

# Richard Cottrell: Was David Cameron's visit to the Somerset Levels really necessary?

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2/10/2014



David Cameron and local Tory MP Ian Liddell-Grainger during the Prime Minister's visit to Somerset last week. Former Euro MP Richard Cottrell questions the value of the visit

**Richard Cottrell**, Somerset-born former Euro MP for Bristol and independent candidate for the West of England in this year's European elections, says the people of the Levels have been failed by politicians yet again playing the blame game.

Politicians making away-day drop-ins on disaster scenes is always a dodgy business. Invariably there is always a risk of somewhat tasteless performances designed to play to the national gallery.

This basic truth was revealed yet again with [David Cameron's recent lightning visit to carefully selected parts of the flood-stricken Somerset Levels](#).

The sense of general concern for the plight of Levels people was pushed aside by the [immediate appearance of the usual Westminster blame game](#), with the European elections due in a few months and a general election next year. So even as he splashed through the flood waters, we had to be told that it was all Labour's fault because they slashed the flood control budget back in 1997. Moreover, that black cloud looming over his head practically had Ukip engraved on it.

I happen to believe that none of the establishment parties enjoys an unblemished record in this department. Budgets were indeed cut by Labour. But here is a prime example of those pretending to be without sin casting the first stone. **On coming to office, the coalition Government filched not far short of a billion pounds from the purse reserved for national flood defences.**

Budgets to counter flooding are regarded by the mandarins of the Treasury as remote contingency funding, all too easy to trim when the inevitable rainy day seems far away. When you have a government committed to the virtues of the "small state", under the heading of ruthless austerity, [then flood control is an attractive sitting target](#).

The pledge to restore some monies previously snatched from the flooding budget was the essence of empty politics, since that does no more than return the situation to square one without recognising perfectly obvious additional spending measures. As it is, the costs of the flooding over a month and more have made a nonsense of simply moving sums around on the balance sheet, on the Levels, never mind practically everywhere else in the South West. Creative accounting will still leave the Levels way out of pocket.

Mr Cameron's proper course in Somerset was to look, listen, learn and say as little as possible, then sprint back to London and kick as many well upholstered backsides as he could find there. He was not there as a first aid worker, or a spreader of balm, simply the Prime Minister, who should have been on a mission to acquaint himself with the soggy facts of life on the Levels. Saying sorry would not have gone amiss among folk who deal in plain language. That he was shocked by the real life scenes, rather than what he sees on television, spoke volumes for the remoteness of London power.

The contrast with the dignified visit of Prince Charles could not have been greater. He spoke, as usual, bluntly about climate change, but the ear he cocked to the Levelers was well understood as one of deep concern and even a sense of shame at how they have been virtually abandoned.

The essential flood prevention risk attendant on careful dredging of the rivers Parrett and Tone was set aside equally by both Labour and coalition governments. What is needed now is a comprehensive system of management for the Levels which respects man and nature and which, so far as humanly and technically possible, ensures that the appalling images we see today become a more remote contingency.

To that end I repeat my call for a Somerset Levels National Park, which brings together all the interested parties of the Levels to the task of controlled management of this priceless asset; all facets of local government – county, district and parish; the Environment Agency, interested bodies such as the NFU and those individual agencies concerned with wildlife who operate on the Levels. And by no means least, the Levelers, who should enjoy directly elected representation on such a body.

And finally, we are no clearer from all these events as to what Mr Cameron really understands or even believes concerning climate change. Having come to office pledged to be the "greenest government ever" no government has ever done more to retreat on the climate change front. Government policy is either in tatters or staggers from one contradictory position to another. We are having hurricanes in the West Country right now – Mr Cameron's response is a quick fix to appease the flood victims and wait for the sun to come out. With the railways collapsing in all directions, Cornwall more or less cut off by train, no county in the South West untouched by extreme weather, we fiddle while London burns.

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## David Cameron stunned by 'biblical' flooding on visit to Somerset Levels

By [Western Daily Press](#) | Posted: February 10, 2014

By TINA ROWE

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Prime Minister David Cameron with Bridgwater and West Somerset MP Ian Liddell-Grainger (2nd left), and farmer Tony Davy (right) during a visit to Goodings Farm in Fordgate, Somerset

Picture: Tim Ireland/PA

### Comments (43)

David Cameron spoke of the: "heartbreaking" sight of flooded farms and homes during an extraordinary day on the Somerset Levels in which Lord Smith, chairman of the Environment Agency, was forced to defy a call to resign from a local MP.

Both men were making their first visit to the Levels more than six weeks since rising waters first began to take their toll, flooding homes, closing roads and wrecking businesses.

Mr Cameron pledged that the Government will do "everything that can be done" to help those affected by the floods and stressed that he has been chairing meetings of the Government's Cobra emergency committee and that the Government has brought in extra pumps, the military and told

councils: "If you need to spend money, spend it and central Government will re-imburse".

And in answer to a question from the Western Daily Press on whether financial help will be available for blighted business, he said: "There will need to be a hardship fund."

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He met third-generation farmer Tony Davy at Goodings Farm, which is under water in Fordgate.

Mr Davy's 65 cows have been moved off his lands deluged by the floods.

During the visit, Mr Cameron met fire service workers pumping from the property and local MP Ian Liddell-Grainger.

He wore wellington boots to walk around Mr Davy's farm, unlike [Environment Secretary Owen Paterson, who was derided for turning up at Northmoor Pumping station 12 days ago in smart black shoes](#).

He then visited evacuated residents at a private meeting in nearby Bridgwater.

"It's a biblical scene," Mr Cameron, who arrived by helicopter, said as he surveyed knee-deep water surrounding the farm.

"The scale of it here in Somerset is immense when you think of how many square miles are under water". [See pictures of the floods from the in our gallery](#).

"Clearly people here have faced a very tough time and continue to face a tough time and that's why we have got to do everything we can to help.

"So more pumps, we brought in more pumps, more help from the emergency services, more help is there, money to help Somerset get back on its feet, the money is there, the Army coming in to help, whether its helping with sandbags, which they've been doing over the last 24 hours, or looking to see whether temporary bridges can be put in place.

"Everything that can be done will be done and I'll make sure that happens. There are always lessons to learn and I will make sure they are learned but Cobra has been sitting in almost permanent session so we can bring the whole resources of Government, the country, the military to bear.

"But there are lessons to learn. One of the big ones is that the pause in dredging that look place from the late 1990s, that was wrong and we need to get dredging again.

"I've said when the water levels come down and it's safe to dredge, we will be dredging to make sure these rivers can carry a better capacity of water."

He said the community response was "amazing" but warned there are sometimes tougher times when the water recedes and people fully understand the damage.

"We need to make sure that the district councils and Environment Agency and others are working together then and the local MP Ian Liddell-Grainger will do that," he said.

Earlier Mr Liddell-Grainger had launched an astonishing attack on the Environment Agency chief

Lord Smith as he prepared to visit the Levels.

Mr Liddell-Grainger called Lord Smith a "coward" and a "git", and even threatened to "stick his head down the loo".

Mr Liddell-Grainger also called on Lord Smith to quit. "I will tell him what I bloody well think of him – he should go, he should walk," he said.

"I'm livid. This little git has never even been on the telephone to me. When I find out where he is, I will give it to him. He's a coward."

Arriving at the Willows and Wetlands Visitor Centre in Stoke St Gregory, Lord Smith dismissed calls for his resignation.

He said he remained "very proud" of the Environment Agency staff.

Residents spoke of their anger at Lord Smith's refusal to apologise for the EA's handling of the crisis and said they were not satisfied at the answers he gave to their questions.

They were furious that he spoke on Monday of there needing to be a choice between flooded front rooms and flooded farmland, a policy which rural communities say has led to the crisis.

Lord Smith insisted the top priority for authorities was "protecting lives", followed by protecting homes and businesses.

He said: "I have no intention of resigning because I'm very proud of the work the Environment Agency and its staff have been doing right round the country in the face of the most extreme weather."

Jim Winkworth, landlord of the King Alfred pub at Burrowbridge, said he was "bloody mad" at Lord Smith's refusal to apologise.

"We thought that's the least he could do," Mr Winkworth.

"He hasn't come down here to apologise, which is what he should be here for. If you apologise it means you're admitting you got it wrong, but he's not fit to do that."

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Charlespk | February 10 2014, 12:01PM

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It's time all the clowns that continually attack those who had, and still have the job of bringing this country back from the most disastrous period of government in living memory, started putting the blame back where it really belongs. . There is no 'Gordon Brown Money Tree'. . Most of our problems can be laid squarely at the feet of flaky 'environmentalists', encouraged by Left Wing Governments who have reversed the centuries of intelligent land management that always required hard work and endeavour, qualities that are now increasingly in short supply. . Quango lead outfits like Natural England and the Regional Development Agencies have just slowly neutered all that has kept this country green, properly drained and well fed and watered over the generations. The Parrett's main tributaries include the Rivers Tone, Isle, and Yeo, and the River Cary via the King's Sedgemoor Drain. The 37-mile long river is tidal for 27 miles up to Oath. . But because the fall of the river between Langport and Bridgwater is only about 1 foot per mile, it is prone to flooding in winter and during high tides. . Many approaches have been tried since at least the medieval period to reduce the incidence and effect of floods and to drain the surrounding fields, but it must be kept regularly dredged to enable enough flow of water out to sea. . It does have one of the highest tidal falls in the world. . The Environment Agency should have known this, and not gambled with it to placate the RSPB bird fanciers and any other other flaky environmentalists as they have done. . Inside the Environment Agency have been exposing the failings of the Environment Agency for going on a year now - others have been exposing these failings for much longer. <http://tinyurl.com/o6y5w5r> (open in a new window) The EA's own hydraulic modelling shows that dredging is effective - perhaps maintaining the sluice at Hunstpill might be an idea? Nobody in their right mind would claim that flooding can be eliminated No amount of denial or ignorance of the geography of the levels or the historical facts will change that. 'Heads must roll'!!



rogerh3 | February 09 2014, 11:43PM

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• Expert reaction to Somerset flooding: <http://tinyurl.com/q2bylno> ; • Flood defence spending, actual & required: <http://tinyurl.com/o96e4g3> ; • 'Don't blame the Environment Agency for floods. Blame the spending rules': <http://tinyurl.com/prfeemn>



Jamie225 | February 09 2014, 9:11PM

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Inside the Environment Agency have been exposing the failings of the Environment Agency for going on a year now <http://tinyurl.com/o6y5w5r> - others have been exposing these failings for much longer.



Charlespk | February 09 2014, 2:41PM

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Please note: \* Salary increases are assumed to be 1% per annum until 31 March 2015, reverting to the long term assumption per annum thereafter.



Charlespk | February 09 2014, 2:10PM

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STOP PRESS!!! . . . Now The Environment Agency's, so called 'EXPERTS' who advise government, are; with the help of the BBC; trying to blame the current government for all the problems on the Somerset Levels. . . You really couldn't make it up!! . . Inflation / Pension increase rate.2013 - 2.5%. 2012 - 2.2%. 2011- 2.5%. Salary increase rate\* 2013- 4.6%. 2012- 4.3 % 2011- 4.6% It's very nice if you can get it. <http://tinyurl.com/no5nqbs> (open in a new window)

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Biglog2080 | February 09 2014, 10:39AM

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-4

The only thing that will help us is Home Rule for England. The British State gives our money and taxes to Scotland the EU and foreign aid.

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Charlespk | February 09 2014, 9:55AM

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Cond. . . 2. the character of the Romano-British landscape, and in particular the extent of reclamation. 3. the process of medieval reclamation on the coastal marshes, especially its (undocumented) stages. 4. the nature of medieval wetland exploitation in the lower-lying inland freshwater backfens. It is all this that has led to our understanding wetland landscapes. There is much more by Stephen Rippon. . . One might have expected the reclamational 'plumbing' of the Somerset levels to have been of much greater interest to residents of a city like Bath where the Romans had such a great influence.

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Charlespk | February 09 2014, 9:37AM

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14 Clayland colonisation: recent work on Romano-British and medieval reclamation in the Somerset Levels Stephen Rippon. Somerset has a remarkably diverse landscape at the very heart of which lie the extensive reclaimed wetlands of the Levels and Moors. In the very first Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological Society, William Stradling (1849) published a paper reporting some recent archaeological discoveries there, and since then scarcely a decade has gone by without further research into Somerset's wetland heritage. Three pieces of archaeological work in particular can be singled out as being of international importance: the excavation of Glastonbury and Meare Lake Villages by Arthur Bulleid and Harold St George Gray, the pioneering palaeo environmental analysis of Harry Godwin (eg 1941), and the major programme of work carried out in advance of commercial peat cutting by John and Bryony Coles (1986). Michael Williams' (1970) use of the area's rich documentary archives in his historical study of The Draining of the Somerset Levels also represents a seminal piece of historical geography. . . . By the 1980s, the Somerset peatlands had become one of the more thoroughly investigated landscapes in Britain, and the on-going programme of work by Somerset County Council continues to make important new discoveries (Brunning 1997b). However much remained to be done, most particularly on the remarkably well preserved, yet previously neglected, Romano-British and medieval landscapes of the coastal claylands. . . . The potential of the coastal area should have been recognised earlier, notably through the diligent recording of sites around Burnham-on-Sea by Samuel Nash (1973), and on the North Somerset Levels by Marie Clarke (eg 1980), and the North Somerset Archaeological Research Group (Lilly and Usher 1972). In reading these reports (and in particular the correspondence of Nash: see Rippon 1995), one senses a feeling of surprise at the amount of material being found on the coastal claylands which had long been thought of as one of the less favourable environments in Somerset in which to live, even though less than a hundred years earlier a well-appointed villa was

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excavated at Wemberham, at the very centre of the North Somerset Levels (Reade1885). Though a handful of Romano-British villas appear to have had a significant industrial element to their economy, most were essentially the centres of agricultural estates, and as such Wemberham is testimony to just how productive the Levels were 1,700 years ago. However, the actual character of those landscapes remained illusive, for although the earthworks of a number of potentially Romano-British field systems were recognised during the 1970s, no systematic fieldwork or palaeo environmental work was carried out (Leech 1981; McDonnell 1979). A series of historical studies had also shown how productive the Levels were during the medieval period (85 86 Stephen Rippon) though work had focused on the well-documented ecclesiastical estates, most notably of Glastonbury Abbey (Keil 1964; Stacey 1972; Williams 1970). Very limited archaeological work had been carried out on a number of medieval settlements, most notably by Nash, though most remained unpublished (Rippon 1994, fig. 12.5; 1995). As with so many areas typified by dispersed settlement patterns, the lack of deserted medieval villages has led to the area's neglect by medieval archaeology. The 1990s have seen important advances in our understanding of four areas, the last of which was dealt with in David Musgrove's paper at the conference (unfortunately not available for the present volume): 1. the methodologies used for understanding wetland landscapes, notably the range of survey techniques employed, the integration of palaeoenvironmental evidence, and the combination of this with archaeological and documentary material and evidence contained within the present, or "historic", landscape. . . . cond.



[Charlespk](#) | February 09 2014, 9:13AM

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@MoeXXX, is there any chance of you contributing something constructive to this debate instead of just abusing anyone who speaks up for the usually silent minority of country people? . Do you really not know anything at all about any rural matters? . And thank you Free2opine, but that's nothing more than I have come to expect from an intelligent lady of your calibre who has obviously been brought up to understand and enjoy country-living as well as all the intricacies of business and national and international politics. . Some people do seem to have a big problem with anyone with a brain. . They have nothing to say on any subject until someone starts putting them right. . We now see it repeatedly in these columns. .

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[StanStill](#) | February 09 2014, 7:44AM

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Grainger is all 'wind and you know what'. I am always suspicious of people with double-barrelled names, do they have such a complex that they cannot just be Mr Grainger. Lets just wait and see what imput Grainger has, knowing him it will be very little. I wonder how much he claimed in expenses for this visit,

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## Somerset floods: Politicians getting in the way of flood efforts, says Environment Agency boss Lord Smith

By [Western Daily Press](#) | Posted: February 10, 2014

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Environment Agency boss Lord Smith, pictured on his visit to Somerset last week, has said politicians have turned the flooding into a political football

### Comments (1)

Environment Agency boss Lord Smith has hit back at his critics in Government, accusing them of "getting in the way" of [work to deal with floods on the Somerset Levels by turning the crisis into a political row](#).

The peer defended the quango's handling of the situation and issued a furious broadside at what he said were attempts by politicians to undermine the work and reputation of the Agency in a bid to secure better media coverage.

"What really saddens me, though, is seeing the Environment Agency's work and expertise in flood-risk management, internationally respected and locally praised in many parts of the country, being used as a political football for a good media story," he wrote in an article for the Guardian.

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"In a lifetime in public life, I've never seen the same sort of storm of background briefing, personal sniping and media frenzy getting in the way of decent people doing a valiant job trying to cope with unprecedented natural forces.

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"Our staff have worked their hearts out in order to protect as many people as possible in the face of extreme weather.

"They'll carry on doing so. But there's no place for playing politics in the serious business of flood protection."

Repeated calls for dredging were made to Downing Street and other Whitehall departments by farmers and others in the Somerset region from at least six months ago but funding was declined.

Mr Pickles has blamed faulty Agency advice for the scale of the damage to the Somerset Levels and declined to dismiss calls for the former Labour cabinet minister to resign.

"We made a mistake, there's no doubt about that and we perhaps relied too much on the Environment Agency's advice," Mr Pickles told BBC1's Andrew Marr Show.

"I am really sorry that we took the advice ... we thought we were dealing with experts."

But Lord Smith pointed the finger of blame for the failure to sufficiently dredge rivers at Treasury funding rules.

He said a Treasury-imposed "benefit-to-cost" rule had limited the sum the EA had been able to devote to dredging the silted-up rivers which failed to drain the Levels properly.

It had put the maximum £400,000 on the table it was allowed to, he said, but "the additional funds from other sources that would be needed didn't come in".

"So when politicians start saying it's Environment Agency advice or decisions that are to blame, they need to realise that it's in fact government rules - laid down by successive governments, Labour and Tory - that are at the heart of the problem."

Speaking on the Today programme on Radio 4, Lord Smith reacted strongly to yesterday's [barbed comment from Eric Pickles that the Government "thought we were dealing with experts."](#)

Lord Smith said he had "kept his counsel" up until now but that comment had tipped things over the edge.

"When I hear someone criticising the expertise and professionalism of my staff in the Environment Agency who know more about flood risk management - 100 times more about flood risk management - than any politician ever does, I am not, I'm afraid, going to sit idly by," he said.

"The EA is bound by the rules that are laid down by the Government. So when someone says that we followed the advice of the EA, what they were actually doing is following the Treasury rules that say how much we can spend and how much we cannot spend on any individual flood defence scheme."

The former Labour Cabinet minister said the EA was previously permitted to allocate only £400,000

to Somerset, and no other funding came forward.

“The situation now has completely changed because not only has the Government come up with some extra money for Somerset, but they have said the Treasury rules won’t apply to Somerset.”

He added that “money absolutely is a big part of the issue”.

Lord Smith was asked about reports that Environment Secretary Owen Paterson, who was leading the Government flooding response before being forced to undergo an eye operation, complained to Downing Street about Mr Pickles’ criticism of the EA.

“I have indeed spoken with Owen Paterson by text... he has been hugely supportive throughout of the Environment Agency, its staff and its work and I very much appreciate that.”

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C\_Freak | February 10 2014, 9:30PM

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Resign Smith. Thee and thy incompetent outfit av aw bin rumbled. Water own't run away in blocked drains. Thee was more intrested in reed beds and bird nests.

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**Richard Cottrell**, Somerset-born former Euro MP for Bristol and independent candidate for the West of England in this year's European elections, says the people of the Levels have been failed by politicians yet again playing the blame game.

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The sense of general concern for the plight of Levels people was pushed aside by the [immediate appearance of the usual Westminster blame game](#), with the European elections due in a few months and a general election next year. So even as he splashed through the flood waters, we had to be told that it was all Labour's fault because they slashed the flood control budget back in 1997.

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Moreover, that black cloud looming over his head practically had Ukip engraved on it.

I happen to believe that none of the establishment parties enjoys an unblemished record in this department. Budgets were indeed cut by Labour. But here is a prime example of those pretending to be without sin casting the first stone. On coming to office, the coalition Government filched not far short of a billion pounds from the purse reserved for national flood defences.

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Budgets to counter flooding are regarded by the mandarins of the Treasury as remote contingency funding, all too easy to trim when the inevitable rainy day seems far away. When you have a government committed to the virtues of the "small state", under the heading of ruthless austerity, [then flood control is an attractive sitting target.](#)

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Mr Cameron's proper course in Somerset was to look, listen, learn and say as little as possible, then sprint back to London and kick as many well upholstered backsides as he could find there. He was not there as a first aid worker, or a spreader of balm, simply the Prime Minister, who should have been on a mission to acquaint himself with the soggy facts of life on the Levels. Saying sorry would not have gone amiss among folk who deal in plain language. That he was shocked by the real life scenes, rather than what he sees on television, spoke volumes for the remoteness of London power.

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The essential flood prevention risk attendant on careful dredging of the rivers Parrett and Tone was set aside equally by both Labour and coalition governments. What is needed now is a comprehensive system of management for the Levels which respects man and nature and which, so far as humanly and technically possible, ensures that the appalling images we see today become a more remote contingency.

To that end I repeat my call for a Somerset Levels National Park, which brings together all the interested parties of the Levels to the task of controlled management of this priceless asset; all facets of local government – county, district and parish; the Environment Agency, interested bodies such as the NFU and those individual agencies concerned with wildlife who operate on the Levels. And by no means least, the Levelers, who should enjoy directly elected representation on such a body.

And finally, we are no clearer from all these events as to what Mr Cameron really understands or even believes concerning climate change. Having come to office pledged to be the "greenest government ever" no government has ever done more to retreat on the climate change front. Government policy is either in tatters or staggers from one contradictory position to another. We are having hurricanes in the West Country right now – Mr Cameron's response is a quick fix to appease the flood victims and wait for the sun to come out. With the railways collapsing in all directions, Cornwall more or less cut off by train, no county in the South West untouched by extreme weather, we fiddle while London burns.

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## Western Daily Press told Prime Minister of flooding dangers on Somerset Levels

By [Western Daily Press](#) | Posted: February 10, 2014

By TINA ROWE

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The small community at Burrowbridge on the banks of the River Parrett is completely surrounded by water, on the Somerset Levels, pictured yesterday. Inset above: Tilshead, a village on Salisbury Plain which has been suffering with the floods for over a month PICTURES: SWNS/CLARE GREEN

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[tina.rowe@b-nm.co.uk](mailto:tina.rowe@b-nm.co.uk)

David Cameron was made aware of the urgent need to dredge the rivers Parrett and Tone twice last year.

The Western Daily Press alerted him in April in an interview when he came to Somerset on the election trail. The Prime Minister said he was "happy to look at how we set out the Environment Agency's priorities".

Then in August with no more money forthcoming from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Royal Bath & West Society decided to launch an appeal fund, and shame the

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Government into match- funding.

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But first Edwin White, former chairman of the Royal Bath & West Society, wrote a letter to the Prime Minister. Here was a local farming expert pointing out the facts.

Mr White recalled: "I wrote to the Prime Minister back in August, pleading with him, and he replied with a covering note saying: 'I will pass this on to the appropriate minister. Then I had three pages from Richard Benyon (then Defra minister with responsibility for water) who told me that basically within the processes and criteria, we did not qualify."

So the Save the Somerset Levels Relief Fund was launched to support a 20-year action plan, and today those campaigning are stepping up their appeal to raise between £2 million and £3 million.

The society and the landowners who back it say it is still the only way of ensuring that the plan goes ahead.

Although the Government has now finally woken up to the seriousness of the situation and the Prime Minister pledged recently to make £10million available for tackling flood-related issues, the money comes with certain conditions.

Before providing financial support for a 20-year plan the Government has called for "partnership funding" .

The total plan includes dredging through the Levels and Moors; on-going maintenance; pumps and sluice gates – and ensuring that other flood defences are up to standard.

Work in the upper catchment area to slow run-off is needed, as well as a tidal sluice near the mouth of the Parrett to prevent silt being forced back into the watercourse.

The need for extra money makes the success of the Somerset Levels Relief Fund even more important, as it is the only available way at present of raising the money needed to trigger the essential match funding from the Government.

"We managed to raise a significant sum from our own Bath & West members in the first three weeks and now we are promoting this appeal to the people of Somerset and friends beyond – and a committee is already drawing up the action plan," said a spokesman for the Royal Bath & West Society.

"We are aiming to raise between £2 million and £3 million by the end of this year and a group of trustees has been appointed to administer the fund.

"They have been charged with allocating the money where it is most needed, with an emphasis on practical actions to reduce flood risk.

"This combination of short-term Government action and our long-term plan means Somerset now has the best opportunity it has had for many years to beat the menace of flooding and the damage it causes on the Levels – but we need the help of all the people in Somerset to help us raise the necessary cash and ensure the success of this project."

Donations can be sent to Just Giving on the Royal Bath & West website – [www.bathandwest.com](http://www.bathandwest.com)

Eric Pickles has admitted the Government made a mistake in not dredging rivers to prevent flooding but blamed the Environment Agency for providing poor advice.

The Communities Secretary, who has taken temporary charge of the response to the crisis, issued an unreserved apology to those affected in the Somerset Levels.

Repeated calls for dredging were made to Downing Street and other Whitehall departments by farmers and others in the region from at least six months ago but funding was declined.

"We made a mistake, there's no doubt about that, and we perhaps relied too much on the Environment Agency's advice," Mr Pickles told BBC1's Andrew Marr Show. "We recognise that we should have dredged and I think it is important now that we get on with the process of getting those people back into their houses once we are able to really do some serious pumping."

Mr Pickles has criticised under-fire Environment Agency chairman Lord Smith for refusing to say sorry for the failures when he was besieged by angry locals on a visit to the area on Friday.

Asked if Prime Minister David Cameron should also apologise, Mr Pickles said: "I'll apologise. I'll apologise unreservedly. I am really sorry that we took the advice... we thought we were dealing with experts."

The agency was "fit for purpose" and its staff were doing a fantastic job on the ground dealing with the floods but there were serious questions about parts of its leadership, he said.

Mr Cameron chaired the latest meeting of the Government's emergency Cobra committee yesterday afternoon as forecasters warned of another week of storms. Heavy rain and winds of more than 60mph died down throughout the day but the brief respite will be broken by another storm arriving tonight.

And more storms will continue to batter Britain until the weekend, weather forecasters MeteoGroup predicted.

Mr Pickles – who has taken the lead while Environment Secretary Owen Paterson recovers from eye surgery – said the agency needed to revisit its priorities.

It was the biggest such agency in Europe – and bigger than the American version, he pointed out.

"Roughly half its budget goes on staffing and I think they only spent about £20 million on cleaning culverts and the like. I'm sure now they'll be reassessing."

Asked if Lord Smith should fall on his sword, he told the Andrew Marr Show: "That's a matter for him. I don't think I should nudge him out."

Two severe flood warnings remain in place in the crisis-hit Somerset Levels – where many residents have already been forced from their homes after weeks of heavy rain.

There are around 270 low-level flood alerts and 179 medium-risk warnings in place across Wales and central and southern England.

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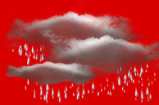
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## Owen Paterson's trip to Somerset Levels backfires

By [Western Daily Press](#) | Posted: January 28, 2014

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4 COMMENTS [SHARES](#)



Environment Secretary Owen Paterson was kept away from any water during his visit to the Somerset Levels - but the tactics simply made residents even angrier

### Comments (4)

Owen Paterson's ministerial visit to Somerset was a slick manipulation of the media, with his handlers keeping him away from even a puddle. But, as **Martin Hesp** writes, such disdain for 'yokels' was never going to wash

People just don't want to live here any more...

You won't often hear anyone say such a thing – especially when they're a local farmer whose family goes back in a location for generations – but that was one grim statement given to the Western Morning News yesterday within earshot of a government minister, collected politicians, high-ranking officials, engineers and scores of journalists.

The floods of the Somerset Levels reached a publicity high point when environment minister Owen Paterson visited a badly hit (but by no means the worst) corner of Britain's newest lake...

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### Flooded Somerset Levels could get help from Army, Paterson confirms

A circus of TV and radio crews mixed with print journalists to find out the latest official thinking on the Great Somerset Inundation of 2014, but an observer might have been forgiven for asking: why weren't they listening to local people, like farmer James Hall?

Many residents who'd turned up on the banks of a swollen River Parrett to hear first hand what a government minister had to say about their plight were enraged that he did not speak publicly to address their concerns. Instead, Mr Paterson – aided and abetted by local MP Ian Liddell-Grainger – took selected media behind a noisy and ancient pumping station for a huddle of interviews, away from sight or hearing of the crowd.

"Everyone's feeling the same. People just don't want to live here any more," said James, standing on the river bank nearby showing me his land which, at present is nine-tenths underwater. "It's a beautiful place to live, but now – the destruction we're having and everything else – it's just horrible.

"The minister hasn't actually spoken to the local people here," he growled as the party from Whitehall climbed back into a gleaming four-wheel drive. "I wanted to speak with him and ask him why incompetent people are keeping their jobs after they failed us.

"The media circus has turned up to ask questions and obviously only selected people have been allowed in there," shrugged Mr Hall. "It's not what we hoped to be seeing today. We were hoping Owen Paterson would stand out here face-to-face with the people who've been directly affected and answer our questions in a civil manner. And that's obviously what we haven't had."

He was joined by Rebecca Riley, who'd heckled Mr Paterson as he exited the scene.

"Where has he been? Who has he actually spoken to?" she cried. "We've got the farmers here, members of the public, and he's not here listening to the actual people who are having to go through, what they're going through. It's not right.

"Why was this not done ages ago?" she gasped when a journalist asked her why she was so angry at the lack of dredging. "We had this last year when it happened. It's wrong – it's all wrong – and we are all fuming."

It had, indeed, been an odd sort of ministerial visit... I had driven in to the Moorland area the "difficult" way – by which mean downstream from , along deeply flooded roads. I saw people walking or cycling – or driving on tractors – towards the North Moor pumping station where they hoped to hear the minister make an announcement.

As we've heard, that didn't happen. Instead, Messrs Paterson and Liddell-Grainger disappeared behind a great spaghetti junction of massive steel pipes, then reappeared to walk briefly to the river bank, only to vanish again behind the old brick pumping house.

And there, at the rear of the 1840s building – sealed off from most journalists by the network of new pipes vibrating with millions of gallons of floodwater being pumped from the polders – the minister gave interviews to a handful of television crews in front of a windowless portable office that could, as a backdrop, have been anywhere – even central London.

Press photographers and TV cameramen were spitting with rage – they'd carefully set up their tripods on the river bank so they'd be able to capture images of a government minister standing amid a vast flooded plain. Instead they got a Portakabin.

And maybe that was the intention. As more rain fell and angry locals lined the scene with placards and Stop The Flooding T-shirts, the last thing any minister would have wanted was to announce that, maybe, dredging or other measures could happen – but only if a newly launched six-week study discovered it would all be worthwhile.

Local councillor Julian Taylor had heard from journalists about the six-week plan and he told me: "Provided they put in the resources, that is fair enough. One of the reasons we came down was to

listen to the minister and we didn't hear anything.

"I hear he's talking about a six-week fact-finding mission – and I'll say again: unless the money is going to be there, then all these plans are going to be useless."

With that, the rain increased. And someone muttered: "By the time they've made their minds up it's going to need more money rather than less."

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mmjames | January 31 2014, 7:41PM

0

How many of those preventing the shooting of badgers are attempting to help save the animals from drowning?

Report



NDJMILLER | January 28 2014, 11:57PM

19

All I will say is you get what you vote for. I'll bet that most of the farmers in the affected area were only too pleased to sing Paterson's praises when he pushed the badger cull through despite massive public opinion. Liddell-Grainger certainly was. Now he's the devil incarnate. ut sementem feceris ita metes.

Report



twigcat | January 28 2014, 6:16PM

12

The man is a walking insult. He has proven himself to be dishonest, incompetent and cowardly far too often. I look forward to the spring re-shuffle and hope he shuffles off a very long way indeed. It is less than he deserves. By rights, he should be held accountable for all the damage he has caused whilst holding this ministerial post.

Report



Barri | January 28 2014, 12:29PM

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14

When are we going to see some transparency as promised in the Flooding and Water Management Act ?

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## Somerset Levels flooding from the air

By [Western Daily Press](#) | Posted: February 07, 2014

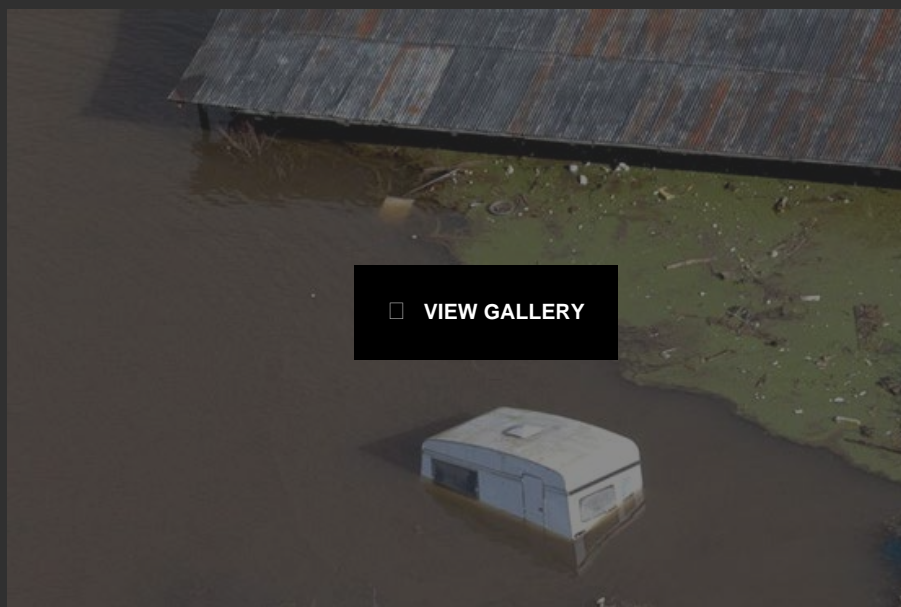
The huge extent of the floods on the Somerset Levels is seen clearly in these pictures of Moorland.

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Aerial pictures of flooding on the Somerset Levels at Moorland

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## Eric Pickles says sorry for not dredging rivers on Somerset Levels

By [Western Daily Press](#) | Posted: February 09, 2014

5 COMMENTS



Andrew Marr, left, and Communities Secretary Eric Pickles appearing on BBC1's current affairs programme, The Andrew Marr Show

### Comments (5)

Eric Pickles has admitted the Government made a "mistake" in not dredging rivers to prevent flooding but blamed the Environment Agency for providing poor advice.

The Communities Secretary, who has taken temporary charge of the response to the crisis, issued an unreserved apology to those affected in the Somerset Levels.

Repeated calls for dredging were made to Downing Street and other Whitehall departments by farmers and others in the region from at least six months ago but funding was declined.

"We made a mistake, there's no doubt about that and we perhaps relied too much on the Environment Agency's advice," Mr Pickles told BBC1's Andrew Marr Show.

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## Somerset floods: Politicians getting in the way of flood efforts, says Environment Agency boss Lord Smith

“We recognise that we should have dredged and I think it is important now that we get on the process of getting those people back into their houses once we are able to really do some serious pumping.”

Mr Pickles has criticised under-fire EA chairman Lord Smith for refusing to say sorry for the failures when he was besieged by angry locals on a visit to Somerset.

Asked if Prime Minister David Cameron should also apologise, Mr Pickles said: “I’ll apologise. I’ll apologise unreservedly.”

The EA has faced fresh anger after a senior official hailed its performance as a “success story”.

Director of operations David Jordan told a press briefing that the 5,000 homes flooded during the winter storms were “individual tragedies”.

“But also we need to recognise that 1.3 million other properties would have flooded if these flood defences had not been built,” he said.

“That is the success story, if you like, that we are talking about.”

Mr Pickles – who has taken the lead while Environment Secretary Owen Paterson recovers from eye surgery – said the agency needed to revisit its priorities.

As politicians trade blows on the political fall-out from the disaster, police were investigating whether seven-year-old Zane Gbangbola, who died after falling ill in his flood-hit home in Chertsey, Surrey, may have become a victim of the floods.

Officers have refused to be drawn on whether carbon monoxide poisoning from a generator pumping out flood water from his home may have been to blame, which also saw his parents, Kye Gbangbola and Nicole Lawler, taken ill.

While tributes have been paid to the boy, two severe flood warnings remain in place in the crisis-hit Somerset Levels – where villages are cut off and many residents have already been forced from their homes after weeks of heavy rain.

The Prince of Wales, the Prime Minister and Environment Secretary have all visited the Levels in recent weeks and the latest politician to visit was Ukip leader Nigel Farage.

During a visit to Burrowbridge, Mr Farage called for a public inquiry and reiterated calls for the Government to compensate victims.

“In the short term I want the Government to say they are going to compensate flood victims. Longer term there has got to be a public inquiry in how we are managing our rivers,” he said.

“There are times when a Government really needs to do something to support its own people. I just want to get this ball rolling.”

Mr Farage denied his visit was “political opportunism”.

“Unlike everybody else who turns up for a photo op and goes away again I am actually going to visit some of these properties, meet some of these people and get a better understanding,” he insisted.

“From what I can see, the Environment Agency appear to be so hamstrung by a whole series of European directives and we are putting the interests of beetles and voles and birdlife before that of farmers and people.”

Mr Farage also took the time to chat to locals and volunteers over a pint of ale in the King Alfred pub, which sits next to the River Parrett in Burrowbridge.

He was heckled by resident Mike Jay, who shouted at the politician "Oy Nigel, what are you going to do for us, rather than just a photo op?"

Mr Farage, who went up to Mr Jay to speak to him, replied: "I am trying to get off the ground a campaign that anyone who has suffered financial loss as a result of flooding actually gets compensation.

"I tell you why, because when we had the storm before Christmas I had a cracked chimney, roofing tiles gone, fencing down and the insurance company paid most of mine and I am £3,000 short.

"I've got a good salary and I can pay for it but people on fixed incomes and everything else can't."

Mr Cameron is to chair the latest meeting of the Government's emergency Cobra committee this afternoon as forecasters warn of another week of storms.

Heavy rain and winds of more than 60mph will die down throughout today but the brief respite will be broken by another storm arriving tomorrow night.

There are nearly 300 low-level flood alerts and almost 200 medium-risk warnings in place across Wales and central and southern England.

The Met Office warned that river levels are expected to continue rising along the Thames, the Severn and the Dorset Stour this week.

The Ministry of Defence has put 1,600 personnel on six hours' notice to help in the south.

Rail operators are now able to run trains to Exeter but there is still major disruption to services following flooding, landslides and collapsing track beds in the West Country.

In Croydon, South London, a pedestrian underpass has been turned into an emergency pond to hold hundreds of thousands of litres of floodwater threatening homes and businesses.

And reserve soldiers of 7 Battalion The Rifles were called in to use sandbags to dam a breach in the Kennet Canal which threatened an electrical sub-station near Burghfield, south of Reading.

Meanwhile, Met Office chief scientist Dame Julia Slingo said while there was not yet "definitive proof", "all the evidence" pointed to a role for climate change in extreme weather.

She also delivered a grim warning that the country should prepare itself for more similar events in future.

It is the strongest link yet made by the Met Office between the intense weather and climate change, and backs David Cameron's remark last month that he "very much suspects" a connection.

Labour former environment secretary Hilary Benn said "real progress" had been made after the Pitt Review into the summer floods of 2007, although added lessons could always will be learnt when dealing with "nature's raw power".

Green Party leader Natalie Bennett insisted Mr Paterson should be replaced as Environment Secretary.

She also said the Government and the previous Labour administration had not spent enough money on flood defences and the coalition's cuts to the Environment Agency should be reversed.

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Jamie225 | February 09 2014, 6:43PM

Inside the Environment Agency have been exposing the failings of the Environment Agency for going on a year now <http://tinyurl.com/o6y5w5r> - others have been exposing these failings for much longer.

□ | □

5

Report



Free2opine | February 09 2014, 6:02PM

Eric Pickles: Spend aid abroad to stop flooding in the UK "Sustainable aid spent across the world will help to alleviate the effects of extreme weather in the UK, the communities secretary suggests. " Yes, it might well do Mr. Pickles, but withholding one months' contribution i.e. £1 billion would be put to better use in this country, sorting out the flooding and transport problems. Some of the despots that receive our aid in foreign countries, can pay for their own space ships, Olympic Stadiums, holiday homes etc.

□ | □

6

Report



Free2opine | February 09 2014, 5:34PM

incidentally of those 20 years of negligible inaction, Labour was in government for 13, so it would be better if they kept their moaning mouths shut!!!!

□ | □

6

Report



Free2opine | February 09 2014, 5:09PM

STOP PRESS!!! . . . Now The Environment Agency's, so called 'EXPERTS' who advise government, are; with the help of the BBC; trying to blame the current government for all the problems on the Somerset Levels. . . You really couldn't make it up!! . Read more: <http://tinyurl.com/nb4r76u> When will people stop blaming everybody else for these problems. The dredging, if carried out regularly over the past 20 years, would have kept this problem to a more manageable situation. Instead of which, people are suffering and the only person who has spoken any sense, is Nigel Farage!!!

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