

## Birds, Beasts and Baronesses

Barbara Young's brand of plain-talking enthusiasm has carried her via a roundabout route into the Chief Executive's job at the Environment Agency. Simon Hodgson is briefed by the Baroness.

Barbara Young doesn't read the jobs pages. "I always see millions of things that I'd like to do", she says, "so I don't read them on principle". But it was a chance encounter with an advert for the Chief Executive's position at the RSPB that led her from twenty years of Health Service management into the environmental field. "I was bored, on a plane going to Italy", she explains, "and I'd run out of things to read". Despite not knowing "a sparrow from a ready-wrapped chicken" she found herself in the role, albeit with an ominous warning from the RSPB Council that she had only one year to establish herself as a player in the field of conservation.

No-one could doubt that Barbara Young is a 'player'. The Chief Executive of the Environment Agency has the official title of Baroness Young of Old Scone, but there is no trace of formality or stuffiness to justify all of those syllables. She is an easy, relaxed communicator with an infectious enthusiasm for her subject. She has clearly "bonded with the issues", as she puts it – even to the extent of becoming a fanatical bird watcher in her (presumably rather limited) spare time. As she moved from the RSPB to English Nature and then to the Agency her interests broadened, but her level of enthusiasm has remained high "although, you do find yourself becoming fanatical about things like waste", she says with a hint of a grimace.

She gives the example of construction waste, which still makes up about a third of total waste. We discuss what can be done to influence the construction industry, driven by production targets and focussed on output. Young does not despair, offering a typically down-to-earth compromise. "The industry is paranoid about the issue of development of the flood plain. If they build against our advice on the flood plain, we'll just snitch on them to the ABI and they won't get insurance." So her solution? The Agency will help the industry through the flood plain conundrum, and in return wants to talk about a long list of 'Cinderella' issues: construction waste, the eco-homes standard, sustainable drainage and so on.

This mix of plain talking and practicality is a hallmark. She is, by her own admission a bit "in your face", but it's tempered with humour and her genuine commitment. She has needed all these qualities at the Agency as she continues the task of creating an effective single regulator. I ask her whether the turf wars which characterised the Agency's early days still linger. "There's still a little bit of a legacy," she admits "but it's getting better by the minute. We've



*Baroness Barbara Young*

just restructured 5,000 folks so none of the positions can be seen as the legacy of the previous organisations. We're about to do the other 5,500, so I defy anybody to know where they came from after that."

But isn't regulation itself out of fashion? I offer a quote from Stephen Timms – the minister with responsibility for CSR – who says that regulation puts a "dead hand on innovation, creativity and imagination". Young is realistic, confirming the policy makers' belief in "a techno-fix" to everything environmental. Unsurprisingly, she has a different view:

"Regulation, in its place and the right sort of regulation is an absolutely fundamental part of the armoury" she says. "And I don't just mean light touch regulation; there are places where absolutely strong, clear, explicit hard-driving

regulation is the best thing." What about Stephen Timms' argument that this kills innovation, and creativity? "What business is good at is innovating. If we set them a tough regulatory target and not tell them how to do it, then they go away and organise themselves and do it."

Her belief in tough, explicit regulation is tempered by practical common sense when we discuss the tricky problem of

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agriculture. Pollution from agricultural sources is now one of the Agency's biggest challenges, and the 170,000 small and medium sized enterprises making up the British farming industry are not going to respond too well to regulation. "We'd never police it, and they are so fragile that they'd go under" says Young. Once again, she has a practical solution: "We've trained farmers exquisitely well to respond to having fivers waved at them. The answer is that we've got to get the subsidy system sorted out, some education so that they know what to do, and then a very light touch regulatory regime with just a bit of compliance checking."

This discussion suggests to me that Barbara Young's personal values are a theme running through her career history. She agrees, and expands on the idea: "Doing a managerial job that has a good social outcome, very interesting policy and public issues with a lot of controversy and politics and associated with them." So it sounds like she's in the ideal spot. "I've always wanted to do the Environment Agency since I sat through the bill that created it when I was at the RSPB. If you can't do good with 800 million quid and 10,500 staff you can't do good with anything". And there's more to do; she says she can see another five years in front of her "providing nobody sacks me".

So she sounds committed but I wonder whether, bored on another aeroplane, Barbara Young might suddenly find herself applying for a job with Children in Need. Does she still stick to

her rule of not reading the jobs pages? "Absolutely, I never read the job adverts." Those of us with an interest in a strong, forward-looking environmental regulator should be glad of that.

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