

The economist next door

*Ian Pearson is newly arrived in Defra, taking over as Minister for Environment. **Simon Hodgson** finds that he's an ordinary bloke, happy to talk about hillwalking, rugby and economic mechanisms to avert global catastrophe.*

Ian Pearson is the third Minister for the Environment in this New Labour Government and – I have to say – the most likable. He's a gentle, rather diffident chap from the West Midlands, a man with everyday interests and a soft, rather hesitant way of speaking. Frankly, it's rather pleasant to be talking to him, but I can't shake the feeling that it's all some kind of mistake. Like the IT contractor interviewed live by accident on the BBC, I wonder if this really is the Minister, or if I'm filling in the time chatting to his diary secretary while we wait for him to arrive.

Now don't get me wrong. He shows no lack of intellect. He's got a degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from Oxford, a Masters and a Doctorate too. He can talk at length about market failure or about economic policy making in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s. It's just that when I ask him questions I get the kind of answers that you'd get from your mate in the pub. Can he tell me, I wonder, what it is that has brought him to this office of State. "What brings most people here is the phone call from Number 10. I was in the middle of a rugby field attending a corporate dinner at my local rugby club when I got the call from Tony," he says.

Or how about this: "I fought a hopeless seat in 1983. I only decided to become a candidate because I'd fallen out with my girlfriend and felt suitably depressed to take on a really crazy challenge. This was Bexhill and Battle in Sussex where the job advert said 'even the grass is blue'. And being a Labour candidate in 1983 was akin to having a social disease. If I'd have read our manifesto – if I hadn't been standing as a candidate – I don't think I would have voted for us."

Aside from the call on the rugby pitch, what's brought Pearson here is a roundabout route through a Parliamentary Secretary job at the Treasury, a spell in the Whip's office, the Education and Employment Select Committee, the Northern Ireland Office, the Foreign Office and the DTI. He's clearly not an environment specialist. This is obviously a criticism that he anticipates, as he is almost too quick to remind me that his role in Northern Ireland took in the agriculture portfolio. His career before Parliament is equally varied – including The Urban Trust, an American strategy consultancy and the West Midlands Enterprise Board. So what's he bringing to the table?

Well, there's no doubt about the biggest task in Pearson's in-tray: tackling climate change. In fact, it looms so large that during the whole of the interview, he referred only once to any other environmental topic (and that was water shortage, which, one could argue, is intimately linked.) "What we need to do is to make sure that more people are aware of the urgent need to tackle climate change and what they can do themselves



Ian Pearson MP

to reduce their carbon footprint," he says. "The polling that we do clearly indicates that there is a significant part of the population in the UK that really still doesn't understand that climate change is a here and now issue. There's a big task for us in Government."

Pearson seems to be bringing his everyman, bloke-next-door style to it: "We can't have unrealistic expectations that everybody's going to give up their motor car. If we can persuade people to leave the car at home and walk more, if we can persuade them to take the train to work, if we can persuade them to walk their kids to school..."

And then he stops and corrects himself: "Well, maybe 'persuade' them isn't the right word. Maybe the right words are 'make them see'. Make them see that it's the right thing to do for the environment. I just don't think that the nanny state idea really works. We shouldn't be nannying and dictatorial in the way we talk to people. If we can provide them with information so that they understand the importance of climate change they can then decide for themselves that they want to live more environmentally friendly lifestyles."

Hodgson's Choice

I'm not sure I agree with his solution, but the style is a refreshing change. But it's surely about more than that, I ask. People won't act without incentives. What about those?

And here's where the economist in Pearson kicks in. "There's this thing called externalities – just left to the market there's a whole range of environmental issues that just won't get taken into account. If you leave things completely to the market you are going to achieve sub-optimal environmental outcomes. So what we need to look at and to be creative in is: how do we bring in the full environmental costs of our actions? We need the debate to take into account full costs. In terms of production, processes and products but also how we live as well."

But he goes further: "There's got to be a mixture of incentives and in some cases regulations. I'm keen on us taking action at an EU level to regulate out some of the most energy inefficient products where there are alternatives that are clearly more energy efficient." He illustrates his case with examples of inefficient lightbulbs and set-top boxes.

I think he knows he's no expert, but he can see what he can bring: a mixture of down-to-earth experience, economic imagination and some hard work. He's full of praise for his new boss, David Miliband (tipped as the Cabinet's rising star – its Wayne Rooney according to Blair), although he adds that it must be a comedown for Miliband to have "someone from the Doc Marten's league as his number two".

He's clearly rooted in his constituency – deliberately steering the conversation in that direction despite his diary secretary (the real one) agitating in the background that we are over-running. "We haven't really talked about my constituency. I've always been right on the fringe of the greenbelt. It's been important to me, it's part of my growing up – you used to go and walk through the woods and in the countryside but at the same time I can catch a bus and go to my local swimming baths. It's that balance that I just think is very important."

"What I wanted to do this summer," he says, "– and I've got all the maps – was the Coast to Coast walk, but I've got a

feeling that I'm still going to be doing work here during August. There's still a huge learning curve," he adds ruefully. "Twelve days according to the books – start on what I call the left hand side of the country, go through the Lakes – it's supposed to be spectacular." As I turn off my PC and go on my holiday this year, I'll think about Ian Pearson, slaving away in the Department and wishing that he was doing likewise. I'll imagine him reaching for another ministerial red box instead of a leisure map of the Lake District – a decent bloke with a sense of duty and a huge job to do, but who deep down wishes he was walking the Coast to Coast. I really hope he makes it.

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