

Years of government cuts worsen UK flooding

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Torrential rain has led to the deaths of several people in recent weeks and flooded thousands of homes in the UK, many of which have suffered the same misfortune at regular intervals over the last few years. Large areas of prime agricultural land have been submerged under the highest-ever-recorded water levels.

The Environment Agency (EA) has issued 16 severe flood warnings—meaning “danger to life”—2 in the Somerset Levels and 14 for towns and villages in the Thames Valley to the west of London. More than 350 other flood warnings and alerts are also in place, mainly in southern England and the Midlands. Rail links to the southwest of the country have been cut by landslides.

EA chief executive Paul Leinster warned, “Extreme weather will continue to threaten communities this week, with further severe flooding expected.... River levels are high across south west, central and southern England and further rain has the potential to cause significant flooding.”

The government has sought to shift blame for the weeks of misery and chaos caused by the floods onto the EA. Accusations by Floods Minister Eric Pickles that the agency was driven by political correctness, gave bad advice to government, and attempted to divide town and country over funding matters have been met with almost universal derision.

The Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management called his outburst “absolute tosh” and that the real problem was huge cuts to the EA’s funding.

Town and Country Planning Association policy chief Dr. Hugh Ellis told the *Observer* that flooding was now a fact of British life, because governments had ignored clear scientific advice. “They well understand they have a problem, they have done for a long time, yet they refuse to acknowledge it,” Ellis said. “Instead they abolish the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution and slash the EA; it’s like saying I don’t like

the rain, so I will abolish weather forecasts.”

The flooding has revealed the decay in the physical and social infrastructure of Britain, overseen by the Conservative/Liberal Conservative government and its Labour Party predecessor. Decades of underinvestment in critical social infrastructure, including flood prevention projects, have resulted in a social catastrophe.

The Somerset Levels and Moors were once held up as the prime example of flood control. The Levels are a manmade low-lying environment reclaimed from the sea centuries ago. Flooding has occurred most winters, but it has been controlled by a complex and interrelated system of pumping, maintenance, dredging and the use of water meadows or washlands to absorb storm surges.

Following the floods in the winter of 1999-2000, the water meadows were overwhelmed and new areas of houses, businesses, agricultural land, roads and nature reserves were flooded for several weeks. Scientific reports called for the creation of temporary flood storage areas on higher areas, the restitution of dredging and maintenance of river channels in the tidal areas that had been abandoned, the upgrading of pumping stations, an increase in the use of water meadows, the building of a tidal sluice or barrier in the Bristol Channel and restricting new development on the flood plain.

The National Audit Office warned that a large proportion of flood defences were “inadequate and inconsistent,” and that up to 2 million homes and buildings were in areas at risk of flooding. Describing changing weather patterns due to climate change and the likelihood of more rainfall, it warned that the situation would get worse.

Most of these recommendations were ignored by the Labour government, which set about slashing the EA’s budget and workforce. By 2008, the EA had decided that “providing a robust economic case for maintenance

works on the Somerset Levels and Moors remains a challenge” and that it was “doubtful” that all the pumping stations were necessary.

Following the floods in 2010 and 2012, Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium chief executive Nick Stevens told a local meeting that the EA “has agreed that desilting, or dredging, would substantially alleviate flooding and reduce disruption and financial consequences to the county, but doesn’t have the money to meet the estimated £2 million cost”.

The parliamentary Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee also investigated the 2012 floods and identified specific “pinch points” including the Parrett River on the Levels.

Across the UK, the committee stated that “investment remains insufficient to meet growing flood risk” and that just a paltry extra £20 million every year for the next 25 years was needed “to keep pace with threats due to climate and demographic changes.”

“We are deeply concerned at the decision to reduce funding for maintenance of flood defences and watercourses which could leave communities exposed to the threat of flooding despite having benefited from considerable capital investment in flood defences. It is essential that adequate revenue funding is provided to enable the Environment Agency to conduct the necessary dredging and maintenance of watercourses so as to minimise flood risk to local communities,” the committee added.

The committee revealed that the so-called partnership model used to justify budget cuts and a shift away from public provisions of vital services had led to the “withdrawal” of the EA from “maintenance activity” and placed “additional cost burdens” on councils, which were also suffering cuts. The hope that private sector money would make up the shortfall had “secured very little to date.”

EA chairman Lord Chris Smith responded to criticisms of his handling of the flooding by saying his organisation has become a “political football” in the recent events, at the same time as agreeing in retrospect that dredging should have been carried out in the Somerset Levels. Smith was a minister for many years in the Labour government of Tony Blair when cuts to the EA were carried out and has implemented those demanded by the coalition ever since it came to power in 2010. As a result of a 10 percent cut to the

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in last June’s spending review, the number of EA workers will be reduced by 1,700 to around 9,700 by October 2014.



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