

# Britain's flood disaster exacerbated by spending cuts

Paul Mitchell  
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Floods in large areas of Britain have led to three deaths and widespread disruption of transport and power supplies. Several cities, towns and villages have been submerged twice in two weeks, leaving thousands of homes ruined and threatened by sewage pollution. The wettest September and October for 110 years has been blamed on global warming.

Prime Minister Tony Blair said, “we have to put in the right protection for people against the possibility of floods and work to deal with the issue of climate change.” His Deputy, John Prescott asked, “Should our power lines come down every time we have such storms? Should 1,000 trees fall across railway lines in the South East? Should we do more to prevent flooding? Is our drainage system adequate?” Digby Jones, head of the Confederation of British Industry, compared Britain to a “banana republic”.

Scientists are still researching the impact of climate change. Some suggest Britain will see more unpredictable weather, with stormy winter days five times more common by 2050 and the sea rising by 30 centimetres. However, it is economic policies that have been largely responsible for the breakdown of infrastructure in the face of the recent floods.

The origin of land drainage can be traced back to pre-Roman times, when large areas of the Fens in eastern Britain were drained. After the First World War a policy of agricultural self-sufficiency was implemented that was intensified after the Second World War. Today, the Fens contain nearly all the Grade 1 agricultural land. Half of farmland and large areas of industry rely on drainage schemes to prevent flooding.

An enormous programme of river and coastal defences was started by the Waverley committee after the 1953 east coast floods that killed 300 people and caused £5 billion worth of damage. There have been six similar storm events since 1953, but they have not resulted in loss of

life or serious damage until the last two years when 25 people have died.

The Waverley sea defences had a design life of 30-50 years. A survey in 1990 showed 16 percent were in need of moderate or significant repair. By 1993 this figure had increased to 41 percent, which prompted the publication of *A Strategy for Flood and Coastal Defence*. In evidence to an Inquiry into flood defences by the Parliamentary Agricultural Select Committee in 1998, the Institute of Civil Engineers said the surveys and strategy identified “an urgent need to increase the level of expenditure on flood and coastal defence works”. “However, the level of grant subsequently appears to have declined. Unless the situation is addressed, the ability to undertake necessary works at the appropriate time will be further constrained by inadequate funding. Consequently, the risk of flooding and damage will be further increased at a time when the effects of global warming may well intensify this risk.”

In the first year of the New Labour government flood defence expenditure fell from £102.6 million (1996/7) to £75.1million (1998/9). Two Private Finance Initiative schemes were commissioned that have absorbed 10 percent of the total coastal defence budget. In April 1998 the government introduced a priority scoring system strongly based on cost-benefit, which meant a rural scheme was unlikely to qualify and only the most urgent work is financed. Ian Sumnall of the Local Government Association told the Inquiry it was “very difficult” to secure funding for new defences unless “there is failure or imminent failure of existing works ...because of the lack of resources”. He said the available funding was one-third “of what would get us out of this fire-fighting situation and properly get an implementation of the national strategy”.

Humphrey Temperley, councillor for an area of low lying reclaimed marsh land called the Somerset Levels, explained how the Levels rely on £500 million of assets

such as pumping stations that require £10 million of annual maintenance. Only half the money is available. Pumping stations with estimated lives of 25 years are kept for 40 years. There are few maintenance workers, with the most experienced taking early retirement. There have been several major coastal floods in the area with the Environment Agency allowing one farm of 100 acres to become totally useless because of breach of the defences.

The Inquiry was told that the inadequate funding of the national strategy was also hindered by the existence of many organisations—240 in coastal defence alone. In North Norfolk the Environment Agency has carried out artificial reef building and beach stabilisation on one 14 kilometre stretch of coast, but after a storm in 1992 North Norfolk District Council gave up trying to repair an adjacent stretch. Local councils are under pressure to cut defences on the smaller rivers and coast-lines they are responsible for because of council tax capping and pressure on local government finance.

It emerged during the Inquiry that a policy of “managed retreat” of flood defences is being developed. The end of the Cold War is used to justify this. The development of a global market in agricultural products and over-production also means less farmland is needed in Britain. Whilst it is true that public money has been used to protect private land, increasing property values and encouraging further flood defence work, the real intention is to prevent “inflexible and expensive options for defence”. The conservation argument—constructing salt-marshes and allowing rivers to flood in their natural floodplain—provides the rationale. However, in practice, as an Environment Agency report shows, of 46 sites abandoned in Essex “most show major sediment losses ... most have rather poor nature conservation value”.

The emphasis is also shifting from “hard-engineered” solutions such as concrete embankments to “soft-engineered” ones. But these often require more maintenance. In 1986, Seaford beach was reformed using 55,000 tonnes of granite and 3 million tonnes of shingle—but each year 160,000 tonnes have to be shifted back.

The Inquiry's recommendations were based on the “conclusive proof of the unsustainability of imposing human constraints on the natural cycle of flooding and erosion, and the ebb and flow of land and sea”. It recommended the government reduce human intervention, concentrate on urban areas and “overcome widespread public intolerance of risk associated with flooding”. The government accepted most of the recommendations.

By chance, during the Inquiry a severe flood hit the English Midlands. As the Central Association for Agricultural Valuers told the Inquiry, the “chickens (were) coming home to roost”. Two people died and 74 were rescued from mobile homes. The newly built M40 motorway was closed. It was discovered that many moderate risk rivers did not even have simple river level monitoring equipment to warn of flooding. The mobile homes where the poorest live were situated in the floodplain because it is much easier to get planning permission. Because they are low value property they do not get a high score in the government's scheme and miss out on defences. The government's plan to build 4.4 million new homes by 2016 will put further pressure to build on flood plains.

Whilst the head of the CBI, Digby Jones calls for a serious overhaul of the planning system as his response to the floods, he ignores the record of the private sector. As Dr Geoff Mance of the Environment Agency says, “the commercial developer is allowed to take the profit without making the right contribution in the long term” when houses are built in floodplains.

It is 15 years since the first utilities have been privatised. The break-up of the electricity industry, for example, has seen a heavily cut workforce, frenetic takeovers and reorganisations as it struggles to become a global player. Writing in the International Journal of Strategic Management, Christopher Clarke and Suviv Varma say, “Most companies do not have a comprehensive risk strategy or vision. They have no clear risk organisation, responsibilities or culture. The approach taken is fragmented, with operations, insurance, treasury and human resources reacting ad hoc to events as they arise.”

Ian Wilson in the same journal points out “the suspicion persists that executives understanding and support for strategic planning is fragile and will only last until ‘the next big thing’ comes along.”

In a global market, both private and government sectors see plans and strategies—limited as they are—destroyed by the anarchy of the market. In the case of flood prevention in Britain, man's achievements since the Romans are being sacrificed.



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