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Barrell on ... saving forests for the nation

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More than 535,000 people signed the 38 Degrees (www.38degrees.org.uk) petition to save our forests, forcing a humiliating coalition Government U-turn on selling off England's nationally owned woodlands (www.w2.defra.gov.uk). Caroline Spellman's apology to the House of Commons showed the collective power of individuals to prevent reckless and ill-considered change.

But the move has subtler implications. For years there has been research telling us that trees are good a solid investment in terms of the psychological benefits they deliver. Indeed, most of us intuitively know this because a walk in the woods makes us feel better.

Although obvious, the reality is that common sense and goodwill alone, despite being supported by research, carry little weight for politicians obsessed with short-term efficiency savings at the expense of long-term sustainability. However, research now endorsed by such a massive public vote is a different matter entirely.

It is in the public interest to upgrade administrative structures. NHS and Ministry of Defence procurement mechanisms are obvious candidates for scrutiny. But the wisdom of taking a blanket approach to include organisations with a proven track record has to be questioned.

The Forestry Commission has a strong record of balancing local needs with national objectives, to deliver us a woodland resource of which we can be proud. It is common sense that a national asset should be managed by the nation and it is obvious that the commercial pressures of private ownership will trump sensitive ecological and social interests.

The coalition's proposal to "set up an independent panel to consider forestry policy" has to be welcomed as a resounding vote of confidence for the Forestry Commission. For any politicians who still perceive the commission as a soft target in the drive for efficiency, the message is clear. Half-a-million voices for trees is a warning – think carefully before wielding the axe.

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