Why is it that we haven't chosen a sensible approach to flood prevention?

Paul Benneworth argues that hard cash and cold greed are undermining our attempts to keep the waters out of our homes

It was fantastic to be back home this Christmas for an extended break with my nearest and dearest. The terrible weather was a great opportunity to enjoy the festive atmosphere and catch up with friends new and old.

But festivities were overshadowed by the terrible flooding which spread from Cumbria into Lancashire, Yorkshire and Northumberland. Keswick is our long-standing summer holiday destination and we were shocked as the Derwent repeatedly burst its river defences.

The ensuing Westminster war of words rubbed salt on the wounds. Desperate Tories scrabbled around to try to prove that flood defences hadn’t been the victim of deliberately vicious spending cuts.
We heard that the north received more flood spending per person than the south. We heard less about how these supposedly ‘northern’ river catchments covered the true blue Shire counties that you might assume were in the south.

Most worrying for me was the government’s cavalier disregard for the science of contemporary flood protection. This isn’t about global warming, where it might still just be possible to hold a principled sceptical position (although I very much doubt it); it’s about understanding how what you do to the land in river catchments affects flood risk in big rivers.

You don’t solve winter flooding by building higher walls: dealing with flooding after water reaches rivers is shutting the door behind the proverbial horse. The Thames Barrier is great at holding back sea surges from freakishly high tides, but won’t defend East London from excessive rainfall around Oxfordshire’s upstream Thames.

The only 100% effective solution of preventing flooding at the river level turning the whole country into a giant culvert, so water flows as quickly as possible from where it falls to the sea. But who wants to live in a giant drain?

A much better option is to hold that rain where it falls, preventing it reaching the swollen, angry torrents we saw recently. Paved or Tarmacked surfaces are the villain of the piece, whilst deep-rooted trees, reed beds and natural lakes retain water allowing it to percolate to refresh our long-parched groundwater stores.

If no-one wants to live in a giant drain, then who wouldn’t want to live amidst copses, rustic meanders and picturesque ponds in these flood-resilient landscapes? And the science about this has been 100% certain since my early 1990s geography degree.

So why don’t we choose this attractive, sensible approach to flood prevention? The simple answer is hard cash and cold greed.

If you don’t immediately plant a harvested sweetcorn field with a winter grass, then bare earth becomes as good a water channel as the gutter outside your house, but winter planting carries a price-tag. Piling houses high on floodplains is good for short-term profits, but an acre left to nature is a million less in the bank for developers.

With the invisible hand of the market not guiding farmers and developers towards sustainable flood prevention, then it’s left to the government to drive collective action. But in their craze for cutting red tape, the Tories have long abandoned any sense of sharing the pain of long-term adaptation.

Under Labour, local authority planners had at least some powers to try to encourage flood-resistant land use. But in the bonfire of regulations that is their latest Planning Bill, the government are recklessly throwing oil on the flames of an environmental crisis threatening to permanently disfigure our green and pleasant land.

Since 2010, Conservatives have voted time and again to weaken our collective protection, to allow a favour few landowners (including their own MPs) to make massive profits. So the next time you see a crocodile-teared Tory plodging through water devastation in their reasonably priced wellies, remember that voting for these floods is in their DNA.

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