

Neil Carmichael MP

[Address
redacted]

10 January 2017

Dear Neil

UK Climate Action Following the Paris Agreement

Context of this letter

Many thanks again for the generous amount of time you gave to meeting with supporters of Gloucestershire Climate Action Network (GlosCAN), including myself, on Friday 21 October 2016. At that meeting, you expressed confidence in the Government's policies to meet the requirements of the Climate Change Act, and in the advice of the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) and its Chair, Lord Deben.

As you may know, the CCC was at that time in the process of publishing its report on "UK Climate Action Following the Paris Agreement". If you have not already done so, I hope you will read at least its six-page Executive Summary. I found the report very informative, and it significantly increased my own knowledge of, and confidence in, the CCC. It confirms that the UK will need to set an additional target for reaching "net zero" emissions, and do so in the next few years. However, it (worryingly) points out that there is a real risk that the UK's emissions will in fact cease to fall during the coming 10-15 years, and may not fall at all, unless there is renewed effort on the part of Government.

The remainder of this letter draws out what I think are

the key points in the CCC report that, taken together, should give you cause for concern about the Government's current policies, whether seen through the lens of the ambition behind the Climate Change Act or that of the subsequent Paris Agreement.

The Paris Agreement Goals

As I am sure you are aware, the Paris Agreement sets goals of limiting the increase in global mean temperature to "well below 2°C" and "pursuing efforts to limit the increase to 1.5°C". It also recognises the need for global CO₂ emissions to fall to "net zero" in the second half of the century.

Efforts to 1.5°C?

This goal represents a significant increase in ambition from previous agreements and legislation, including the UK Climate Change Act, which, as the CCC report states, was framed around a 2°C goal (not "well below 2°C").

Although the CCC report discusses potential "pathways" to the 1.5°C goal, there is a moment of candour (on p. 29) where it says "We... consider the goal of pursuing efforts to 1.5°C as implying a desire to strengthen... efforts towards 2°C." This seems to me to be the CCC trying to say that staying below 1.5°C is an unrealistic goal. In the remainder of this letter, I assume that 1.5°C will be exceeded in coming decades, leaving our successors to decide whether to attempt to remove enough CO₂ from the atmosphere to bring the global mean temperature back down to 1.5°C above its pre-industrial average (or even less). Such a scenario may sound far-fetched, but it is what the IPCC and CCC are saying.

Well below 2°C?

The CCC report's language around the "well below 2°C" Paris goal is in terms of a 66% (2 in 3) chance of staying (just) below a 2°C increase. I do not think such a large risk (1 in 3) of failing to stay below 2°C would equate to most people's concept of ensuring the goal of "well below" 2°C is met, but there it is. Even so, it does represent a modest increase in ambition from the (usually implicit) 50% (1 in 2) chance of staying (just) below 2°C that is among the assumptions underlying the Climate Change Act's target for 2050 of at least an 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels. Therefore there has to be a question about the adequacy of the UK's 2050 target in light of the Paris "well below 2°C" goal.

A "net zero emissions" target for the UK?

The report notes (page 51) that "The Government has stated [Hansard, 14 March 2016] it is not a case of if, but when, they will set a net-zero emission target." However, the CCC has declined to provide Government with such a target now, stating (page 51) "a new and ambitious target that is not supported by additional plans and actions to meet it risks undermining the credibility of UK climate policy." I think this is a diplomatic way of saying that until the UK gets back on track with meeting its near term carbon budgets, a net-zero target without a credible plan to attain it would be empty posturing.

Near-term carbon budgets at risk

The report goes on (pages 51-52) to point out that robust policies are not yet in place to ensure that the near-term targets

legislated by Parliament (up to the end of the 5th carbon budget in 2032) will be met. Figure 4.1 on page 52 is particularly important, as it shows that if there is insufficient support for what the CCC term "At-risk policies", UK emissions in 2032 will be barely below 2015 levels, and even increasing slightly. Unless this situation is speedily rectified, requiring effective Government support for "At-risk policies" and new policies to fix the "Policy gap" illustrated in Figure 4.1, then the credibility of UK climate policy will surely be lost.

Lack of global equity in UK climate policy?

The report (pages 30-33) acknowledges that there is an implicit lack of ambition in the UK Climate Change Act as far as global equity is concerned. As a highly developed country, the UK would be expected to reach net zero emissions (in terms of CO₂ only or all greenhouse gases) before the world as a whole. This could be as early as 2055 (for all greenhouse gases) to be more equitably consistent with the 66% likelihood of 2°C goal (Figure 2.1 on page 33). This further highlights the weakness of the UK's 2050 "at least 80%" emissions reduction target as the key metric of the UK's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement.* This is important unless developed countries that claim leadership on climate policy (such as the UK) are seen to be making equitable NDCs, the whole process will be at risk of losing the "I will if you will" negotiating dynamic that made the Paris Agreement possible, and reverting to the "I won't if you won't" dynamic that led to the failure in Copenhagen in 2009.

* This assumes that the UK will submit its own NDC after "Brexit".

A strategy to develop carbon removal techniques?

In more than one place, the CCC report assumes that UK emissions can be made to decrease over time in more or less a straight line, crossing net zero and going net negative at some point in the second half of the century. This can only be credible if there is to be mass deployment of techniques to remove CO₂ from the atmosphere. None of these techniques yet exist at scale, and most are likely to take over 30 years to reach mass deployment even if supported by policy (page 59). Such techniques are currently lacking incentives and R&D funding commensurate with the need (page 46), even though the CCC state that a UK Strategy for their development "should start now" (page 59).

In particular, the report notes ~~the~~ (page 55) that it wrote earlier in 2016 to the then Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change about the critical importance of carbon capture and storage (CCS). I hope that her successor in the Department for BEIS is by now following up on Lord Oxburgh's September 2016 Parliamentary Advisory Group report "Lower Cost Decarbonisation for the UK: The Critical Role of CCS."

Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I hope the following summary points will make it easier for you to respond and take action:

- There are several respects in which the UK Climate Change Act now looks unambitious in relation to the Paris Agreement goals.
- UK emissions reductions are at risk of stalling over the next 15 years or so (and thus breaching carbon budgets already endorsed

by Parliament) unless there is renewed effort on the part of Government in terms of both support for existing policies and new policies. (6)

- As the UK leaves the EU and becomes a separate party to the Paris Agreement, it is at severe risk of losing its previously recognised status as a world leader on climate policy. This is at a time when strong leadership is needed more than ever, particularly in light of the likely stance of the incoming US administration.
- The UK currently lacks a strategy to develop carbon removal techniques (including, but not limited to, CCS) that need to be ramped up to mass deployment well before 2050. Some of these techniques present opportunities for the UK to develop a leadership role in terms of skills and capability, as well as policy.

To conclude, I should be grateful if you would let me and my colleagues in GlosCAN (e.g. via info@gloscan.org) know whether you now share these concerns, and, if so, what actions you propose to take (over and above forwarding this letter to the relevant Government Department(s)).

Yours sincerely

Hugh Richards

HUGH RICHARDS

Post-script: This letter has been written in a personal capacity, rather than as Chair of GlosCAN. However, I believe that most if not all the concerns raised and points made in this letter would be endorsed by GlosCAN's supporters.