

## Defra's wall of silence

### Parliamentary Written Answers

In the last couple of issues I have included answers to several Parliamentary Written Questions on river access put by various MPs, Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green and independent. You will not have seen one from my MP, James Gray (Con, N Wilts) because, when I went to see him earlier in the Parliamentary Session, he refused flatly to put one asking which legislation took away the right of navigation on rivers.

In discussion I commented that at a previous address Ed Vaizey (Con, Wantage) had set up a meeting for a group of us to see Waterways Minister Richard Benyon, who had refused to attend. Gray seemed to have a pretty good knowledge of what Benyon had and had not known at the time.

Gray, a Scot, was contemptuous of the SNP and likened the Land Reform (Scotland) Act of 2003 to theft from landowners. He wanted to see the number of public footpaths reduced, especially those receiving light use, and was strongly opposed to the English coastal path.

I asked the Ramblers if they were aware of his views and they confirmed they were aware of his opposition to the coastal path. In debate on the Marine & Coastal Access Bill in 2009 he said 'Given that two thirds of the coast is already open to walkers, does my hon Friend see a real need for access to the entire coast... can we really justify forcing through a path that apparently walkers do not actually need?'

'I am by no means convinced that thousands of people in our towns and cities are desperate to go for a walk along our coastline and cannot find one to walk along... I am not certain that there is a huge demand for allowing people to walk all the way from Newcastle to Carlisle via the coastline and Land's End. Anyone who wanted to do that walk would probably go along Hadrian's wall instead. I respect and admire committed long distance walkers but I am not convinced that there are an awful lot of them.'

'I have spent most of my summer holidays for the past 25 years at a house high on the cliffs in Cornwall, on the coast path. I tend to be there for the first two weeks in August, which is the high point of the holiday season. In my 25 years at that house, on that cliff, on the very best part of the coastal path in Cornwall, I suspect that I have seen no more than 10 or 20 walkers.' Somebody must be buying the guidebooks which Cicerone, Trailblazer and others publish.

How good are his powers of observation on lesser footpaths? Some people seek out quieter places to walk and get away from the crowds as a matter of choice. Mountaineers choose to climb any mountain to the top, not just having some token steep bits to walk up and down.

Gray claims to represent the interests of all his constituents, not just those who voted for him.

He claimed 'the number of walkers has collapsed; far fewer people go into the countryside than before the CROW Act was passed' He told me the majority of people want to walk for about half an hour from their cars, typical of the man who wants to exercise his dogs. His line seems to be that the public should only have access to land where there is heavy usage. He also implied that the countryside should be for those who own it or rent it.

Another interesting comment in the debate was 'It is a pleasure to follow the hon Member for Reading, West (Martin Salter)', the MP most strongly outspoken against canoeists, who was about to stand down to work for the Angling Trust.

'Once he has left this place it will be a poorer place once he has gone, although of course he will always be welcome to come down to Malmesbury in my constituency to go fishing, as he does at the moment.'

'Members of local wildfowling or angling clubs do not necessarily want walkers right beside them and I am sure it must be possible to find ways to push them further away.'

The inland rivers of England and Wales have been locked down since before we were born, actually what Gray has termed 'the arid ground of self-interest'.

Why should the views of my MP matter to you? They might matter because Gray announced he is to chair the Environment Bill Committee, where his views would have undue influence (although that did not happen in the first five sessions before the stage was suspended and he was not listed as such or even as a committee member). The bill includes water resource management although it seems to be more about restricting than allowing its use.

### The Environment Bill

In the Environment Bill Committee stage Edward Lockhart-Mummery (Project Convenor & Principal Investigator of the Broadway Initiative) called for not just the environment to be considered but also its effects, including 'to health and to wellbeing for everyone' as one of three objectives for the bill.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Lab, Southampton, Test) wanted the bill to 'consider the sea as well as the land', different from water and land but to be added to the bill's wording.

'We all agree that the marine environment is important if we are to maintain clean beaches and water we can swim in', he said

Rebecca Pow, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, also referred to 'on land, and on sea' but did not want them included by name and persuaded Whitehead to withdraw his addition.

Chris Tuckett (Director of Programmes at the Marine Conservation Society) noted that Stuart Colville (Director of Strategy at Water UK) had 'mentioned the temptation to use bathing waters year-round in different places—swimming in rivers and that sort of thing—so the need is there, from a recreational point of view, to do more', a definite reference to inland waters and their use.

### Freedom of Information

Unable to have a Parliamentary Written Question put because my MP opposed it, I put a Freedom of Information request directly to Defra. They are required legally to reply to any request related to information they hold.

As before I asked what legislation removed the right of navigation from rivers in England and Wales. After some chasing I received a reply from Sarah Hill of the Ministerial Contact Unit:

Q Asked by Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) Asked on: 22 January 2020  
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 6602  
Countryside: Access  
To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, with reference to the Landscapes Review, published in September 2019, if she will make an assessment of the adequacy of open access on water in national landscapes.  
A Answered by: Rebecca Pow Answered on: 28 January 2020  
The Government welcomes the Landscapes Review and is now carefully considering its proposals, including those concerning open access. The Government will set out its response in due course.

Q Asked by Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) Asked on: 21 February 2020  
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 18738  
Inland Waterways: Access  
To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, if he will make an assessment of the adequacy of existing regulations on rights of access to waterways; and if he will make a statement.  
A Answered by: Rebecca Pow Answered on: 26 February 2020  
There are no plans to undertake such an assessment.

Rebecca Pow, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, becomes the latest Defra politician to oppose paddling on most inland rivers in England & Wales.