

Building the political mandate for climate action

“green alliance...”



Building the political mandate for climate action

by Dr Rebecca Willis

Green Alliance

Green Alliance is a charity and independent think tank, focused on ambitious leadership for the environment. With a track record of over 35 years, Green Alliance has worked with the most influential leaders from the NGO and business communities. Green Alliance's work generates new thinking and dialogue, and has increased political action and support for environmental solutions in the UK.

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Executive summary

“Politicians understand the need for action on climate change, but it is not straightforward for them to make the case for it.”

This insight summarises the findings from a research collaboration between Green Alliance and Lancaster University, investigating how members of the UK parliament understand and respond to climate change. It included analysis of parliamentary speeches, a focus group with NGO representatives and interviews with 23 current and former MPs. We feature the anonymised stories of four MPs, based on the interviews offering a glimpse into how climate change looks from a politician’s point of view.

The study found that politicians understand the need for action on climate change, but it is not straightforward for them to make the case for it. There are three main reasons for this.

First, climate change is seen as an ‘outsider’ issue, ie not something discussed as part of the political mainstream. This means MPs may be reluctant to champion it.

Second, politicians feel under very little pressure to act on climate change. They report limited interest from their constituents, and indicate that they need to find ways to make climate action relevant to the daily lives and concerns of the electorate.

Third, there are practical, procedural and even psychological difficulties in responding to climate change, as large scale, long term challenges do not fit well with the daily practice of politics.

We offer recommendations for developing a renewed political mandate for climate action in the UK. We suggest that there needs to be more clarity about where responsibility lies for meeting the targets enshrined in the Climate Change Act and that this should be shared between government departments and local areas.

Greater use of deliberative processes, such as citizens' assemblies, could allow politicians, the public and experts to meet on equal terms, assess evidence and agree how targets could be met in ways that improve social and economic outcomes.

There is a need for policies that build engagement and public support, rather than assume passive consent from the electorate.

Institutional changes, such as those now adopted in Wales, could allow greater consideration of the future in political decision making.

Introduction

“The science is clear and the solutions are there. The missing ingredient, it is said, is political will.”

Since the introduction of the 2008 Climate Change Act, the world’s first comprehensive, legally binding national climate strategy, the UK has been acknowledged as a world leader on climate. National carbon emissions have reduced by 42 per cent since 1990.¹

In the run up to the 2015 Paris Agreement, the UK invested heavily in climate diplomacy and was instrumental in raising global ambition. Since then, the government has pledged to revise its national target in line with the global commitment and is considering a goal of net zero carbon by 2050.

It is not at all clear, though, how the UK will meet its carbon budgets in the future. The Committee on Climate Change has warned that progress is not on track.² So far, a combination of structural change to the economy and power sector policy has been relied on to achieve the necessary carbon reductions. The government’s Clean Growth Strategy, which outlines policies to meet the 4th and 5th carbon budgets (setting targets for 2023-32), also relies largely on cutting emissions from the power sector. But the UK is unlikely to meet these future targets unless it enables carbon savings right across the economy, through changes to transport, housing, land use, resource use and industry. This, in turn, will require new policy, to support and encourage climate action by businesses, communities and individuals.³

Deciding how to achieve this transition raises some big questions. What kind of political leadership do we need to drive through the transformation to a zero carbon economy and society? And crucially, what will motivate politicians to act?

This insight attempts to address these questions, summarising the findings of a major research collaboration between Green Alliance and Lancaster University. As part of the research, we analysed parliamentary speeches, held a focus group of environmental advocates and conducted 23 detailed interviews with current and former MPs (see page seven).

Why can’t politicians just get on with it?

In a recent interview, the artist Antony Gormley said that he despaired of politicians’ inability to act on climate change. “They are just not capable of long term thinking”, he said. “We are sleepwalking into a massive human disaster.”⁴ Gormley is not alone in expressing these frustrations. Groups as diverse as Friends of the Earth, the OECD and the World Economic Forum have been similarly critical of politicians’ timidity.^{5,6}

It is clear that urgent action on climate change is needed.^{7,8} World leaders have agreed the goal of stabilising temperatures at ‘well below’ two degrees. The UK has clear targets for emissions reduction, enshrined in the Climate Change Act, however, it does not yet have the policies in place to achieve them.⁹ Climate change rarely features in parliamentary debate. In this light, the criticisms seem well founded.

This frustration is compounded by mounting evidence from academics, community leaders, businesses and many others, demonstrating pathways, models, trials and case studies of low carbon solutions. The science is clear and the solutions are there. The missing ingredient, it is said, is political will.

Having signed the Paris Agreement on climate change, politicians have a duty to respond. And yet, as elected representatives, their legitimacy comes from the people who voted for them and from the party they represent. However compelling the science, they cannot act without support. The role of the politician is to act on the best available evidence, and to make proposals which reflect and develop support from voters and other interests.

This is not to absolve MPs of responsibility. It is, rather, to describe the way in which they can exercise leadership. They cannot lead without followers. Their job is to develop a mandate. This point is often overlooked by those advocating more radical action on climate change, whether scientists, NGOs or business leaders. Hence Antony Gormley’s frustration, shared by many.

What politicians think

“Climate change is still an ‘outsider’ issue, not something discussed as part of the mainstream of politics.”

We have looked at the dilemma from the politician’s viewpoint. A key finding is that most do understand the need to act on climate change and to reach the carbon targets set out in the Climate Change Act. Whilst levels of understanding vary, the vast majority of them accept the scientific consensus.

The process of converting that understanding into vocal support and action, however, is not straightforward. It is clear that politicians do not respond to scientific evidence in a simple or linear way, and neither should we expect them to. The way in which all people understand and interact with scientific evidence is complex.^{10,11,12,13} However, an assumption persists, particularly among the scientific and policy making communities, that scientific evidence will inevitably translate into political action.

Our research addressed three linked considerations that MPs bear in mind when deciding their course of action. First, how does climate action fit within their conception of their role as an MP, including the culture, assumptions and working practices of parliament? Second, to what extent is there a mandate from the electorate for action? Is there pressure or support for action? Third, and most fundamental, how can an issue as significant, complex and long term as climate change be acknowledged and addressed within the day to day realities of life as a politician at Westminster?

Outsiders and obsessives

“You can’t just go steamrolling in.... you’ve got to tread really carefully”

The way in which politicians might take forward proposals on climate change needs to be seen in the light of the wider question of how MPs understand their role and their working environment. This study, like others before it, shows clearly that there are strong, yet implicit, norms governing the working life of politicians.^{14,15,16} Each MP in our study had a clear sense of how their statements and actions would be judged by others, both inside and outside parliament. As one said, “you have to create this persona of who and what you are, and then you have to try to publicly live up to it.” This matters because MPs need support from colleagues and other interests (business leaders, professional bodies, unions, NGOs and so on) to have influence. MPs cannot act alone and, more specifically, will only be promoted to ministerial office if they have the backing of party leaders.

It is clear from the evidence we gathered that climate change is still an ‘outsider’ issue, not something discussed as part of the mainstream of politics. One, who campaigns actively on the issue, said he was seen as a “freak”; another described the group of MPs who campaigned for the climate change act as “the obsessives”, adding “I know it’s offensive to use the term obsessives.”

Given the status of climate change as an outsider issue, politicians think carefully about how they handle it. Some champion the issue at every opportunity, not wanting to censor what they say. They accept that they will, as a result, be seen as an outsider or an obsessive, and that this might limit their career prospects. Others take a more tactical approach, talking about climate change in a way that they think will be perceived as less extreme: “it’s important not to be a climate change zealot”, said one of our interviewees.

In particular, analysis of political speeches shows the dominance of economic and technical language to describe climate actions.¹⁷ As another said, “I’m happy to use an economic argument if that means that more people will come on side.”

Some politicians make a deliberate choice not to talk about climate at all, even if they understand and are concerned about it. One MP, who works on energy issues, does so without mentioning climate change or carbon, saying “Climate change in my own party is toxic. There’s no need to talk about it.”

“Climate change is of low importance to voters compared to other issues.”

Are there votes in it?

“I’ve knocked on hundreds, literally thousands of doors, and had tens of thousands of conversations with voters... and I just don’t have conversations about climate change”

A stark message emerging from our research was that politicians feel under very little pressure on climate change. Voters are not asking their representatives to act. As one said, “I can’t remember the last time I was asked about climate change. It’s very rare to be asked about it.”

There is a small exception to this: many MPs identified a particular group of voters, mostly affluent, educated city dwellers, who are vocal advocates of climate action. But for the overwhelming majority of people, climate change is a non-issue. This finding is backed up by other research, which suggests that climate change is of low importance to voters compared to other issues.¹⁸

If politicians saw their job as simply responding to issues raised by their constituents, they would not focus on climate change. But they do not see themselves as mere aggregators of voters’ views. They are influenced, but not controlled, by what the electorate tells them. They are representatives, not delegates. Exactly what ‘representation’ means has been debated fiercely by political theorists.¹⁹

A useful explanation put forward by political theorist Michael Saward is the idea of a ‘representative claim’.²⁰ Representation should not just be seen as a static fact, that an MP represents a constituency just by virtue of being elected. Winning an election is necessary but not sufficient. Instead, representation should be seen as a process of claims-making, in which the politician makes claims which are then accepted, rejected or ignored by the electorate. In short, representation is a dialogue. When an MP campaigns against a hospital closure, they are, in effect, saying “I am campaigning for local health services and this makes me a worthy representative of this area”.

Whilst it is easy to see how politicians can make a case for supporting local hospitals, how might this work for climate change? We uncovered four different sorts of representative claim on climate.

Cosmopolitan claim: this puts forward a global problem to which a global solution is proposed. Politicians argue that it is in the interests of the global community to take action. As one interviewee told me, “a lot of the impacts of climate change are going to hit other places before they hit here. [My constituency] is not likely to be one of the first places to be hit particularly badly. So what? I just happen to be here.”

This claim has the advantage of acknowledging the global dimensions of the problem. Yet it has limited appeal, as another explained, given that many people “fundamentally care about themselves, their environment, their friends, their local space... We have these sort of massive big things about what will happen in other parts of the world... and they’re like, ‘yeah, ok, whatever.’” In short, this claim is often ignored.

Local prevention claim: another strategy is to tailor the claim explicitly to a local setting, saying that action is necessary to prevent local impacts like flooding. One MP, representing a flood prone area, told us that he used floods as a way of talking about wider climate impacts. This claim has the advantage that it links a global issue directly to the local area, and allows a politician to talk in terms of the interests of local people. As with the cosmopolitan claim, though, it does not link directly to a case for local action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Co-benefits claim: this was the most common strategy interviewees reported, ie linking climate change to practical, achievable local actions, particularly economic measures, such as encouraging renewable energy generation, or improving transport infrastructure. This has

“Politicians understand and accept the scientific consensus on climate.”

the obvious advantage of relevance to the local area. The disadvantage is that it may reduce the opportunity to discuss the full implications of climate change, focusing instead on small steps at a local level.

Surrogate claim: as discussed, some MPs promote action on climate change without mentioning climate or carbon. This happens at constituency level as well as in national debates. Although the politician is privately thinking of a particular strategy, such as transport infrastructure, in terms of its climate benefits, they deliberately do not mention it, because they think it could backfire. One judged that, if he had mentioned carbon emissions in arguing for a sustainable transport scheme, “there would have been a rolling of eyes and saying, ‘oh here he goes again.’”

Overall, the research demonstrated clearly that it is not straightforward for a politician to make a case for why, as an elected representative, he or she should support action on climate change. As one interviewee memorably said, “you don’t say someone came to my surgery with climate change coming out of their ears.”

Thinking on a planetary scale

“It’s the ultimate challenge to politics, isn’t it?”

With the exception of a small number of climate sceptics, politicians understand and accept the scientific consensus on climate. Yet this acceptance is coupled with a notable reluctance to open up discussion on the far reaching implications of climate change.

As one veteran ex-minister said, speaking about himself and his parliamentary colleagues, “it’s almost like they don’t want to think about that. I’d say that’s even true of people who think we need to grip it, it’s like it’s such a frightening thought that it’s easier to just assume and believe, be optimistic.”

Instead of continuing discussion about the significance of climate change for human society, interviewees steered the discussion on to other linked areas, such as parliamentary procedure, public opinion or technical policy solutions. This reluctance to integrate knowledge of climate change into everyday life or social action has been called ‘socially organised denial’.²¹

This tendency is exacerbated by the sheer pressure of day to day life as an MP, something which all interviewees stressed. As one said, you have to deal with “every subject in the world, you get weighed down with the weight of subjects you have to deal with... you have to equip yourself on education, transport, you know, contaminated blood, anything, anyone up for murder in your constituency, whatever it is”.

Senior politicians, in particular, stressed the practical difficulties of implementing significant reforms. Most, therefore, highlighted the practical and procedural difficulties of responding to climate change, and the lack of ‘fit’ between large scale, earth system challenges and the daily practice of politics.

MPs' stories

These stories are based on our interviews. Details have been combined to preserve anonymity.

The climate champion

This story is based on three interviewees. 'David' is a pseudonym.



David has been in parliament six years. He is a backbencher, and sits on a select committee. He is forthright and a champion of climate issues. He points out that where we are sitting, in the House of Commons beside the River Thames, may well be under water in a few years' time. He calls climate change "catastrophic", and thinks that might be why some of his colleagues don't want to talk about it:

“I think the majority of MPs recognise that climate change is manmade, is happening and is going to have catastrophic consequences, but it's so scary in some ways, maybe they don't want to think about it. It's just such a big issue.”

He tries to speak about climate change at every opportunity, both in parliament and in his constituency. He asks questions about climate issues in debates, puts forward amendments which alter legislation in support of climate action and goes to meetings hosted by environmental groups.

David feels that his commitment has come at a price. Like every MP we interviewed, he says that climate change is not discussed much in the Commons. He thinks his colleagues see him as a "freak", and that speaking out on climate is a "career limiting move."

Although he doesn't set out to be difficult, and would like to be promoted, it is important to him to speak up for what he believes in. However, he thinks about how to present issues in ways that might appeal:

“I'm happy to use an economic argument if that means that more people will come on side... I change the language to be much, much less extreme.”

As a relatively new MP, David says he needs to focus a lot of his attention on his constituency. He feels a responsibility to the people he represents, and wants to stand up for his local area. This takes up a lot of his time. Like nearly all the MPs we interviewed, he says that he's never asked questions about climate change.

“I've knocked on thousands of doors, and had thousands of conversations with voters, and I just don't have conversations on climate change.”

Nevertheless, he says "I do feel I have a mandate to act", and finds ways to talk about it. He uses speeches in his constituency to "highlight the things I care about", including climate change. He works with local environment groups, like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, though he is critical about how strident they are. They are like the Englishman abroad, he says; "If you don't understand me, I'll shout louder."

He thinks discussion of climate change is too abstract and distant from voters: "They've never been to Bangladesh, they've never met a polar bear... they're like, 'yeah, ok, whatever.'" Instead, he tries to make a case for low carbon jobs, preventing floods and so on, building climate change into the discussions as he goes.

Despite his commitment, he says it is important to be realistic:

“Politicians like to have campaigns that they can win...you can't say 'I've campaigned to stop climate change. And now climate change is fixed, and I've delivered for you.' It's never going to be a press release that anyone's going to put out.”

The newcomer

This story is based on three interviewees. 'Jonathan' is a pseudonym.



Jonathan is new to parliament. Elected in 2017 to a marginal seat, he feels his position is precarious. He is just starting to find his way around the Commons, saying that "there isn't really any training in being an MP." He comments that the working ethos is "totally individualistic, not collegiate", with each MP having to steer their own way through their working life.

Jonathan is cautious about being pigeonholed. For example, he has spoken several times in parliament about a particular health condition, but worries that colleagues will see him as the person who "keeps banging on about [the condition]. Whereas you want people to think of you as, oh you can go to him with anything." He is critical of strategies used by MPs like David, who speak stridently about the causes they believe in.

“You can't just go steamrolling in, although some people have done that, and they've made themselves very unpopular.... So you have to tread really carefully.”

Jonathan has not spoken much about climate change, in parliament or in his constituency. He says "my priority is to stand up for my constituency." He sees climate change as an abstract, long term issue, which makes it hard to talk about.

“Telling people about the long term is a hard sell, you know it's not going to get in the local paper above [a story about how] one village has broadband and the other doesn't.”

In every decision he makes, his constituency comes first. He tells me this is because of the UK's electoral system. Jonathan compares his marginal constituency with colleagues who have safe seats:

“There's a sort of a luxury that comes with a safer seat, you can say 'Well ok I care about, whatever issue,' and make that your mission in life to change the world on one particular issue. Whereas when you're in a more marginal seat... you feel like you have to be doing a little bit of everything.”

Jonathan describes a particular group within his constituency as "retired, intelligent and affluent." Such people like to make their views known to their local MP, he says, yet there is a danger in just listening to the loudest voices.

He tries to make contact with people who would not think of approaching him. Of course, he wants their votes; but he also wants to make sure he is representing the interests of all his constituents, not just the campaigners and letter writers.

The realist

This story is based on four interviewees in the study. 'Paul' is a pseudonym.



Paul has served two terms as an MP, and has a frontbench role. When asked why he ran for parliament, he says, "it sounds rather trite, but coming into politics was an exercise in wanting to make a difference. My previous work [in the public sector] had taught me that there was plenty wrong in society."

Paul says that he sees climate change as a "gut" issue. He has thought a lot about it, but worries that it does not motivate his colleagues. He says they are generally "not naturally inclined to be so interested in this policy area" and that there is no pressure from party leaders to get involved. He sees limited value in trying to persuade colleagues, and tries to find other ways to make progress.

He gives his ideas for reforming transport and energy policy, but is adamant that such policies should be justified solely on economic and social grounds, and that reducing carbon emissions, or tackling climate change, should not be given as a reason for action. In short, he advocates climate policy by stealth.

“ I don't use climate change as the word because I think it's just toxic now in politics...As is the way in these issues which are contentious, you won't take people with you politically.”

Paul worries that too much focus on climate change risks alienating people, both local people in the constituency and fellow MPs. He says "I think it is important not to be a climate change zealot." He recently argued for better public transport in his local area, alongside a proposed road scheme. When asked whether he had talked about the carbon emissions from transport, he said

“ I think if I had mentioned carbon emissions, there would have been a rolling of eyes and saying, 'Oh here he goes again.'”

So he made his case in other ways. He is very deliberate in his choice of strategy and in the words he uses.

He is pessimistic about the ability of parliamentary processes and mechanisms to bring about change. He said he worried about this before he was elected, but "I underestimated... The frustrations are much greater... it's a bunfight, nothing ever changes, you can become deeply cynical." He says that how policy is designed "ends up really mattering" and is more important than bold public statements. He mentions Bismarck's phrase: "politics is the art of the possible."

Paul has a different attitude to his constituents than David or Jonathan. He is not so strongly motivated by constituency work, he says:

“ I enjoy the constituency stuff; it gives me a hell of a lot of information and knowledge which is of benefit to me here for the national stage. But ultimately, my job is here [in parliament], it isn't there.”

Though this attitude gives him more freedom to focus on the things that he sees as important, he is keen to point out that he is not dismissive of local views. He sees his constituency as a barometer of public opinion.

He talks about the possibility of profound change over time, using the example of equal marriage legislation to argue that change is possible through a combination of opinion shifts and careful policy. He worries, though, about moving too far, too fast. He says,

“However much it might look like the leaders are making decisions, in a democracy they are polling public opinion, they are asking people about their priorities, they’re experiencing, just in the course of doing their job, where public opinion is.”

This complex balancing act, he says, is the core of democratic process. So no matter how urgent the issue, “the idea that you can somehow ignore the electoral result when setting your expectations of what government might do is, I think, profoundly undemocratic.”

The ex-minister

This story is based on four interviewees in the study. ‘Stephanie’ is a pseudonym.



Stephanie has been in the Commons for three terms, and has served as a minister. She expresses her views readily, and speaks with the relaxed confidence of someone who has proven their worth. Though she talks about her constituency, it is clear that it doesn’t have the same pervasive influence on her as for younger or less experienced MPs. Neither is she as worried about what people think of her. When told that other MPs are worried about being seen as outsiders if they make the case for action on climate change, she is surprised and even dismissive:

“There’s no argument for staying quiet on any of this. You’ve got to speak out.”

Stephanie sees herself as a pragmatist, and says that others’ expectations are unrealistic.

“The punters, the populace, think that the politician, the prime minister for example, is all powerful. Actually, they absolutely are not. I’m not saying they have no power, but they can’t just do it.”

This isn’t an excuse for doing nothing, she says, but is instead a plea to focus on the practical steps necessary to achieve change.

This view is central to her argument about how to tackle climate change. It's not enough, she says, for politicians to be convinced of the science:

“Even if all the cabinet today were completely persuaded, the question then of what you do about it, becomes a difficult and problematic issue.”

She was in parliament when the 2008 Climate Change Act was passed, and like the vast majority of MPs, voted for the legislation. She doesn't remember it being discussed much, though: “The big issues were more around terrorism, anti-terrorism legislation, tax rates and smoking in public places... I remember it going on in the background.”

She thinks that the fact that there was a strong consensus might have meant that it was discussed less, saying that:

“If you take it out of the day to day of political conflict, you shouldn't be surprised that people aren't talking about it.”

Stephanie describes the group of politicians who worked directly on the bill as “the obsessives.... I know it's offensive to use the term obsessives.” For her, she says, climate change “probably falls into the basket of general progressive issues that sound good to ensure.”

When asked more about this, talking about the likely impacts of climate change, she says that just stating the problem, without regard to practical steps that can be taken, is counterproductive.

“The argument that we're in a qualitatively different situation than we've ever been in history, in my opinion doesn't help the argument at all.”

For the same reason, she criticises environmental organisations:

“Motivation isn't about just a set of beliefs, it's about an ability to implement... this is a criticism I'd make of many of the green organisations, you just say it's all very worthy but what the fuck can you do?”

Instead, she wants to focus on tangible objectives, promoting measures that improve local areas, like encouraging walking and cycling, creating jobs in the renewables industry, and so on.

Although Stephanie is less focused than other interviewees on the views of her constituents and public opinion, she does also ask how realistic it is to expect significant change on an issue that barely features in public or media debate. Following the recession, she says, it has “died” as an issue. Neither is it discussed much within her party:

“If either your party membership or the public are not flagging it up consistently as one of their top concerns or priorities, that is the issue.”

She is keen to explore changes to the practice of politics that could enable a more constructive debate between parties on climate change:

“It's the ultimate challenge to politics, isn't it?”

A political agenda for climate action

“Reorientating policy and resources toward local action would allow cities, towns and rural areas to contribute fully to the low carbon transition.”

Much advocacy on climate change has focused on policy prescriptions, couched in terms of necessity, efficiency and efficacy. But our research shows that it is not enough just to show that a policy is necessary, efficient and effective. There is another important question to ask: does the proposal build and extend the political mandate for climate action?

This is not to argue that efficiency and efficacy should not be criteria for climate action. Rather, that any proposals should be examined in terms of their contribution to developing the political mandate, as well as their effectiveness. On the basis of these insights, we outline below the elements of a renewed mandate for climate action in the UK.

Widening the political base for action

There is a campaign, supported by MPs, NGOs and business groups alike, to strengthen the Climate Change Act, setting a more ambitious target for net zero emissions by 2050. One hundred and thirty one MPs wrote to the prime minister asking for this target to be enshrined in law, representing the UK’s commitment to the goal agreed in Paris, to limit warming to 1.5°C.²² This stronger target is certainly necessary. But the debate masks a more fundamental question about how long term, top down targets are realised.

Currently, although government as a whole is responsible for the target, implementation lies with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Other departments, including those that have considerable influence over emissions of greenhouse gases from agriculture, land use and transport, like the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Transport, do not give it the same attention. Placing clear responsibilities on, and setting carbon targets for, each of these departments would help to engage a wider political base in climate action.

Nor is the act explicit about the role of local areas in carbon reduction. Some local areas have taken the initiative, pledging local targets and developing action plans. Manchester, for example, has pledged to become a zero carbon city by 2038; and the Lake District National Park has developed a local carbon budget, modelled on the national budgets enshrined in the act. There are many such examples. But local authorities are neither required to contribute toward national carbon targets, nor resourced to do so. Much local action is in spite of, not because of, national policy.

Setting targets for local areas, and reorientating policy and resources toward local action would allow cities, towns and rural areas to contribute fully to the low carbon transition. Members of parliament, with their dual role in the constituency and at national level, would be well placed to steer such initiatives.

Involving people

One practical way in which politicians could explore the public mandate for action, and develop meaningful policy solutions, is through greater use of deliberative processes, such as citizens’ assemblies. These allow citizens and experts to meet on equal terms, to assess evidence, debate and agree solutions.²³ They are not a substitute for electoral politics, but they provide a more nuanced and detailed understanding of voters’ viewpoints than traditional political polling or focus groups. Recently, two select committees in parliament commissioned a citizens’ assembly to investigate policies for social care, another complex, long term issue. Research has shown that politicians value these opportunities to engage directly with people.²⁴

The Republic of Ireland recently held a citizens’ assembly on climate change. A representative group spent two weekends hearing from, and debating with, climate scientists and experts on issues including transport, agriculture and energy; and they deliberated as a group on how Ireland as a nation should respond to climate change. Given the time and space to learn, think and discuss, citizens offered up a surprisingly radical and confident set

“It is both legitimate and necessary to ask of every climate policy, ‘Will this engage people?’”

of answers to a tricky question. Eighty per cent of them, for example, said they would be willing to pay higher taxes on carbon intensive activities.²⁵

Such processes could be used in the development of future carbon budgets. Politicians and citizens could debate, together, how they should be met, and prioritise policies to achieve them. It would allow politicians and policy makers to test and discuss a range of approaches to climate action, rather than second guessing which policies might be supported.

Doing politics in this way would not just be good for climate action, but for politics too. Similar prescriptions for change have been put forward by those searching for a less divisive and more productive post-Brexit politics, to counter the distrust of ‘experts’ and ‘elites’.^{26,27} A more inclusive form of government would involve a constant interplay between the views and values of the public and politicians.

Policies that grow support

In addition to greater deliberation, there is a need to design policies which build engagement and public support. It is both legitimate and necessary to ask of every climate policy, “Will this engage people? Will it build a mandate for further action?”

Our research did not look in detail at such strategies. Possibilities could include local, municipal or community ownership of energy, which helps to build support for, and understanding of, energy infrastructure at a local level. For transport, there could be a greater focus on travel demand locally, and involvement of citizens in the setting and managing of transport budgets for towns and cities.

The growing divestment movement has been a useful way for people to engage in the transition to a low carbon economy and society. It is also important to consider the effects of such a shift across the economy. The new Just Transition Commission for Scotland acknowledges that the transition needs to be carefully handled, to ensure that those currently working in high carbon sectors do not lose out.

Focusing on young people could be effective. Research indicates that, whilst young people are less engaged in formal politics, they look for other means to engage politically and demonstrate citizenship.^{28,29} In ten countries, including Canada, the US, India, Pakistan and the Netherlands, young people have brought lawsuits against their governments, urging further climate action.³⁰

Considering the long term

An issue raised by many politicians in this study was the tension between the pressures of day to day politics and long term challenges like climate change. Institutional changes could allow greater consideration of the future in political decision making. Some countries, including Wales, Hungary and Sweden, have institutions in place to represent the needs of future generations.³¹ The UK’s Climate Change Act provides an element of futures thinking, by enshrining long term targets in law. The act could be supported by institutional changes which explicitly consider future generations.

Endnotes

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About this research

This briefing summarises a three year research collaboration between Lancaster University and Green Alliance, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The study consisted of:

- An interdisciplinary **literature review**, drawing on previous work from a range of perspectives, including science and technology studies, sociology, political science and environmental governance.
- **Analysis of parliamentary speeches** on climate change, in the lead up to the 2008 Climate Change Act, using the technique of corpus analysis.
- **A focus group with NGO representatives** who work with MPs on climate change, to orientate the research and gain insights for use in MP interviews.
- **Two sets of interviews with current and former MPs**, carried out between 2016 and 2018. Twenty three interviews were conducted in total, using a qualitative method designed to elicit reflection and narrative. Interviewees were offered anonymity. The sample contained a balance of party background, gender, parliamentary experience and previous work on climate issues.

Findings from the research have been published in academic journals, in the following papers, all open access (free to read without subscription).

- R Willis, 2017, 'Taming the climate? Corpus analysis of politicians' speech on climate change', *Environmental Politics* 26(2): 212–231. This presents the findings of the corpus analysis of debates on the 2008 Climate Change Act.
- R Willis, September 2017, 'How members of parliament understand and respond to climate change', *The Sociological Review*, advance online publication. This analyses findings from the first set of MP interviews and uses insights from sociology, political theory and science and technology studies to explore how MPs understand and act on climate.
- R Willis, January 2018, 'Constructing a 'representative claim' for action on climate change: evidence from interviews with politicians', *Political Studies*. This looks in detail at the issue of political representation and explores how MPs create a mandate, or 'representative claim', for action on climate change.
- R Willis, July 2018, 'The use of composite narratives to present interview findings', *Qualitative Research*, advance online publication. This describes the 'composite narrative' technique developed to present findings from the MP interviews.
- R Willis, November 2018, 'Governing earth systems: the role of national politicians', paper for the Earth Systems Governance conference, Utrecht. This explores how national politicians respond to calls by scientists and international organisations for new forms of global governance of climate and other earth systems.

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