

Countryside Alliance 26/8/2016

Coastal Access Failure

Walking the North Northumberland coast during a week's holiday earlier this month I was reminded of a dreadful couple of hours in a Defra meeting room nearly 10 years ago. The Alliance had been called in to Natural England's 'Coastal Access working group' or something similar where we were lectured about 'Ministerial visions', coastal trails, statutory rights of access, coastal margins and spreading room. It was classic Whitehall nonsense encouraged by Defra Ministers and a Chairman of Natural England who clearly viewed landowners, and those who represented them, as enemies of the people.

The Alliance, and our colleagues in most other rural organisations, supported the principle of a coastal path and believed that extension of the existing rights of way network by agreement with landowners was the right way to go about it. The then Government disagreed and the then Defra Secretary David Miliband embarked on the long and expensive process of primary legislation which finally enshrined all the aforementioned complexity in law in the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. It was his successor Hilary Benn who actually guided the legislation through parliament, including an exemption which ensured that coastal access around the Blackwater Estuary in Essex will not include the stretch of sea wall in front of his family seat at Stansgate Abbey.

Meanwhile in Wales the Plaid Cymru led coalition Government decided on a different route and sought to create a simple Wales Coast Path using existing legislation largely by agreement with landowners and keeping compulsion as a largely unused back up.

The different policies have generated radically different results. The Welsh Coast Path was declared complete in 2012, but as I discovered in Northumberland access around the English coast is far from total and in many places where there is a path the vision of an access 'corridor' from the sea inland to the first boundary is laughable. Not that anyone other than a few zealots ever wanted

such a scheme anyway. Natural England claims to be on track to complete its coastal access programme 8 years after Wales in 2020, but its [latest assessment](#) makes even that target look optimistic. The reality is the legislation imposed ridiculous burdens and expense on those left to implement it (as an example the 'approved scheme' runs to no less than 175 pages), whilst alienating landowners who are understandably concerned about losing their rights over large areas of land.

All this could have been avoided if ideologically obsessive politicians and an overly-compliant agency had listened to the sound advice coming from those on the ground. Sadly it is no surprise that they did not, or that no-one will ever take responsibility for the whole sorry tale.

Tim Bonner
Chief Executive
Follow me on Twitter [@CA_TimB](#)