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COFFEY TIME

Simon Cooper makes an elevator pitch to a new leader



WELL, GOODBYE GEORGE, goodbye Ranil and hello Thérèse at the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), the latter being our third Secretary of State since the summer, with Ranil Jayawardena, a dedicated Trussite, lasting just seven weeks as our nation became what The Economist called Britaly, with three Prime Ministers in as many months.

From an English and Welsh rivers perspective it really does matter who is at the helm of Defra – all environmental and ecological roads lead to it and all-important policy decisions flow from it. Key quangos such as the Water Services Regulation Authority (Ofwat) are under the oversight of Defra, and the heads of the Environment Agency and Natural England sit on its Executive Board.

I think it would be fair to say George Eustice was not the best champion of rivers, a disappointment to many who'd hoped his background from a Cornish farming family would make him more attuned to rural needs. But he was captured by the beaver lobby, and I distinctly recall him opining that a £12 per year increase to household water bills was too high a price to pay for basic reforms to water provision.

As to Ranil, we'll never know whether this Hampshire MP, with the source of the River Test within his constituency, would have become our saviour although he did sport a Barbour jacket for the appropriate photo shoots.

But what of Thérèse Coffey, briefly Deputy Prime Minister and Health Secretary? At first glance, she might seem an odd choice, but she has Defra form, having been at the department for three years, 2016-19, as Minister of State for Environment and Rural Opportunity. She does also represent a largely rural Suffolk constituency and has a PhD in chemistry, with

a working background, prior to parliament, in finance. I think of all the people Sunak could have picked, she seems to have a CV we can work with. So, what should be my elevator pitch to our new Defra leader? As the doors slide shut, I begin...

"Thérèse, I've 30 seconds, so I'll make it fast. You have three problems: over-abstraction that is crippling rivers every summer. Sewage pollution that will continue to get worse until the infrastructure of the 1960s is brought up to the standards required for the 2030s. A farming industry that is responsible for 40% of all river pollution. Solution one: build lots of reservoirs, create a national water grid and use surplus solar energy to power desalination plants at times of greatest need. Solution two: build vast numbers of new sewage treatment works that can cope with modern pollutants and are future-proofed for the growing population. Solution three: legislate and regulate the worst farming practices out of existence. Remember: when it comes to pesticides, a pest to a farmer is an insect to everyone else.

Finally, don't be deflected by vested interests. For too long, the water industry and regulators, aided and abetted by Defra, have been a cosy cartel who have shown little regard to their polluting ways. The bad news is that there are no quick fixes; these problems have been decades in the making and will be decades in the resolution. However, the good news is that none of this is rocket science. It will just take time, some money, lots of determination and great leadership. We believe you can do it.

Thanks, Thérèse. I think this is our floor?" ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale. Follow his fortnightly blog on saving our rivers at fishingbreaks.co.uk