



MARK CARWARDINE

THE GREEN PARTY HAD THE CHANCE TO PUT THE ENVIRONMENT AT THE HEART OF THE POLITICAL DEBATE. SO WHAT WENT WRONG?

OPINION

What a fiasco. Natalie Bennett, the leader of the Green Party, promised the “biggest, boldest campaign ever”. And what did we get? The most shambolic, unfocused campaign ever.

There was never any expectation that the Greens might actually win the General Election. But this was the moment – if ever there was one – for environmentalists to challenge the ‘business as usual’ politics we’ve begrudgingly come to expect from the mainstream parties.

Apart from winning seats in Parliament, the Greens had one simple task – to break the unacceptable political silence on the environment. In an ideal world they would have shown how it directly affects the economy, the NHS, energy bills and all of the other issues that politicians actually care about. Even if they had put one simple environmental issue onto the political agenda, it would all have been worthwhile. Nigel Farage did it for immigration, so why couldn’t Bennett do it for climate change?

Bennett would argue, of course, that she wasn’t asked about environmental issues in most of her interviews. But the more clued-up political leaders can get their messages across no matter what they are being asked. So why did Bennett barely mention the very things that are supposed to be core to what her party stands for?

Things looked quite promising in the beginning. Green Party membership – and prominence – rocketed in a matter of weeks. Bennett has been taking the credit for this but, with or without her (actually, *despite* her), it was as inevitable as the inexorable rise of UKIP.

First, as we all know, everyone was desperate for change. Second, whatever most politicians seem to think, voters really do care about the environment. The RSPB alone has hundreds of thousands more members than all of the parties put together, while a YouGov poll published before the election found that 48 per cent of the electorate didn’t think the environment was being discussed enough.

Third, despite David Cameron saying in 2010 that he wanted “to be the greenest government ever”, he promptly turned it into the least green government ever. He abolished key environmental

institutions, slaughtered badgers, weakened the planning system, and underhandedly sneaked in laws that have undone a lot of hard-won environmental legislation.

There couldn’t have been a better time to swoop, but quite simply Natalie Bennett wasn’t up to the job. She coughed, spluttered, ummed and ahed her way

through some of the most horribly cringeworthy interviews imaginable. Exasperated interviewers repeatedly pointed out the folly of Green Party pipe dreams – sorry, “proposals” – on everything from Trident and the NHS to tax policy. Some of Bennett’s comments were laughable – “maybe we will have to pay sewer cleaners more than

bankers” – while others were plain scary (at one point she stated that it should be legal for people to be members of terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda or ISIS).

She was so terribly out of her depth that there was more chance of FIFA cancelling the Qatar 2022 World Cup than her ever answering a direct question or delivering a coherent environmental message.

What’s surprising is that the Green Party actually did quite well. Admittedly it only got one MP (the talented Caroline Lucas) but it won 1,157,613 votes. That’s only 296,823 fewer than the Scottish National Party (which with our skewed electoral system got 56 seats). Imagine what could have been achieved with a clear environmental message. ❧

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Natalie Bennett on the campaign trail in Bristol.

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