</sup> Water Use in Southern England: What do the public think is fair? (Doron, 2011)

to environmental issues, this attitude also holds in relation to public perceptions of government and industry playing their part too. Furthermore, the impression of cooperation between government and business in tackling sustainability issues is of strong symbolic importance for public attitudes.

## **Politics and business must rise to the occasion**

The effect of adversarial short-termism in politics has been widely demonstrated to be a key contributing factor in public apathy and antagonism towards politics and politicians of all parties. Dryzek and Niemeyer note that adversarial processes of deliberation weaken the construction of normative meta-consensus through opponents continually devaluing each other's legitimacy. In work for the Fabian Society, Meg Russell adds to the understanding of how adversarialism in politics creates lower levels of public engagement.<sup>21</sup> Russell's argument states that whilst politics is about careful negotiation and compromise, a purely reactive and oppositional process obscures the truth about the nature of politics. If the public only see political parties constantly attempting to undermine the integrity of their opponents, it is no surprise that they turn away from the process.

It is therefore crucial to the success of any consensus-building strategy in problematic policy that the political class demonstrate their ability to work in a more consensual fashion. These will often mean reaching across party lines and making decisions in the long-term interests of the public as opposed to the short-term electoral interests they are seen to represent. Not only will demonstrating the ability to operate more co-operatively with other parties aid consensus, it will also represent the political class taking responsibility for long-term interests that they are elected to uphold.

Demonstrating such responsibility will also fall upon the government's relations with business as well as business taking responsibility itself. Industry and market actors should demonstrate their ability to be active partners in building consensus on policy. As mentioned above, the symbolic importance of government and business being seen to work collaboratively can trigger strongly-held co-operative instincts amongst the public. In addition, stronger communication of such efforts to take responsibility for sustainability objectives can help signal the importance of such efforts in the public consciousness. This means that businesses must demonstrate their social and environmental responsibility beyond the delivery of services in return for profit.

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<sup>21</sup> Must Politics Disappoint? (Russell, 2005)

In the cases of both politics and business, many representatives from these stakeholder groups will argue they are already playing their part. But satisfaction with politicians and faith in corporations are at incredibly low-levels. What this suggests is that not only must government and business take action but they must also place high priority in communicating this. It is here that the role of environmental campaigning groups becomes even more important. At its very worst, a continuation of polarised debate will see the environmental and aviation industry lobbies engage in devaluing the legitimacy of the other and disputing their claims. At its very best, a more consensual policy debate should see environmental groups providing the industry, as well as the government, with a high degree of scrutiny, suggesting ways in which they could and should do more to help meet the difficult challenges involved.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that not only is the coalition government in the UK right to seek greater consensus in the aviation debate, but that such consensus is in fact achievable. Drawing upon political science literature, this paper has offered an examination of what consensus means as well as some suggestions of how this can be achieved.

The four policy objectives outlined in this paper represent an attempt to suggest what is necessary in order to form the platform upon which genuine and increased consensus can be built upon. There are many elements to such a process but this paper has urged that public attitudes are a crucial component of a successful consensus-building strategy. This means developing our understanding of how the public deliberate about the values underpinning the difficult choices involved in aviation policy.

The deliberation of members of the public about difficult choices involved in aviation policy is of course a noble democratic end in itself. But beyond this, such an understanding of how the deliberation process unfolds can aid political decision-making. To take just one example, in order to reconcile growth in aviation whilst avoiding dangerous climate change, the levels of emissions in other parts of the economy would have to be radically reduced. Understanding more about what kind of approaches are acceptable to the public can be crucial in ensuring the effective progress of policy making.

But it is not just the public that play an important role in this strategy. What this paper really drives at is a wider point about environment and citizenship, and the need for all stakeholders to recognise their mutual reliance in ensuring that the

sustained health of our natural environment and a vibrant economy go hand in hand, and the long term thinking this calls for.

Responsibility must be the green thread that runs through all levels of engagement with environmental policy. The government, the public, industry and campaigning groups must all demonstrate their responsibility to each other in the context of long-term challenges. The future of our climate, the health of our economy, our society and ultimately of our planet rely on this greater sense of citizenship driving the policy agenda.

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