

The Burning Question: Why the ban on coal & wood burning shows politicians are still out of touch with rural & coastal folk

By John Clancy, Visiting Professor at the Centre for Brexit Studies, former Leader of Birmingham City Council and Labour Councillor for Quinton.

One of the post-referendum lessons which should have been learned by the London politicians (from wherever they came) was that they appeared out of touch with what I call the countrypolitan and coastalpolitan U.K.

The more rural U.K., and small urban and coastal towns, their needs and views, were not seen as policy drivers. Indeed, wider U.K. policy affecting those very places were policy driven by Cities' challenges and in particular those of London and surrounding satellite urban areas.

The referendum result was seen by many as involving in some way a fightback from the countryside and coastal towns, and the regional rural U.K. It was certainly a factor.

So the Brexit general election he always wanted delivers for Boris and a humble government promises to have learned from the disregards of the past. Indeed the Prime Minister emotes immediately on the steps of Downing Street that he respects and understands. He knows that Brexit-minded folk had only 'lent' their votes and his government would connect in a different way with left-behind towns and left-behind areas....never again etc.

But straight out of the traps after the election, within a few weeks indeed, darts an obviously well-intentioned but eye-catching diktat from London: let's ban wet wood and coal burning in people's homes. The environmental credentials of the new government shown upfront and centre. It connects with woke folk. It'll be dreadfully unpopular

amongst London chattering classes, but it shows the government means business.

Because, you see, it's becoming a real issue in our great cities in particular. The metropolitan masses have rather too readily imported their rural and coastal holiday experiences into their townhouses. The gorgeous feel and smell of that coal fire, that log burner. It's become part of London again!

I'm genuinely surprised that this got past Boris, and especially surprised that Dominic Cummings (he whose reputation stands on understanding the left-behind folk from left-behind places and how they behave and vote) didn't spike it as making the big mistakes of the past, being dead politics déjà vu all over again.

You would have thought, and especially immediately post-Brexit, that propelling into immediate impact a radical law might have caused someone in government to pause over the handling of its implementation. This policy driver from a real environmental challenge in certain densely-populated UK cities emerged instead into an access all areas order in chief. It was not handled and is not being implemented in a newly-learned different way.

Indeed it might be that a post-Brexit lesson should be that different parts of the U.K., whether at nation level, or regional level, or sub-regional or topographical level need to be treated differently. Their needs and challenges need to be respected better. Their cultures need to be respected and supported better. In the context of keeping the U.K. together post-Brexit difference is good – harmony does not require uniformity.

But no. Let's start with a diktat from on high which shoots right into the very heart and hearth of rural and coastal homes. Shut down their fireplaces. And by the way, you can't even buy your coal and wood from your hard-pressed rural shops either, from next February.

What about those coastals and regional rurals? They need to know it's good for them. Because it's good for the U.K. And let's do it now.

Stop the home fires burning!

But if the sounds of an army of lead falling as balloons around the rural and coastal U.K. was not heard by George Eustace, the environment secretary, the PM and Dominic Cummings, then tin ears will have been present instead.

Of course wet wood and coal burning in hundreds of thousands of hearths in London and the wider region is a real problem for Londonworld. Of course its sudden, recent emergence has been as a result of both permissive regulation, or a failure of regulation, or just no money for regulation. But just because it creeps in on Londoners and the PM2.5 particles hover in the newly Victorianised air, doesn't mean you have to whack a ban England-wide.

Wales and Scotland have their own judgement to make, admittedly. I have to say that I would anticipate a cultural and political earthquake when a Welsh government (a WELSH government, in Kinnock tones) bans the burning of coal in the valleys and coastal towns of Wales. That touch paper will require quite a retire when lit.

The nature of the handling of the government's proposals, and especially its brutal suddenness, has appeared blustering and bullying outside London.

What it shows, more worryingly for the government, is a real lack of awareness of the historical infrastructure deficit that affects rural, and coastal regional, Britain.

One of the main reasons that coal and log fires burn in coastal, rural and remoter towns and villages is because of a failure over history (long past and recent past) of national governments to provide the appropriate arterial infrastructure to allow alternatives choices. This long-standing failure of U.K. governments drives the fundamentally different economics of heating homes in rural and coastal U.K.

If the only way to heat your house is electricity (of variable certainty of supply and at a higher price) then you have to be careful how you heat your house. If you have to rely on the filling by huge lorries of expensive gas into huge canisters stuck on your property, you have to be careful how you heat your house. Gas pipes do not go everywhere in the U.K. some in London might be surprised to hear.

For many in rural and coastal towns and villages there really is no alternative economic judgement but to rely on coal and log burning in the home. It's not just because it looks nice.

Laughably, the government proposes that during a transition certain solid hearth entities may be burned, but these will inevitably be more expensive. If the government was proposing some considerable subsidy there, it might have lessened the impact and made more sense.

But left-behind towns, villages and communities were indeed left-behind when it comes to all sorts of infrastructure. Poor power connections and energy supply lines, poor digital infrastructure, poor sewerage and drainage networks (where they exist at all), and poor transport links blight too much of places the government now wishes to preach environmental probity to. Get the rest right first, invest there. Then preach on a level playing field.

Most in the countryside and coastal towns can themselves also preach that the wider ecological damage to the environment comes not from the countryside and coasts, but from the engines of tens of millions of cars in cities and the power stations that heat and power them. Their hearth outputs are negligible in the wider environmental scheme of things. It's policy-stupid to go whole hog everywhere and damages the U.K.

The PM2.5 particulates which the environment secretary wishes to see banished are a problem for the U.K. and a problem for U.K. cities. So let's at least start the ban there – next month, if necessary. I'd advise the Prime Minister to tread carefully if he wants to avoid being a PM1 term.

Without an entire change of approach on this and other issues, the lent votes of the left-behind will leave behind the P.M.