

Sustaining the political mandate for climate action



Sustaining the political mandate for climate action

Authors

by Dr Steve Westlake and Professor Rebecca Willis

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About this research

This report summarises the findings of a collaboration between Lancaster University, The Climate Coalition and the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST).

The research updates a previous study, published in 2018. The findings reflect not only the perspectives of MPs, but also their views on how climate change is considered by their parliamentary colleagues. This was a particular line of questioning in the interviews conducted, which means the findings paint a broader picture of how MPs in general engage with climate change as an issue.

The research is based on:

- Fifteen interviews: 14 with sitting UK MPs and one with a former senior MP. These comprised seven from the Conservative Party, seven from the Labour Party and one Liberal Democrat. The interviews were conducted between November 2022 and March 2023. There was a balance of gender, experience and ethnicity.
- A focus group conducted with five representatives from civil society organisations who work closely with MPs, to add wider perspectives on the political landscape and inform our recommendations.

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Summary

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Responding to the climate crisis is a fundamental challenge for politics today. The UK has a statutory goal to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050, Parliament has declared a climate emergency, and its impacts are being felt across the globe. But how do politicians themselves, charged with leading the way, navigate the issue? This report answers that question. It updates research from 2018 investigating how UK MPs understand and respond to climate change. It is based on interviews with 15 MPs, and a focus group with civil society representatives. The findings reflect not only the perspectives of the MPs, but also their views on how climate change is considered by their parliamentary colleagues.

The earlier research, conducted by Lancaster University and supported by Green Alliance, showed that, before 2018, MPs understood the need for action on climate change but struggled to advocate strongly for it. Climate change was considered an ‘outsider’ issue that could set them apart from their colleagues. They felt little pressure from their constituents to lead the way. The long term nature of climate change and its solutions did not lend itself to the daily cut and thrust of politics.

In this report, we show that the situation has changed. Nearly all the MPs interviewed for this recent research saw climate as a mainstream concern and spoke in favour of action. They understand the scientific consensus, support the Climate Change Act and say they have a stronger mandate from their constituents. They also see the co-benefits of climate action, such as better air quality and cheaper electricity from renewables.

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Yet this support is accompanied by specific concerns. MPs told us they have questions about how to manage the social, practical and political challenges of the net zero transition. They are “walking a tightrope”, in their words, between responding to the scale of the problem and managing a complex process of change. In some cases, this becomes outright opposition to proposals that MPs think may detrimentally impact their constituents, leading to disagreements over specific issues, like congestion charge zones or the rollout of heat pumps.

All the interviewees emphasised the importance of protecting people from potential negative impacts, such as higher costs or job losses in high carbon industries. They also fear a political backlash if climate action is seen as unfair to certain groups.

MPs report stronger demands for action from their constituents, compared to five or ten years ago. But they say that climate is often still an underlying, longer term concern, particularly for lower income groups. This underlines the importance of ensuring that benefits from climate policies are seen locally, for example more jobs or better air quality. However, MPs suggest it is higher income groups who are more likely to object to low carbon infrastructure, such as renewable energy developments.

MPs say the pace of change must be carefully managed. They point out that the UK has nearly halved its emissions since 1990, arguing that further progress should be incremental and “pragmatic”, and that drastic changes should be avoided.

There are also concerns about increasing polarisation. Some MPs voiced fears that there could be deliberate attempts to fold climate issues into “culture wars” to delay action, stoked by media controversy. Others agreed that this is an increasing risk as actions to tackle climate change begin to affect people’s lives.

The political debate has shifted from the need to do something to the pace of change. It seems the quiet consensus on climate change in the UK may be coming to an end.

Introduction

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is no longer considered safe. The latest IPCC report has since described “a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all”.

There are grounds for both optimism and concern about the UK’s current political landscape on climate change. With the world’s first net zero target passed into law, a spectacularly successful offshore wind story to tell and a political consensus that many countries can only dream of, things might appear rosy. However, government support for a new coal mine in Cumbria, the recent licensing of more North Sea oil and gas fields and a reluctance to engage the public on the challenges and benefits of meeting the net zero target may indicate that impressive ambition on climate is not matched by political commitment. This research sheds light on where politicians fit into this ambiguous picture.

What has changed since 2018?

Back in 2018 we interviewed MPs to take the political temperature, but the intervening years have seen significant changes.¹ That year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its *Global warming of 1.5°C* special report which ratcheted up the urgency of dramatic greenhouse gas emissions reductions, if the worst effects of climate change are to be avoided.² A temperature rise of 2°C is no longer considered safe. The latest IPCC report has since described “a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all”.³

Climate protests and civil disobedience by Extinction Rebellion and other groups have pushed climate change up the political agenda and into the public consciousness. Greta Thunberg’s school strikes sparked the global Fridays For Future youth movement, placing intergenerational equity at the heart of climate discussions.

Dramatic climate events have also contributed to growing concern and are clear evidence of climate change. Devastating hurricanes, wildfires, heatwaves and flooding have afflicted millions around the world. In the summer of 2022, the UK experienced its highest ever temperature⁴ of 40.3°C. Our rapidly changing climate has become impossible to ignore.

In response, there has been a flurry of declarations of a ‘climate emergency’, in jurisdictions throughout the UK and globally, with more than 2,300 to date, including the UK parliament in May 2019 and dozens of councils around the country.⁵ In June 2019, the UK became the first major economy to set a legally binding net zero target, committing to end its contribution to global warming by 2050. In 2020, the Climate Assembly UK brought together 110 members

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of the public in a citizens’ assembly, sponsored by parliamentary select committees. The assembly ended with a recommendation for an ambitious strategy to reach the net zero target.⁶

Other global events have shaped the political backdrop. The Covid-19 pandemic led to greenhouse gas emissions dropping suddenly, as economic and travel activity slowed, followed by a drive to reinvigorate economies. The war in Ukraine has pushed energy security to the top of the political agenda since February 2022 and has increased calls for a transition away from dependence on imported fossil fuels. The cost of living crisis has been aggravated by spikes in energy prices and shocks to global supply chains, some of them caused by climate events. Meanwhile, significant legislation has been penned at an international level, with the US introducing its Inflation Reduction Act in August 2022, including huge subsidies for renewable energy, stimulating a response from the EU with its Green Deal Industrial Plan.

Amid recent political turmoil at home, some have begun to question the durability of the UK’s status as a climate leader. Despite setting a net zero target for 2050, the government’s ambition has not been matched by policies to meet it. Its official adviser, the Climate Change Committee (CCC), has repeatedly stated that the government is falling short of a credible plan to meet the target and the interim carbon budgets.⁷

A recent political divide has opened up, with a small but vocal minority of politicians openly questioning whether aiming for net zero by 2050 is a sensible target and what the economic costs of it will be.⁸ In the Conservative Party, the Net Zero Scrutiny Group is perhaps the most tangible manifestation of this divide, existing alongside the Conservative Environment Network, a pro-climate caucus of Conservative MPs with a much bigger membership. In other parties, there is little vocal opposition to climate action, but there are nevertheless misgivings, as we outline in this report.

There is also increasing awareness of the role people will have to play, in choosing to make changes to their homes, and in opting for low carbon travel and products, as well as through supporting – or at least not opposing – the necessary policy and regulatory changes.⁹ There have been multiple calls for the government to create a public engagement strategy because, while concern is high and support for action is strong, the public is generally not well aware of the scale of changes required.^{10,11}

On the plus side, technological advances are making climate solutions more effective and tangible. The cost of offshore wind has plummeted, allowing the UK to claim a success story and world leadership, with renewable energy being the cheapest form of electricity generation. The cost of solar has also come down and electric vehicles have increased in popularity.

MPs must navigate this highly complex landscape in the context of the short term issues that dominate politics, such as the cost of living, party politics and, at times, a sceptical media environment.

In this report we start by exploring the main issues and questions that emerged from the research. This is followed by three ‘pen portraits’ of MPs, providing composite narratives to demonstrate the range of views we heard.

Climate is now a mainstream political issue

“Several MPs emphasised the need to base UK action on scientific evidence.”

One of the clearest findings of our research is that MPs in all the main political parties now see climate change as a mainstream issue. In 2018, we found that most thought it was an ‘outsider’ issue, and some feared being perceived as ‘freaks’ or ‘zealots’ by colleagues if they spoke out on climate. Now, most feel able to speak in favour of action. One new MP told us:

“I’ve been pleasantly surprised since coming to parliament that MPs are far more supportive of tackling climate change than I thought. Amongst the colleagues I speak to there’s no real difference between what they say publicly and what they say privately.”

MPs told us that this mainstreaming has happened for multiple reasons, including an ever-strengthening scientific case, a perception of increased concern from constituents and the ability of MPs to make a strong positive case for climate action on economic and political grounds; for instance, because of the falling cost of renewable energy, the potential for the UK to lead in the development of new technologies and industries, health benefits and better air quality. As a result, there is widespread support for the UK’s net zero target, an understanding of the need for concerted global action and support for UK international leadership.

Following the science

The scientific basis for action was a strong theme running through the interviews. A young MP we interviewed who was quite new to parliament, told us: “I think the vast majority of MPs believe in science and research,” and, as a result, they believed the UK’s net zero target was secure. Several MPs emphasised the need to base UK action on scientific evidence. They thought the CCC did a good job, referring to it as the UK’s version of the IPCC. One voiced strong support for the UK’s climate legislation in the shape of the Climate Change Act and the CCC:

“I think it’s extraordinarily impressive ... having the carbon budgets and so on. It provides a structured approach, which I can’t see in any other policy area. You can argue it’s not going quickly enough and it’s not as quick and effective as we would like, but if you compare it to other areas of policy, I think it’s astonishingly successful.”

Some MPs referred to their own scientific knowledge or background and said this informed their perspectives on climate

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change and, in some cases, aligned with that of their constituents. Reference to the science was also how some MPs justified a more incremental, “pragmatic” pace of change, in comparison to the perceived radical views of protesters.

Overt climate scepticism among MPs is confined to relatively few voices. One MP told us: “As younger generations of MPs have come through, the scepticism and the hostility has reduced substantially”. Another explained this lower scepticism not in terms of MPs’ age, but rather by parliamentary intake. MPs who gained their seats in later general elections, where climate change was a higher profile campaigning issue, were likely to prioritise climate precisely because it was salient during their campaigning.

A stronger mandate from constituents

Another major part of the mainstreaming of climate is that many MPs feel they have a stronger mandate from their constituents than was the case in 2018. The perceived need for MPs to push for climate action by stealth, which we identified in the 2018 research, has receded significantly, although it still remains to a degree. Some MPs said they would make the case even if they did not feel pressure from their constituents. That said, most express caution about climate advocacy without also addressing other concerns, for fear of being seen to neglect what constituents might consider to be pressing issues, such as worries over the cost of living. We discuss the mandate from constituents and voters further on page 11.

Pushing the co-benefits

MPs have felt able to mainstream climate action because they can make a positive local, political and economic case. Protection against local flooding, nature-based solutions and opportunities to grow the local economy were cited as arguments they can use to justify action (often referred to as co-benefits). Improving UK energy security, especially in light of the war in Ukraine, was another common argument MPs said they use. MPs from all parties stressed how the UK can lead in developing low carbon technologies and reap the economic benefits. In this way, a straightforward financial case can be made. On the subject of how once reluctant MPs can make the case for climate action, one Labour MP told us:

“They can talk about manufacturing jobs, energy use, they can definitely talk about money - the energy bills issue is a very good entry point into it. I think the people [MPs] who wouldn’t have been talking about renewables before, they’re talking about renewables now because they know that they’re cheaper. If they weren’t cheaper, then they wouldn’t be making the case... But I think there’s still some things like, say, land use, where it’s far trickier and far fewer people would actually be engaged in that discussion.”

Despite climate being a more mainstream issue now, there is also a feeling among MPs that ongoing public and political support for action to solve it is fragile and cannot be taken for granted. High levels of support in general are accompanied by uncertainty, concerns and, sometimes, outright opposition to policies. We discuss this next.

General support but specific concerns

“There are notable worries and, in some cases, opposition to aspects of the trajectory to net zero.”

It is clear, then, that MPs show strong support for climate action and the UK’s net zero goal. However, when discussing how this should be achieved, there are notable worries and, in some cases, opposition to aspects of the trajectory to net zero. Our interviews suggest the argument has moved from questioning whether the UK should be acting on climate change, to how to manage the social, practical and political challenges of the transition.

Walking a tightrope

Our interviewees highlighted the challenges of what one MP called “walking a tightrope” and “striking the right balance” between various public interests, business interests and short and long term political priorities. Another said:

“It’s partly about the debate being framed the right way, and not having too shrill a tone to try and keep the show on the road, as it were. I think a very shrill tone just turns people off. Even those who might want to stick their head above the parapet and argue for a difficult change might then be less inclined to do so.”

One Labour MP told us of the potential threats to net zero from losing focus in the midst of competing interests.

“Over the coming years, it will require a considerable amount of political effort and will to get organised to the point at which we’re able to meet our net zero targets. So I think the greatest challenge to net zero isn’t around polarisation necessarily. I think it’s just around a lack focus and political will and being knocked off course by events, and a lack of available resource. But we can’t afford not to do this. And, actually, there’s quite a positive way of framing this. The route to net zero provides economic opportunities, as well as environmental ones.”

Most MPs we spoke to saw the need to tell a positive story. Even then, as one MP said, introducing significant regulation requires considerable political will.

“There will still be kickback. And then it’s a political test really, of how much grief you can take. And that will depend on political strength and wider circumstances.”

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Outright opposition

In some cases, concerns can develop into outright opposition to specific changes that MPs or constituents feel detrimentally impact their local areas or lifestyles. Examples of this are schemes where traffic volume is addressed with congestion charging or low traffic neighbourhoods. Some MPs disagreed with the case that these measures would lead to greatly improved air quality and did not support them. As one explained:

“It’s very interesting seeing how [the debate] divides at that point between people who intellectually believe we’ve got to do something to improve our transport system, particularly to improve their health, but when it comes to them possibly being restrained in using their cars, you get quite a strong kickback. So there is a gap sometimes between the intellectual analysis of constituents and anything that interrupts the convenience of their daily life, as they see it.”

Another MP described this situation in the context of trade-offs:

“When the reality hits the necessary trade-offs, the climate agenda starts to wobble a bit. We saw it a bit with heat pumps as a source of heating. For example, people started to wobble when they realised, ‘oh, hang on, can I afford ten grand for that heat pump?’ So when the trade-off occurs, unless parliament and politicians manage that process, roll the pitch, that’s when it starts to wobble. And it might fall depending on the political temperature and circumstances at the time.”

Another MP talked about the importance of “pragmatism” and not hitting people’s standard of living, but also expressed opposition to onshore wind, despite it being the cheapest form of energy. “I’m not a massive fan of onshore wind farms. I’m quite open to renewables, and I see the advantage of wind farms, solar panels, etc. But I just think onshore wind is quite intrusive.” This is an example of the possible contradictions that arise in debates over the need to keep costs down, while preserving other things people value.

Compared to 2018, there were more concerns around the pace of change, and connected worries about climate being drawn into “culture wars”, which we discuss on page 14.

In striving to manage these concerns, MPs focus on two aspects of the climate agenda. First, the social impacts of the net zero transition and, second, the views and values of their constituents and the local areas they represent. We look at each of these in turn.

Social impacts of climate action

“The sense of climate change being a middle class, elite concern cropped up in several interviews.”

Every MP we interviewed across the political spectrum, ranging from strong climate advocates to those who are more sceptical about the costs and effects of policies, emphasised the importance of protecting people from negative effects, either from the higher cost of goods and services, or from job losses in higher carbon industries.

The following comment from a Conservative MP who represents what they described as an affluent constituency, refers to their colleagues for whom the social impacts were a real concern:

“There are lots of my fellow MPs who represent disadvantaged communities where there are high levels of unemployment, and people are worried about their housing, and they’re worried about all sorts of other issues, and they can’t afford to insulate their homes and they can’t afford to throw away their cars etc. And if rich, middle class people are talking about the need to combat climate change and reduce emissions, then they are naturally very sceptical about it.”

The sense of climate change being a middle class, elite concern that ignores realities cropped up in several interviews. Along with the direct cost of services, others suggested policies aimed at reducing road traffic and pollution, for example congestion charge zones, should not make driving “an activity of the wealthy.”

Risks of backlash

Some MPs predict that a backlash against perceived regressive policies is likely to undermine climate change as a political project. As one said:

“You cannot get away from the fact that people, our constituents, do not want their standard of living eroded in pursuit of something that we only have a limited impact on [globally]. So it’s getting that balance.”

There is also a subtle difference in whether MPs express concern about climate policies penalising those who are less affluent, or people in general. Some MPs cited the higher cost of heat pumps and electric cars, making them inaccessible to those who could not afford them, or less attractive to those who could. Another pointed to the danger of general increases in the costs of services, like electricity:

“I think it’s really important that we don’t burden people with extra costs to be green, and that the government and the private sector have to work together to provide renewable energy and a means by which people can live. If they think they’re being charged to be green, you’re not going to take the public with you.”

Who should pay?

While the need to protect less affluent people against any costs of the net zero transition was well voiced, MPs were less specific about who should bear the costs. One MP was an exception:

“[My position] is based on a notion that the polluters should pay, and that the hard pressed working families who’re already struggling to make ends meet shouldn’t, where possible, be made or forced to carry the cost of this. That primarily the cost of clearing up environmental damage, should sit with those who are better placed to pay for it.”

Views were divided over the recent windfall taxes on large fossil fuel companies, with some opposed:

“It would be easy if we could compartmentalise the BPs and the Shells and the big majors in a box, saying, right these the guys, you know, we’re going to make the pips squeak with these guys. But, actually, there is a danger that it’s their supply chains, which are made up of businesses in my constituency and elsewhere around the UK, who will suffer. Very often those guys will be moving forward and will be investing in, you know, hydrogen and carbon capture, those type of new technologies. So it’s a balancing act.”

This quote echoes the views of several of our interviewees who thought fossil fuel companies should not be vilified and are a central part of the transition. Although there was general agreement that the less affluent should not pay, this was not matched by suggestions of who (if anyone) should.

**“
There was general agreement that the less affluent should not pay.”**

The local perspective

“The MPs interviewed expressed a wide spectrum of views on the mandate from their constituents.”

A strong theme arising from the research, which was also very prominent in our interviews with MPs in 2018, was the influence of their local area and the views of their constituents. This is particularly the case in the UK where, under the electoral system, MPs have strong ties to a particular region.

What do constituents think?

The MPs interviewed expressed a wide spectrum of views on the mandate from their constituents, depending on the character of their local areas. Two said they felt that being vocally pro-environmental was essential in their constituency: “...you couldn’t be an MP in my constituency unless you were strong on the environment”. Describing their constituents’ views on climate change, one said “It’s the top issue for them. You know, long term underlying top issue.” This captures a crucial feature of climate change as a political issue: that it is an important concern for most people and can sometimes feel like the top priority, but its long term nature often makes it an underlying issue rather than the most important one day to day, like the cost of living or the NHS. As another interviewee said, climate is “everyone’s number two issue, like ‘I care most about Brexit freedoms and then climate change.’”

However, not all MPs said voters were demanding action. Three said it was not a big issue for most of their constituents and stressed that any changes must be implemented on the basis of the wider co-benefits that climate policies may bring, rather than being sold primarily in terms of emissions reductions.

A common theme was the observation that less wealthy constituents tend to be less concerned and less engaged in the issue. However, two MPs pointed out that these constituents are also less likely to object to low carbon infrastructure or development.

“If you’re struggling you’re not going to be thinking ‘has COP26 been of success or not?’ They don’t give a damn about offshore, onshore wind, that’s completely irrelevant to their lives. Why should they worry about it? You could put a wind turbine at the end of the street and they wouldn’t care. And I think most people don’t actually mind them.”

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Locally relevant issues

Many MPs we interviewed made the point that, for them to maintain a political mandate, climate change has to be linked to their constituencies and local issues, and this was not necessarily simple. One MP framed climate change as a potential source of local advantage:

“It’s an opportunity. Ok, it’s a major challenge, but out of some form of adversity we can invigorate the local economy, and develop expertise and knowledge in and around the constituency.”

Another observed that the long run nature of climate change and the common perception that it is a distant problem makes it difficult to connect it to local issues:

“With climate change it’s a bit trickier because the local entry point is not so obvious. Where the government is doing something wrong it’s easier for people to mobilise around ‘stop this’ as opposed to when they’re just not doing enough.”

Another interviewee reported that it is easier to oppose something specific, like fracking, than it is to press for a general climate agenda. Specific opposition is likely to arise in relation to policies and changes that have a local impact, for instance onshore wind or other low carbon infrastructure. Here, again, constituency demographics play a role. As one MP told us, objections to low carbon infrastructure tend to come from wealthier demographics, with other groups in society supporting developments – including low carbon industries – that could reinvigorate a local area:

“My sense is that regeneration, reinvigorating the economy, bringing jobs to the area, is actually something that my constituents are supportive of, and recognise the need for. If you look in neighbouring constituencies, which do not have those economic challenges, you then probably get people questioning the merits of these large infrastructure projects.”

Deciding to lead

MPs’ perspectives on climate change are not necessarily dictated by an explicit mandate from their constituents. As we found in our previous research, some said they would advocate on climate even if they were not pushed to do so by their constituents. One said: “They’ve elected me in order to exercise my judgement about what things I consider to be important.”

Polarisation and the pace of change

“The pace of change is portrayed as politically appropriate, while also being seen as insufficient.”

Despite overall support for climate action and the net zero target, there is considerable debate about the pace of change. Some interviewees, particularly Conservatives, said that the 2050 net zero target was appropriate and criticised campaign groups pushing for even more ambitious targets, saying they were not being pragmatic and potentially risked political unrest. One said:

“There are campaigns that say we’ve got to be net zero by 2025, or 2030. [laughing incredulously]... do you realise what the consequences of that will be? You’d have a revolution in Britain if you tried to do that, in terms of destroying people’s quality of life.”

But, later in the same interview, the MP acknowledged that the pace of change was not enough:

“We need to do more, we could do more, we are, you know, I’m sure the government will do more. I’m certainly pushing it to do more. But, fundamentally, we’ve halved our emissions since 1990.”

Too fast but not fast enough

These views contain a paradox, whereby the pace of change is portrayed as politically appropriate, while also being seen as insufficient. This connects with MPs’ visions of how arguments are won, how to maintain a political project and bring about change.

One MP cited “an increasingly hysterical focus on the pace of change” that “loses the appeal of people of reason towards their cause”, and another said they thought it was important not to have “a very shrill” tone that will put people off, mentioning the recent climate protests and civil disobedience, including blocking roads.

The perception of those pushing for faster change as being hysterical or shrill and, therefore, unreasonable, is presented in contrast to what some MPs perceive as a logical, sensible and science-based approach. Achieving an appropriate pace of change was often framed in terms of pragmatism.

One MP expressed uncertainty relating to long term climate targets by advising NGOs to “...be pragmatic. I know the target’s 2050. Will we achieve it? Probably not. But we should still be working towards it.”

Capturing another paradox in relation to those trying to up the pace, one Conservative MP we interviewed said: “In principle, I support Extinction Rebellion and Greta Thunberg because you need to keep the political pressure up because, otherwise, the vested interests will always try and resist any changes, as always happens.” The same MP also said that climate groups were often too pessimistic in their messaging and should acknowledge the UK’s progress, as we explore next.

“**Science was used both as a reason to act on climate change but also as a reason to reject claims that a faster pace of change is necessary.**”

Different views on the role of science

Science was used both as a reason to act on climate change but also as a reason to reject claims by some parties, such as NGOs, that a faster pace of change is necessary. References to science were folded in with calls to reason, rationality and pragmatism, in contrast to unfounded “extreme” arguments about “the end of the world” or “everything stopping tomorrow”. This contrasting of a scientific outlook with an extreme alternative was a common feature of the discourse in several interviews and was used to justify a “pragmatic” approach. This is in spite of the scientific consensus, as represented by the IPCC, implying the need for very rapid emissions cuts and transformative changes to society.³

Some uncertainty about the scientific consensus also cropped up in two interviews, with one expressing disquiet at the way in which some evidence, like better air quality, is downplayed to further certain arguments. Another said “consensus is not a scientific word”. Both these MPs said they sought information from several sources on both sides of the debate, for instance:

“You might as well get information from both sides. My own personal view is I am open minded about the whole subject. I do not have any ideological views on it. And I feel you get an unbalanced argument from both sides at times.”

These views were, however, very much in the minority. As mentioned earlier, the IPCC and CCC were referenced in relation to the science. One MP used this to argue against the recent decision to open a coal mine in Cumbria saying, “the CCC are very clear. They follow the science, they tell the government what to do, the government should do it.”

Culture wars

Several MPs voiced fears that climate change runs the risk of being deliberately embroiled in “culture war” issues, with two MPs saying that they feared there could be a deliberate attempt to fold it into the “war on woke” as a means to delay action or gain political advantage, as seems to have happened in the US. When asked, other MPs agreed that this is an increasing risk as political action on climate change inevitably begins to encroach more noticeably on people’s lives. There were sounding bells of potential divisions, with some MPs talking of “metropolitan elites” trying to impose uninformed or unrealistic policies affecting rural or less affluent communities.

More broadly, the need for the public to be actively involved in the transition, through changing behaviour, choosing low carbon options or supporting climate policies, means that MPs believe a broad consensus is required to “keep the show on the road” and guard against political fracturing. However, they also acknowledge the inevitability of political disagreement over the best, fairest, most efficient and effective ways to bring down emissions.

Two MPs were explicit about the role of the media in maintaining or harming a political mandate on climate change, both mentioning the *Daily Mail*:

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“If you start talking about anything on the dietary front or anything that is a bit too nanny state, it risks being distorted. I have to be careful and I just go there in subtle ways because you’re trying to avoid being on the front page of the *Daily Mail*, and that’s shorthand for press.”

Consequently, one MP suggested that the primary focus of civil society groups should not be pressuring politicians but, rather, on maintaining and encouraging public support for climate action as the realities of decarbonisation take effect on people’s lives and local areas.

MPs' stories

The young optimist

This is based on six interviews. 'Arya' is a pseudonym



Arya is in her late 30s and is still considered a young MP, in spite of being in parliament for nearly ten years. She has held senior positions on select committees related to the environment and is considered a high flyer by colleagues. Driven by a strong sense of social justice, she is fully committed to climate change as an issue, saying she would advocate for it even if she didn't feel it was something her constituents were particularly bothered about. Luckily many are, particularly those in more affluent neighbourhoods. But she tends not to talk about climate change in less wealthy areas saying, **“they have more pressing things to think about like putting food on the table. They wouldn't care if there was a wind turbine at the end of their street.”**

Arya looks at climate change through the lens of fairness. She insists:

“The cost of clearing up environmental damage should lie with those who are better placed to pay for it. Hard pressed working families who're already struggling to make ends meet shouldn't carry the cost of this.”

She has always been vocal about her commitment to environmental issues and so feels she has a strong mandate, even when it is not always the top issue on the doorstep:

“They’ve elected me in order to exercise my judgement about what things I consider to be important.”

She believes most MPs are on board with climate now and are convinced by the science, especially those who entered parliament in more recent general elections. It’s not a matter of age, she thinks, but more to do with the fact that climate change is an issue that has been increasingly important in recent election campaigns, and this has set the political landscape for newer MPs.

However, she does feel that some MPs are only paying lip service to climate change and thinks they are vulnerable to arguments saying climate action is too expensive or should not progress too fast because it will be the least affluent who bear the biggest burden. And, while things have progressed a lot in parliament, she believes politicians are falling short of what’s required:

“I still think that the level of focus and the appetite for debate about climate policies is still not at the point it would need to be, given the scale of the crisis that we undoubtedly face.”

She believes the current pace of change is insufficient and much more political commitment and financial investment is needed from government. It is a lack of political will in the face of competing priorities that she thinks could ultimately scupper the UK’s net zero ambitions.

To maintain public support, in her constituency and nationally, Arya says the challenge is to integrate climate change with local issues so that people can see the direct benefits to their communities. This means emphasising the economic opportunities and ensuring they are enjoyed by all.

One of her primary fears about climate politics in the UK is that it is vulnerable to becoming a “wedge” issue. She gives the example of the recent controversy about 15 minute neighbourhoods:

“There has been some extraordinarily ill-informed commentary around what that is all about. What they’re aiming to do is to make it so basically it’s so difficult to talk about climate change, because as soon as you mention it you’ll be told, that’s ‘wokeism’, it’s a wedge issue, and therefore people don’t want to touch it as an issue. It’s dangerous.”

In view of this, Arya really appreciates the support of more senior members of her party who encourage her to speak up on climate issues, particularly ones that affect her constituency. Leadership is essential she says.

The technical transitioner

This is based on five interviews. ‘Chris’ is a pseudonym.



Chris is in his mid 50s. He is quite new to parliament but in no way feels out of this depth, having had a successful career in manufacturing industry. He feels he has a lot to offer, based on his prior experience, and his colleagues seem to agree. Chris has held senior positions on select committees and is in line for a front bench role.

He is strongly committed to climate action and believes there is a positive story to tell about the UK's progress so far and its potential for leadership, both in terms of new technologies and demonstrating to the world what a successful energy transition looks like. This is why, Chris says, there must be an orderly transition at a pace that keeps businesses on board.

He believes his constituents are strongly supportive of climate action as long as it is based on reasoned argument and evidence. He has sympathy for the cause of climate campaign groups and NGOs and appreciates the need to keep up the political pressure, but thinks they are often too negative, their arguments are often not based in science and they are perceived as middle class. He thinks the language around climate change has sometimes become “hysterical” and that the recent protests that disrupt people's lives have gone too far and are harming the cause of those who, like himself, are arguing for sensible action on climate change.

But at the same time, he appreciates the paradox that significant societal changes often come when passions rise:

“Great political causes are, of course, emotional causes, which brings us right back to direct action because it gets human beings going. But the answers to climate change in the end are going to need a much duller, evidence-based approach.”

With his self declared scientific acumen, Chris says that climate action must be grounded in science, reasoned debate and pragmatism, rather than being overly ambitious or based on ideology, which would risk threatening peoples’ quality of life by, for example, stopping them driving or travelling long distances, and would soon be rejected by the public.

He is very pro-business and pro-technology and thinks this is the best way to create a thriving net zero economy that provides an abundance of green jobs. As such, he is sceptical about windfall taxes and vilifying fossil fuel companies because they will need to be part of the transition, providing much needed investment and technical expertise.

“I’m conscious from feedback that I get from industry. That, if these windfall taxes and these levies aren’t quite properly balanced, then there is the danger that the investment that we need might go elsewhere. It would be easy if we could compartmentalise the BPs and the Shells and the big majors in a box, saying right these the guys, you know, we’re going to make the pips squeak with these guys. But, actually, there is a danger it’s their supply chains, made up of businesses in my constituency and elsewhere around the UK, who will suffer. Very often those guys will be moving forward and will be investing in, you know, hydrogen and carbon capture, those type of new technologies. So it’s a balancing act.”

The ambivalent supporter

This is based on four interviews. ‘Alan’ is a pseudonym.



Alan is in his early 60s. He is a backbench MP representing a constituency with significant pockets of deprivation and it is this that underpins his stance on climate policies. Like most MPs, he has to be across a great many issues and he admits climate is not top of his agenda.

“I accept something has to be done. But the what and the how fast, I don’t have the bandwidth as an MP to be giving very much attention to that detail.”

He also thinks his constituents are not very engaged in climate change, and he fears they could easily lose out in the energy transition:

“I would say the vast majority are aware of climate change. Are they interested? Probably not. Unless it has an impact on them.”

The best way to engage with his constituents is in relation to local issues that affect them directly, such as flooding or the cost of energy.

“You have to recast the arguments to fit your own constituents. I try and portray the issue in terms they understand and care about, so, for example, energy security, rather than that net zero or renewables. More renewables is a way to reduce dependence upon not just Russian oil and gas, but all oil and gas.”

Alan doesn't have much time for generalised rhetoric about 'green jobs' because he says there is no guarantee they will be created in his constituency. He also becomes suspicious of arguments that paint a dire picture of the environment but leave out areas where things have improved dramatically, like air quality. He therefore seeks information from a range of sources:

“You might as well get information from both sides. My own personal view is I am open minded about the whole subject. I do not have any ideological views on it. And I feel you get an unbalanced argument from both sides at times.”

Alan thinks the costs and impacts of the net zero transition must be carefully scrutinised and the public made fully aware of them. For him, the best way to advocate for net zero is on the basis of energy security and international competitiveness, and to move incrementally.

“If we can get our energy in a sustainable and renewable manner, what's not to like? But I just think from a practical perspective you can't jump from one to the other overnight, you've got to transition.”

He says incremental steps can lead to more rapid change, which is a preferable approach to going at a pace not matched by other countries which harms the UK economy. He frames this in pragmatic terms:

“I know the target's 2050. Will we achieve it? Probably not. But we should still be working towards it.”

He thinks campaign groups' and protestors' arguments are often not grounded in accurate information and are not aligned with ordinary people's concerns. People don't want their standards of living eroded, he says. Some of Alan's colleagues wonder if he is just paying lip service to climate and suspect his support could diminish if the political landscape changes. And, unlike Chris, Alan thinks the apparent consensus among MPs in support of the UK's net zero target is a little less rock solid when you talk to them in private:

“There is a view that this has to be done, it's important, people are saving the planet. So they don't want to raise a sceptical voice, or they're not brave enough. But you go into the tearoom or the bar and you talk to people and there is more of a private concern.”

Recommendations

“Some MPs are very comfortable with their understanding of the science and its implications, but others are less surefooted.”

From this research, a number of clear conclusions can be drawn about how to strengthen and support political action on climate change.

Promote ongoing dialogue between scientists and MPs

The scientific basis for climate action underpins MPs’ commitment to the issue. It provides a foundation for them to construct a reasoned narrative about how climate should be addressed and the appropriate pace of change. MPs refer to the IPCC and the CCC as institutional touchstones for the scientific consensus.

Some MPs are very comfortable with their understanding of the science and its implications, but others are less surefooted. Ways should be sought to enhance MPs’ understanding of the scientific consensus and how this relates to the UK’s overall climate targets. There is also a need for ongoing dialogue about the basis for net zero scenarios, their grounding in evidence and their implications for specific policies and sectors, including transport, home heating and measures for business and industry.

MPs are clear that the advice given by the CCC is grounded in science and independent analysis. This allows them to justify the UK’s climate targets and pressurise the government to go further and faster. Maintaining and using this institutional connection between science and policy is essential to bolster a widespread political mandate amongst MPs.

It is necessary to reinforce the scientific knowledge and engagement of MPs for whom net zero is just one of many competing concerns. Trusted messengers are essential and one avenue could be to encourage climate experts in each constituency to engage with local MPs on an ongoing basis, tapping into local relationships. Another valuable resource for MPs and their advisers would be regular short, clear summaries of the state of climate science to both increase their confidence and ‘pre-bunk’ disinformation that may sow doubts.¹²

Make constituents’ views known

The motivation of MPs to speak out on climate change is often directly related to their perception of public support and the views of their constituents. This is particularly the case for those with smaller majorities whose political antennae are highly attuned to public sentiment.

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However, recent research shows that MPs' perceptions of public opinion on climate change and the popularity of specific policies, can be very different to the actual opinions of their constituents. For instance, public support for onshore wind is much higher than many MPs imagine.¹³ This may occur because, by their own admission, MPs often hear the loudest voices from the ends of the spectrum of opinion on climate, which do not necessarily represent the general views of those who are less vocal or less certain of their position. It is the views of the silent majority in the middle ground that MPs need to hear more. Providing them with this data, tailored to their constituency, would allow them to represent the mandate of their constituents more accurately and to be called out if they do not.

Any initiative that allows an MP to connect action on climate change with the benefits it might bring to their constituents is likely to be successful and welcome. This could involve events that engage constituents or data that shows how climate action will benefit them directly.

Similarly, if maintaining public support becomes a challenge, work that bolsters local support for existing or upcoming changes will assist MPs to maintain their mandate to act, giving them confidence to stay the course. This would also be supported by explicitly focusing on a diversity of constituency voices and local campaigns, including individuals and businesses.

While the MPs we spoke to said they take some notice of mass email campaigns and respond to them, most said that more tailored approaches from their constituents or local campaign groups carry much more weight, especially from those who are not considered usual suspects.

Wider public engagement is vital

As our research shows, general support for climate action may not necessarily translate into support for specific measures. This is true both for politicians and the people they represent. There can be considerable resistance, even from those who generally support climate measures, when specific policies are implemented, such as congestion charge zones or large infrastructure projects. This means there is work to be done, as one MP put it, to “roll the pitch” in advance so objections can be minimised and advantages made clear to people.

Emphasising the co-benefits of policies (such as better air quality and better public transport, healthier populations and quieter neighbourhoods) can be useful in justifying climate policies. Previously, MPs would make the case for carbon saving measures, such as cycle lanes or home insulation, without referring to climate change, ie they would use a ‘stealth’ strategy. But stronger general support for climate action now makes this unnecessary and possibly counterproductive. A ‘both... and’ strategy is likely to appeal more: stating that measures both help climate change and have other benefits. For those MPs still squeamish about full throated climate advocacy, the economic and energy security case is now compelling on its own. Being explicit about the other

benefits is very unlikely to backfire and will strengthen the case for further action.

Pay attention to social and distributional implications

Concerns we heard from MPs in this round of interviews about the social impacts of climate policies emphasise the need for much more nuanced consideration of how different demographics and income groups engage with the net zero transition. For instance, a sizable segment of the population (about a third) termed ‘low to middle income households’ often do not benefit from support offered to the least well off, but also cannot take advantage of financial incentives that require considerable upfront financial outlay, such as the Boiler Upgrade Scheme.¹⁴ The risk is that the support of these people, characterised as ‘the squeezed middle’, will be lost if action to reach net zero is not perceived as fair. Tools such as Climate Outreach’s segmentation of the population, developed as part of its Britain Talks Climate project, can be used to help MPs and others maintain the mandate to act by paying detailed attention to the concerns of different groups.¹⁵

A nuanced understanding of how to maintain a mandate that includes the concerns of the public can also be achieved through deliberative processes, such as climate assemblies and citizens’ panels. The UK Climate Assembly was one example of this.⁶ Such processes increase understanding of people’s views on the principles that should guide policies, such as ensuring fairness. They can also feed into detailed policy design; for example, the CCC worked with a citizens’ jury to develop policy recommendations for home energy saving.¹⁶ MPs should be informed of their findings and assembly members could be helped to establish relationships with politicians at all levels to share their insights.

Localised strategies are important

There is growing recognition that a localised approach is important for effective climate policy. MPs and others can press the government to enact the recommendations of the CCC, clarify the roles of central and local government, co-ordinate action and share best practice.⁷ MPs can also be encouraged to engage with the proposed Net Zero Local Powers Bill that would permit and oblige relevant levels of local authorities to deliver against the net zero target.¹⁷

Consider the impact of protest

MPs appreciate that the surge of activism and civil disobedience since 2018 has pushed climate change up the agenda and contributed to political progress. However, most of those we spoke to said that recent protests are losing public support and risk undermining the climate agenda. Polarisation can be an explicit strategy of protests and campaigns, but this situation presents pressure groups and NGOs with a dilemma as to whether to pursue more conventional political engagement with MPs or employ emotive and potentially divisive tactics.

**“
A localised approach is
important for effective
climate policy.”**

“MPs are targeted with well co-ordinated, well funded lobbying that can weaken political resolve on climate.”

Focus on lobbying

This report has primarily centred on the mandate MPs receive from the public and the way in which it can increase or decrease as policies are introduced and public opinion fluctuates. A less accessible but equally powerful part of a politician’s mandate, especially for those moving the levers of government, comes from their interaction with businesses and lobbyists. The fact that high carbon economic interests, particularly fossil fuel companies, have a strong financial incentive to shape and slow down the net zero transition is an issue often absent from discussions around politics and policy making.

The process of well funded political manoeuvring and lobbying, supported by a network of think tanks, is well documented in the US, but less so in the UK.¹⁸ One example is that government ministers had nine times as many private meetings with fossil fuel companies, from July 2019 to March 2021, as they did with companies prioritising clean energy production.¹⁹ MPs are also the subject of well co-ordinated and well funded lobbying that may steer them to support some policy directions rather than others. Raising awareness of these lobbying influences could help to rebalance the mandate of MPs and empower them to put climate goals ahead of corporate or donors’ interests.

In the past five years climate change has moved from an outsider issue for politicians to the mainstream. This welcome shift brings with it difficult challenges: to maintain the political mandate to act urgently and ambitiously on climate as the necessary transformations to society are debated, contested and enacted. MPs have a pivotal position in achieving this, as representatives of people and businesses, and upholders of societal values and culture. We hope this report provides useful insights for all those involved.

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