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A Plant in Government

Another deadly tree disease threatens these islands, but the government will do nothing to keep it out.

The less you care, the better you will do. This has long been the promise of conservative politics on both sides of the Atlantic. People who couldn't give a tinker's cuss about the consequences of their actions are elevated to the highest levels of government. Their role is to trash what lesser mortals value.

This describes the position of **almost everyone in Trump's cabinet**. In the UK, I feel it applies, among others, to Jeremy Hunt at the department of health, Boris Johnson at the foreign office, **Priti Patel at international development** and now Michael Gove at the environment department. The worst possible candidates are given the most sensitive portfolios.

Gove has **attacked the two main pillars** of protection for wildlife and ecosystems in this country, the European habitats and birds directives. As education secretary, he **sought to erase climate change** from the geography curriculum. Now, at a time of great environmental hazard, as the *Brexit* talks commence, he has been granted an opportunity to make his dream – and our nightmare – of destroying public protections come true.

Let me give you an example of how dangerous this appointment – and the government's wider agenda – could be. A plant disease called ***Xylella fastidiosa***, that originated in South America, is leaping across the European continent. It has now reached Italy, the Balearic Islands, Germany and France. As well as crops, it threatens many of our forest trees, including oak, elm, ash, cherry, sycamore and plane. Urban trees seem to be **especially susceptible**, perhaps because of the stresses they suffer: in American cities, some streets have had to be clear-felled. There is no known cure.

Xylella has **ripped through olive groves** in Italy and vineyards and fruit farms in the Americas. It is impossible to say how many species it might affect, how much damage it might do and whether it would thrive in our climate. But we should hope we never find out.

It is unlikely to stay within the current European infection sites. Once the disease arrives, in imported plants, it is spread by sap-sucking insects, which can quickly be blown beyond the exclusion zones the EU has established. One of the few places that could remain unaffected is the United Kingdom, whose islands, **Shakespeare remarked**, are a "*fortress built by Nature for herself against infection*". This blessed plot could become a reserve for species hammered by invasive diseases elsewhere.

But the government won't contemplate it. Deaf to the pleas of **foresters, scientists** and **tree nurseries**, the only measure it will apply is a "*plant passport*", certifying that potential hosts of the disease are free from infection before they are imported. There are **55 plants on its list**. But already, according to the *European Food Safety Authority*, 359 plant species **are known to carry the disease**, in many cases

without showing any symptoms. They range across wildly different families, from magnolias to meadow grass, hydrangeas to holly, asparagus to aubergines, broad beans to buttercups, nettles to nightshade and lilac to lemon trees. New hosts are being discovered all the time. *The only safe assumption is that almost any species could be a potential carrier.*

In other words, the entire live plant trade presents a threat. The freedom with which it can move plants and the soil in which they are rooted across borders is a classic example of regulatory failure, that has *spread hundreds of invasive species* around the world. Unless there is a radical change of policy, the UK appears likely to repeat its grim experience with Dutch elm disease and *ash dieback*, but in this case potentially affecting far more species.

What this threat appears to demand is a moratorium on the import of all live plants other than those grown through tissue culture (propagation in sterile conditions). This would require negotiation with the EU or (in future) the *World Trade Organisation*. But while the government has long been happy *to pursue a holy war* in such forums on behalf of financiers and other favoured interests, it is not prepared to request concessions to serve the wider public good. I hope I am proved wrong, but the notion that Michael Gove would champion such measures seems preposterous.

He represents, in its extreme form, the *neoliberal fundamentalism* that makes such policies unthinkable. His *long relationship with radical lobby groups*, such as *Policy Exchange* in the UK and the *American Enterprise Institute* in the US, his characterisation of public servants *as "the Blob"* and his battles against public protections ensure that he should be the last person any responsible government would appoint, at this time of multiple environmental crises, to defend the living world.

But it has been a long time since we saw a responsible government in this country.

In 2011, David Cameron launched a *"one-in, one-out" rule*. Any new regulation could be introduced only if an existing measure, with equal costs to business, was revoked. In 2013, this escalated to *one-in, two-out*. This was the doctrine cited in 2014 by the then Conservative housing minister to *justify his refusal* to insist that sprinkler systems be fitted to new buildings to prevent fires from spreading. In 2015, the government ramped up the ratio to one-in, three-out, and locked it into law through the *small business, enterprise and employment act*. As Christine Berry *points out on openDemocracy*, this more or less bans new regulations. It ensures that business costs are transferred to society, where they remain, under this formula, uncounted.

It's the kind of doctrinal absolutism you don't expect to encounter in a democracy. But it now informs every aspect of government. It ensured that *repeated warnings* about fires in tower blocks were ignored. It ensures that crises ranging from obesity to air pollution cannot be addressed. And it will, unless something changes, tear apart what remains of the living world.

Like the measures that would have saved the lives of people in *Grenfell Tower*, the protections required to prevent further disasters for nature in this country are denounced by the government, the billionaire press and corporate lobbyists as *"red tape"*. The purpose of neoliberalism is to free the rich and powerful from the constraints of democracy.

Week after week, we see what this means.

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