

By Ben Spencer, Science Editor, The Sunday Times.

ENVIRONMENT

There was a moment at the Times Earth Business Summit last week which made me pause for thought. **Beth Thoren**, regional director of environmental action at the outdoor clothing brand **Patagonia**, told the audience of CEOs and other business leaders that her company had abandoned growth as a goal. “We slow our growth down,” Thoren said. “We choose not to grow. That is our situation at the moment because we don’t want to have too much of a damaging impact on the environment.”

Patagonia, of course, is not a normal company. Last month its owner, Yvon Chouinard, gave his company away to a trust, with all profits to go towards fighting the environment crisis. Nevertheless, it was striking to hear a major business say they were shunning growth, as growth was incompatible with protecting the environment.

Zac Goldsmith, the foreign office minister and passionate environmentalist, who was speaking on the same panel, had another take on the same theme. “The market does not yet understand the value of nature,” he said. “It does not attach a proper cost to pollution or waste or the use of scarce resources. And until we change that, until we find a way to make the market recognize that value, we’re going to be hurtling in the wrong direction.” He added: “If you take government out of the equation, you’ve just got a market. And without being instructed that nature has a value, that waste and pollution and sabotaging natural systems has a cost, the market will take us over the cliff.”

We now have a new prime minister. Liz Truss’s government fell apart for many reasons, but the final blow was her chaotic attempt to push fracking through parliament, to the fury of many in her own party. Truss’s overriding mantra was growth – growth at any cost. But the cost, according to a broad swathe of MPs, charities, NGOs and scientists, was an environmental one. And for many it was too high a price to pay.

Rishi Sunak now takes the helm. Yesterday a broad group of green charities urged him not to make Truss’s mistake. “Please honour the 2019 pledge for environmental ambition, green jobs and a sustainable economy,” said their letter, organised by the Wildlife and Countryside Link. “Set aside misguided plans for deregulation for deregulation’s sake and an old-fashioned fossil fuel, extractive economy. Instead, please focus on implementing bold and popular plans for thriving wildlife, unpolluted air and water, resource efficiency, and regenerative agriculture. Let’s make the future of our wonderful country a green and prosperous one.”

It may be a truism, but perhaps it needs restating after the past seven weeks: the government’s job is not just to grow the economy. It has to defend the realm, nurture society, educate our children, care for the sick and elderly. And yes, protect the environment.