A Browner shade of green—energy and environment after Blair

The handover from Blair to Brown has been a long drawn-out process, and now it has finally happened and a new Cabinet and ministers have been appointed, the policy questions return. How green is Brown? How will the recent White Papers on energy planning, and the draft Climate Change Bill be taken forward? Will short-termism—and the next election strategy—take precedence over the longer-term challenges of climate change and investment in power stations and networks? What does the change in ministers and the reshaping of the DTI tell us?

Another year, and another change of ministers

In energy, the turnover rate of Energy Minister is now almost one per year. So far we have had:

Battle (1997-99)
Liddell (1999-2001)
Hain (2001)
Wilson (2001-03)
Timms (2003-04)
O'Brien (2004-05)
Wicks (2005-06)
Darling (2006-07) (taking over energy at the Secretary of State level)

Now we have Wicks again (2007-). At the Secretary of State level we have had:
Beckett, Mandelson, Byers, Hewitt, Darling and now Hutton. In environment, we have had two departments: the DETR created to satisfy Prescott’s status as one of the key Labour figures, and then Defra, and a host of ministers too. The mismatch between the long-term nature of the energy and environmental issues, and the short terms of office could not be starker.

With so little time in office, each has had their ‘initiatives’ and ‘core issues’. Battle rolled up his sleeves and plumped for Neta. Liddell wobbled about the ‘go-live’ for the new trading system ahead of gas liberalisation. Hain, with the shortest term in this office, focused on sorting out the coal issues, especially concerned with health claims. Wilson took an outspoken pro-nuclear line. Timms (and Wilson) had the 2003 White Paper to deal with under Hewitt’s watchful (and predominantly anti-nuclear) eye. O’Brien’s term of office passed almost unnoticed. Wicks had the next energy review to get going, though he was shifted sideways to science before he could complete the White Paper. Darling himself did the 2007 White Paper and launched the nuclear consultation after the DTI was drubbed in the courts.

Downgrading the DTI (to DBERR) and Defra

The striking feature of Brown’s new appointments is that the renamed DTI and Defra have been pushed right down the ministerial pecking order. In the last years of the Blair government, two of the big beasts in the Labour Party were in charge: Darling and Miliband. These two now hold the two major government posts below the Prime Minister: Chancellor and Foreign Secretary. The DTI and Defra both had real clout around the Cabinet table. Now we have John Hutton, a strongly Blairite survivor of the old regime, who has publicly questioned Brown’s suitability to be PM, and Hilary Benn, who faired worse than expected in the Deputy leadership contest.

There are three possible explanations of this downgrading. The first is that it
reflects the fact that energy and environment are now so important that the main decisions will actually be taken at the Treasury and the Foreign Office—in other words, Darling and Miliband are still in control: the former to fix the nuclear, carbon sequestration and energy efficiency spending; the latter to do the international climate change negotiations.

The second is the ‘cock-up’ explanation: that Brown actually intended to create a new department of Climate Change and Energy, but he baulked at the last minute for two reasons: strong opposition from the industry lobby; and the administratively difficult questions of what to do with what would be left—agriculture, water and the residual DTI.

The third explanation is that neither energy nor environment is particularly important to Brown, that he is more brown than green. In his first few days in office, the new PM has been very explicit about his priorities—health and education—and implicit about his concentration on winning the next election and bringing business into the Labour fold. On this view, the green issues might excite the middle classes, but the PM might be sceptical about voters’ willingness to pay the price through higher airfares, carbon taxes and other environmental charges, whilst the nuclear issue is a post-election problem. Until recently Brown has not been noted for his interest in the environment, having a much more intense focus on economic growth and now house building, runways and infrastructure. This may, of course, reflect his ten years at the Treasury, but there is little evidence that he shares Blair’s recognition of the central challenge of climate change as a priority of government. And at the Treasury, he was of course in charge of green taxation—or, rather, the resistance to its large-scale deployment in environmental policy.

The fundamental problems will not go away

All three of these explanations has some truth: the main players will probably be Darling and Miliband (and hence the DBERR and Defra will be less important). There almost certainly was a plan to create a new ministry, which went awry (and it remains on the agenda for after the next election). And Brown has a different set of priorities to Blair. None of this bodes well for energy and environmental policy going forward, and a period of treading water is the likely result—since Darling and Miliband will have other things to press on their time, and are in the front line as ‘events’ unfold in the economy and in the war(s).

In time, the Brown government might regret this neglect. Energy in particular has a nasty habit of springing surprises—in 1998, it needed a White Paper to deal with the ending of the coal contracts (Mandelson’s attempt to limit gas entry to promote competition). By 2001, an energy review was needed again, and by 2005 yet another energy review was required. Three White Papers—none of them anticipated or planned back in 1997—have so far been published, and few think they will be the last. The national policy framework for the new planning regime will demand a statement of energy needs (something governments find very difficult to define for obvious political reasons) and there can be little doubt that there will be further energy reviews ahead. The time lapse is indeed shortening: two years is now the typical length of particular energy policies (and one year the typical term of office of energy ministers).

The reasons for this sad state of affairs are multiple—to do with the way parliamentary democracies work. Across Europe (outside France), the experience is not so different. This points to a deeper malaise, and a need to rethink the institutions of energy and environmental policy and the role of ministers. What ministers need to do is to concentrate on the objectives: the
carbon framework of targets, and setting the security of supply margins. They do not need to deliver them—that is a task much better decentralised to a specialist body. The obvious answer is an Energy Agency.

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