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Sir John Lawton
Chairman
The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution
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23 December 2010

From Lord Henley
Parliamentary Under Secretary

Dear Sir John,

Thank you for the Royal Commission's report on *Adapting Institutions to Climate Change*, published in March 2010. Your report offers a clear and thorough analysis of the threats and opportunities that climate change will bring to this country. It will be of service not only to the Government, but to all those organisations that need to adapt to the changes ahead. I am grateful to the Royal Commission for the work that went into it.

As your report makes clear, we need to accept the overwhelming evidence of climate change; to step up work to adapt to a warmer climate in the UK, with more extreme events, even as we continue to make the case for a global, comprehensive and legally-binding climate agreement. Mitigation and adaptation are both essential.

The Government's general approach to climate change adaptation was set out in a new strategic statement, published in September 2010. It explains how we will prioritise work to support a strong and sustainable green economy, resilient to future climate change.

I agree with the report's view that the success of adaptation efforts will depend primarily on action by individual organisations and communities – given the wide variability of climate change at the local scale. The Coalition Government believes firmly in devolving power, money and knowledge to those best placed to find the best solutions to local needs. Government's role is to provide leadership and an enabling policy framework, and ensure that the most useful and robust information is available to raise awareness and support decision-making.

I also agree with the report's highlighting of the natural environment and the implications of climate change for our vital natural resources. The Government's upcoming policy development – such as the White Papers on water and the natural environment – will include responses to the long-lasting consequences of climate change in these priority areas.

Your report highlights the considerable challenge of flood and coastal erosion risk management, which will increase with climate change. Defra expects to spend at least £2.1 billion on flooding and coastal erosion over the next four years and, as a result of this investment, aims to deliver better protection to 145,000 households by March 2015. We have also completed the majority of the recommendations of the Pitt Review and made commitments to prevent unnecessary building in areas of high flood risk.

In addition to this, we are consulting on a new approach to the way Government funding is allocated to flood and coastal defence projects. The reforms aim to provide improved transparency and greater certainty over potential funding levels for every flood and coastal defence project. It will also allow local areas to have a bigger say in what is done to protect them. The Environment Agency is also consulting on a new national flood and coastal risk management strategy for England. This promotes the use of a wider range of measures to manage risk in a co-ordinated way – to balance the needs of communities, the economy and the environment. It will form a framework that gives communities a greater role in local risk management decisions.

The Royal Commission has made a number of recommendations about the use of powers under the Climate Change Act 2008 and you encourage us to look at imposing a general adaptation duty on public bodies. It would be wrong in my view to alter our existing and proportionate approach ahead of the information provided by the Climate Change Risk Assessment in 2012 and the larger evidence base generated by reports submitted under the current round of statutory adaptation reporting. This information will of course allow us to identify sectors where there is further need for the targeted use of formal reporting powers.

The Adaptation Sub-Committee of the Committee on Climate Change will play a vital role in the task of holding the Government to account as well as providing independent, authoritative expert advice on the national risk assessment. In addition, I have asked the Department's Chief Scientific Adviser (Bob Watson) to carry out a specific challenge function; making sure that Defra is carrying forward work to address the thrust of the Royal Commission's findings.

The Coalition Government is determined to broaden and accelerate work to address the risks and opportunities of climate change. Early next year we will publish a report on the risks and opportunities for key national infrastructure (energy, water, transport and communications). By September 2011, we will have in place improved arrangements for providing specialist adaptation advice and support to local authorities, businesses and other organisations – building on the good work of the UK Climate Impacts Programme. In 2012, we will publish the first Climate Change Risk Assessment and a National Adaptation Programme that deals with the highest priority opportunities and risks.

Government's statement on climate change adaptation is available on the Defra website at: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/climate/documents/adapting-new-approach-100916.pdf>. I am also placing a copy of this letter on our website and in the Libraries of the House.

Your report is a valuable contribution to a vital task. I am extremely grateful to the members and staff of the Royal Commission.

SW EVANS

LORD HENLEY

pp signed with the Minister's approval
in his absence.