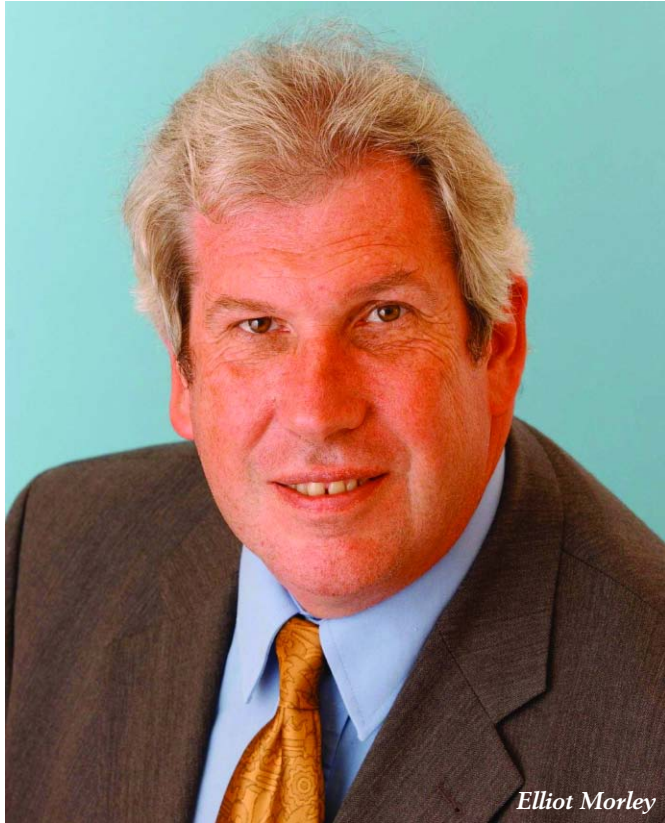


# Hodgson's Choice

## Slowburn



*Elliot Morley, Minister of State for the Environment, is often compared with his firebrand predecessor. Simon Hodgson found out that he has a radically different style.*

There is no better illustration of the phrase 'Ministerial Office' than this. Here I am sitting in the same wood-panelled room in Defra's Smith Square building, drinking the same tea, and accompanied by the same civil servants. "Ministers may come and go" it all says, "but we remain the same". Yes, the office is unchanged from my last visit eighteen months ago, but it has a new holder.

Elliot Morley became Minister of State for Environment and Agri-Environment in June 2003, a promotion from a Parliamentary Under-Secretary's job in the same Department. He has exhibited remarkable continuity in his Commons career concentrating on agriculture and the rural environment almost since his arrival in the place. He was opposition spokesman on food, agriculture and rural affairs for eight years, with the shadow portfolio transformed into the real thing by the 1997 election victory. At that time he sat in the late (and unlamented) Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF). Morley argued in favour of the ministerial merger that created Defra and seamlessly transferred his responsibilities into the new department, which he calls a "huge improvement on MAFF".

Yes, there is real consistency there. "I've always been a great lover of the countryside", Morley explains "even though I grew up in the City of Liverpool. We always went on holiday in

North Wales and the Lake District, and I live in a village now". He goes on to illustrate a very long-standing interest in matters of agricultural and environmental policy.

And as we talk I get a sense of a steady man with unwavering interests. He has been a keen birdwatcher since his teens, even going so far as to let it influence his choice of College (Hull, for its proximity to the mud-flats at Spurn Point on the Humber). His college friends were birders ("fanatics", he grins). He took part in bird ringing exercises, and was on the Council of the RSPB when it appointed Barbara Young (now head of the Environment Agency and once again working for Morley) as Chief Executive. His 'life list' of spotted British Birds stands at over 400 (not bad at all, given that the total ever recorded is not much over 500, of which roughly half are only occasional visitors). Ministerial responsibility has curtailed but not killed his interest: "I might have a few hours on a Sunday" he admits "when I bird-watch on my local patch. I still do wading-bird counts, I have a stretch of the upper Humber that I go and count once a month." It's hard to imagine many other Government Ministers doing a monthly task like this to feed into genuine scientific surveys. I find it equally hard to imagine Mrs Morley's reaction to her husband's use of his precious leisure time.

But then Elliot Morley is pretty uncompromising. He is, for example, a long-term implacable opponent of fox-hunting, and was one of the few Government Ministers to openly criticise the fuel protesters in 2000. And he doesn't dress things up, stating plainly what he thinks. He has a belief in "challenging the status quo, and pursuing a policy of radical change, which was all part of my motivation to enter politics" he says, and indeed he has already been pushing action on a number of fronts; the marine environment, waste minimisation, and linking the Government's procurement policy to green objectives.

Take an example from agriculture; the evolution of countryside from a place to grow food towards a managed environment for leisure. "There's nothing wrong with that" he states flatly. "The Forestry Commission probably makes more money from its campsites than it does from timber at the moment, with world prices being as they are. But agriculture will always have an important economic role, becoming more so as it becomes more diverse, particularly as farmers develop their business in response to market demand instead of growing for subsidy." As part of those changes habitat management and ecology will become more important and farmers will have to factor them into their business decisions. He gives an example "Farmers take decisions: 'Do I want to have an intensive cereal farm and compete on world terms?' if he's in the East of England, or you might find a Pennine Farmer thinking 'I'll have a few sheep, but I might like to open up my farm in relation to walks, interpretation or farm holidays'".

His vision of the future – diversified agriculture linked to rural businesses – is not universally popular with some feeling

# Hodgson's Choice

that it is turning the countryside into a theme park. "You hear this: 'I don't want to be a park ranger, I want to be a farmer'" he says, "They can do what they like. At the moment they have very large sums of money for maintaining a habitat. If they'd rather not have that and go their own way, then I don't have a problem with that. But there's nothing to be sneered at in terms of taking business decisions in relation to habitat management. Habitat management requires skills and farmers have those skills. It's respectable in fact it's admirable." That's pretty clear then. Don't argue.

All of this might be a bit abrasive, overbearing even, if it wasn't for Morley's genuine commitment to the issues. He may be blunt in his opinions, but it is quickly apparent that they are sincerely held. I ask him about his own environmental credentials. "I've got the whole family fanatic recyclers and composters, I use farmers' markets, I have a [Toyota] Prius for my Government car and at home I have a diesel which I run on biodiesel, and I've put low-energy lightbulbs in the whole house." He has also just completed negotiations with Future Forests to make his entire re-election campaign carbon-neutral, which is a first.

So here we have a minister with a long-term steady interest in environmental issues, unafraid to bluntly challenge the status quo, and living like an activist. Yet it was his predecessor, Michael Meacher who was seen as the champion of environmental NGOs and the scourge of polluters everywhere.

In comparison to Meacher's quotable quotes and high-profile, Morley has been quiet, almost invisible. The Minister refuses to be drawn on the topic, but it's my guess that Meacher's tendency to play to the gallery left him somewhat isolated within Government, and that – in turn – was beginning to limit his effectiveness. Morley is different, working steadily from within: a strategy which is more slowburn than firebrand. "That's right" he laughs "but you do go up in flames in the end."

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