



Demanding UK government action for climate justice

A briefing by Quaker Peace & Social Witness

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At the COP 23 UN climate negotiations in Bonn in November 2017, the UK is likely to recommit to tackling climate change. Yet when it comes to domestic policy, the UK is failing to commit to cut carbon fast enough.

Quakers in Britain have argued that the UK must address the ongoing injustice of climate change by putting the needs of communities and nations most vulnerable to climate change first, and lead in taking rapid and radical action to cut its climate impact.

The UK's climate commitments

In 2015 the UK and nearly 200 other nations signed up to the **UN Paris climate deal**. Nations committed to cut emissions in line with limiting global warming to “well below 2°C” above pre-industrial levels by 2100, and to “pursue efforts” to limit this further to 1.5°C. The deal was hailed as a milestone of international cooperation, and individual nations were called on to submit their own plans to cut emissions fast.

At current rates of greenhouse gas emissions, the Earth is on course for an average temperature increase of 3°C above preindustrial levels by the end of the century. This would have catastrophic impacts around the world. A **2°C limit** to global warming is recognised by many as key to averting some of the very worst impacts of climate chaos. The UK has enshrined this target in domestic law in the form of the Climate Change Act 2008. With this law, the UK commit to cut 80% of GHG emissions from 1990 levels by 2050. It also appointed a committee of experts to set five-yearly national carbon budgets designed to achieve these cuts through intermediary reduction targets.

Yet the Paris climate deal presents a new challenge. Leading climate scientists note that even a 2°C rise could threaten vulnerable communities and ecosystems. They estimate that limiting warming to **1.5°C compared to 2°C would:**

- Substantially lower the risk of the lowest-lying nations being flooded by rising sea levels.
- Reduce by one month the length of heatwaves in many poorer tropical countries.
- Limit the risk of reductions in crop yields by 10-15%¹.

Many of the nations that are most vulnerable to climate change demanded a commitment to further “pursue efforts” towards a 1.5°C limit. Its inclusion in the Paris climate deal marked a shift in international cooperation for climate action.

From commitments to action

The UK is a vocal champion of UN climate negotiations. When President Trump announced in early 2017 the USA’s withdrawal from the Paris climate deal, Prime Minister Theresa May was keen to reassert her commitment to it. Yet campaigners note that the government has been slow to turn commitment into action.

Despite the policy lag, the UK has made some progress in its transition to a low-carbon economy. The government claim that the 1st, 2nd and 3rd national carbon budgets (covering the years 2008-2022) have been or are due to be over-achieved². The UK, according to government figures, has indeed cut its emissions by over 42% since 1990³ (although the government’s failure to account for extensive emissions from aviation and shipping call these emissions figures in to question).

Yet in recent years the future of this progress has been left in the balance with scant detail being made public about how the UK will continue to cut emissions. The fact that much of the UK’s climate policies derive from the EU means that Brexit leaves further uncertainty for the UK’s plan for climate action.

The government are clearly still making choices that reinforce the UK’s current dependence on fossil fuels. The UK continues to offer generous subsidies and tax breaks to the fossil fuels industry. Government support for fracking and similar forms of extraction could deepen our dependence on high-carbon fuels. Expansion of the highly polluting aviation industry could significantly risk progress in cutting carbon. Despite it providing the most cost-effective renewable energy, the government continue to rule out onshore wind farms. Whilst renewable energy production in the UK is at a record high, in 2015, the UK only ranked 24th out of 28 European countries on its share of energy from renewable sources.

¹ 2016 *Low Carbon Monitor* ‘Pursuing the 1.5°C limit: Benefits and Opportunities’. Climate Vulnerable Forum and UNDP (2016). Available at http://climateanalytics.org/files/lowcarbongoo.gl/ituudG_monitor-nov2016-medres.pdf

² The Clean Growth Strategy. UK Government, October 2017. p.5

³ See (2) (p.22).

The Clean Growth Strategy

In October, after a year's delay, the UK government released its Clean Growth Strategy. This document, the government claims, answers increasing demands by the campaigners and businesses for a comprehensive plan for achieving our remaining climate obligations.

The strategy shows some signs of progress. It starts from the basis that cutting GHG emissions must become a central part of managing our economy. £2.5bn will be targeted at low-carbon innovation and renewable energy over the next decade. Around £3.6bn of investment is allocated to improve the energy efficiency of a million homes – good news for cutting emissions and tackling fuel poverty. £1bn of investment is promised for ultra-low emissions vehicles. This all signals a welcome step change in the government's commitment to a low-carbon economy.

Yet, fundamentally, **the Clean Growth Strategy demonstrates an ongoing failure to commit to the action we need.** The government has responded to initial progress in cutting emissions by reducing ambition to meet remaining emissions targets, and fallen far short of the policy detail now needed to deliver sufficient GHG emissions cuts.

The government **admits that emissions cuts resulting from the Clean Growth Strategy would fail to meet the reductions required by the 4th and 5th Carbon Budgets by 6 and 9.7% respectively.** The government claim they have drawn on 'flexibilities' within UK climate law to allow this. Lord Deben, Chairman of the Committee on Climate Change, however, has said that these carbon budgets should be delivered through domestic action "without the use of accounting flexibilities or reliance on international carbon credits."⁴

Of course, falling short of the emissions target laid out by the Climate Change Act 2008 – itself based on a global warming limit of 2°C – leaves "pursuing efforts towards 1.5°C" as a distant ambition. Just a year after officially ratifying the Paris climate deal, it appears that the government are attempting to quietly drop this key feature of the deal.

The strategy is missing many important details. Among these, the document fails to say what their vision means for the future of fracking and similar extraction techniques in the UK. Whilst support is pledged for low-emissions vehicles, it overlooks much-needed investment in sustainable public transport that will help take cars off the road. It delays decisions to fully account for aviation and shipping in emissions targets. The strategy fails to offer any support for community or small-scale energy production.

Beyond this, the Clean Growth Strategy raises many fundamental questions. After all, the document is essentially an *industrial* strategy. What role will it play in a broader plan to cut UK emissions, and by how much? What role does the public sector play? How will the government

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support behaviour change to reduce energy consumption? Where there is investment promised, which companies will receive this and what will this mean for our services and resources?

The government claims it must balance investment in a low-carbon economy with 'value for money' for tax payers. Yet when it comes to the radical action needed to protect vulnerable communities in the UK and overseas from climate change, how is 'value for money' measured? The government must do much more to build a comprehensive plan to determine a full and just transition to a low-carbon economy.

Take action – contact your MP

With the UK government returning from UN climate negotiations, it's time to demand it delivers on its climate commitments.

Write to your MP and ask them to call on the government for action, and ensure their own party is doing all it can to promote policy for climate justice. Ask your MP to call on the government to:

- Further develop the Clean Growth Strategy to fully meet the 4th & 5th Carbon Budgets, delivering emissions cuts through domestic actions rather than relying on 'flexibilities' in UK climate law
- Fully commit to developing policy and delivering investment that ensures the UK plays its part in further pursuing efforts to limit global warming by 1.5°C.

If you meet with your MP, you may want to raise other concerns detailed in this briefing. If your MP is not in the Conservative Party, ask them how they will ensure their party will support policy for a rapid transition to a low-carbon economy.

If you'd like further support on engaging with your MP on this issue, please contact Chris Walker, Sustainability & Peace Programme Manager, at chrisw@quaker.org.uk or on 020 7663 1048. If you receive a reply from your MP, please share this with us. This will help us hold the government to account and support others in their witness.

You can find out who your MP is, and how to contact them, at www.theyworkforyou.com

For more information on this issue, and for further advice on taking action for climate justice, please go to www.quaker.org.uk/sustainability