

Environment and Climate Change

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Debate resumed.

🕒 6.38pm

Helen Hayes >

(Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab)

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I pay tribute to Greta Thunberg and the school strikers, including those from my constituency, and to the protesters whom we saw outside Parliament last week for ensuring that climate change is once again at the top of the political agenda, where it must be. Under this Government and in this global context, their actions are necessary.

The Government have failed on climate change. Since 2010, a raft of policies and initiatives that were driving progress have been scrapped. Today, Conservative Members have called for action on energy efficiency, yet the Tory Government's cancellation of the green homes scheme means that the retrofitting of insulation is 5% of its level in 2012. We should have been building on those initiatives to make further progress, not talking about the extent to which we have moved backwards.

In the very limited time that is available to me, I want to raise an issue that has not been mentioned so far today: fossil fuel divestment. Part of the system change that we need to see involves taking money out of dirty, damaging, exploitative fossil fuel extraction. We can do something about that here, in this place. Both my local councils, Lambeth and Southwark, have committed to divest their pension funds out of fossil fuels, yet our parliamentary pension funds remain invested in fossil fuels, despite 100 Members writing to the trustees last year calling on them to divest and remove our money from fossil fuels and invest it in sustainable industries. I call on all Members here to join that call.

We need the Government to act comprehensively at the scale required by an emergency. Climate change demands that it is the prism and the underpinning principle of all our political and economic decision making. We must act to address this emergency.

🕒 6.40pm

Justin Madders >

(Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab)

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I would like to know whether our desperation to seal trade deals with other countries, especially the United States, will inhibit our ability to talk candidly with them about the need for them to change tack on climate change, because I want the Government to embed in any future trade agreements legally binding commitments to reduce carbon emissions, as we can do everything humanly possible in this country to reduce our carbon footprint, but if we continue to trade with the rest of the world as we do now, our efforts will be for nothing.

Our economy is changing rapidly and it is now possible for people to order goods from almost anywhere in the world and for them to be on their doorstep within a matter of days. To the consumer, that is one click of a mouse with no climate impact at all, but if one counts the carbon footprint of original manufacture, transportation and packaging, it begins to look a lot less pain free. We have talked in here about some of the awful working conditions delivery drivers have to put up with in the gig economy, how they often have to pay for their own—outdated—transport and how they have to drive convoluted routes to get to their destinations. That business model is not sustainable for them as individuals and is not sustainable for the planet.

And what about the packaging? We are always talking about how we need to tax the online giants more, so let us tax those who do deliveries for the miles they send their products and for the ludicrous amounts of cardboard they use when doing so. I am sure it would not take long for them to develop more sustainable ways to deliver their products.

As we heard from the Leader of the Opposition earlier, WWF has said that humanity has wiped out 60% of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles since 1970. Should that fact alone not cause us to reconsider what we are doing? We are the dominant species on this planet but that dominance should be used responsibly, not to drive everything else to extinction, not only because it is wrong but because, if we do that, our own extinction will surely follow.

We have to take responsibility for our actions—all of us. We have to declare a climate emergency and then we have to act on it. That is the most important thing: we have to take action, not just today but every day from now on in.

🕒 6.42pm

Anneliese Dodds >

(Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op)

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My city of Oxford has not just declared a climate emergency, but is putting in place the UK's first ever zero emissions zone and is also convening right now a citizens' assembly to discuss measures to deal with that climate emergency. If we decide collectively in this House that we have a climate emergency, we must act on it, and we need to do so above all in three areas.

First, house building standards were watered down appallingly under the coalition Government. We have been told there will be changes on energy efficiency, but we need to go further. The Government not only need to change on energy efficiency, but also need to make sure we are protecting wildlife in every new development, particularly those between Oxford and Cambridge.

Secondly, we need concerted action from central Government to promote environmental innovation. At present, we are relying on enthusiasts, volunteers and individual companies and councils to drive that change. That is not good enough. I am very proud of project LEO and project ERIC in Oxford—big projects changing our energy infrastructure locally—but they need to be backed up by Government investment otherwise this will be piecemeal. This should be mainstream, not just a matter for enthusiasts.

Finally, we must be honest about the challenges we face; I agree with the Secretary of State that we have got to be honest. I am sick and tired of hearing people say they care about the environment and then the next minute tweet out criticism of a policy like the ultra-low emission zone. I am very proud of those who say, "Yes, we've got to take those difficult steps and have those difficult conversations," including London Labour MPs such my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous).

We are facing up to it; we are dealing with this in a grown-up manner, and that is what Government should be doing, not, sadly, making the sort of short-term politically expedient points that we so often hear greeting environmental measures. Let us grow up, just like those kids have been doing when out in the streets; that is what we need to do in this place.

🕒 6.44pm

Ruth George >

(High Peak) (Lab)

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I would like to talk not only about what the national Government can do but about what local councils can do. There will be elections tomorrow in High Peak and in rural districts across the whole of England, in which local people can show their commitment to taking the measures needed to tackle climate change by voting for Labour councillors who are putting forward practical proposals to tackle it.

Labour councillors on my council in High Peak voted to ban fracking and to declare a climate change emergency, in the face of opposition from Conservative councillors, who have not taken the actions that we need in this area. They are not proposing to introduce proper passive housing standards, and they are not legislating for clean air; they are not even monitoring it properly. Where they are monitoring air pollution, they are refusing to release the results, even from outside schools, despite the fact that parents are concerned about their children's health.

Not a single public charging point for electric vehicles has been installed in High Peak for the past four years under that Conservative council, yet people are crying out to be able to use electric vehicles. They are also crying out to be able to use public transport, but we are seeing our buses cut and our train services not being supported. It is the Labour councillors who are out there fighting for our bus services and working with local companies and local people on cycle routes to ensure that people can cycle to work and use their cycles for leisure, to reduce emissions in a practical way, not just by doing things like banning fracking but by supporting renewable energy in a positive way at local level. That is what every local person across rural England can do tomorrow: they can back policies that will support the environment and make this change real.

🕒 6.46pm

Rebecca Long Bailey >

(Salford and Eccles) (Lab)

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It is an honour to close today's debate. It has been the kind of debate that justifies why the public go to the ballot box to put us here. We have had 63 collegiate, wise and passionate speeches today, including from the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who talked about farmers being displaced by the salination of their land, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), who made my favourite comment of the day when he said:

“When you are drowning, you do not ask yourself, ‘Ooh, what is politically possible?’; you do whatever it takes to survive.”

We also heard the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), and I have to say that Newport will be proud of her tonight, as will her predecessor, who I am sure is smiling down today.

We also heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who was applauded right across the House for his groundbreaking work on climate change. He said that every political issue that we consider must deal with climate change. In that vein, I want to pay tribute to the many colleagues who have not had the opportunity to speak today but who have been leading the charge on climate change, not least my hon. Friends the Members for Workington (Sue Hayman), for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) and for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), who are sitting behind me today.

The great Salford poet and songwriter Ewan MacColl once wrote, in a song about hiking on the moors:

“I may be a wage slave on Monday, but I am a free man on Sunday.”

Now, whether or not you like his music, or his politics, I think there are three things we can take from that on which almost everyone in this House would agree. First, the environment is not something separate from ourselves, something out there; it is part of our freedom. When we talk about the environment, we are talking about the places that mean the most to us, about our food, about the air we breathe. We know that 70% of the world's oxygen is produced by marine life, but that life is threatened by ocean warming and acidification caused by the carbon put into the atmosphere.

Secondly, climate change and the environment are not luxury concerns. It is working people who benefit the most when our public spaces flourish—urban or rural—and it is the poorest, both at home and internationally, who will be hit first and worst by the climate emergency. As we have heard today, it is working people who have the most to gain from a green industrial revolution that could transform our economy, creating hundreds of thousands of good jobs. We on this side of the House estimate that retrofitting the UK's housing stock could create 160,000 jobs right across the UK, and that offshore wind could create 120,000 jobs by 2030, largely in coastal towns and regions that have struggled for decades.

Thirdly, our climate and our environment are in deep trouble. We do not have to look far to see that climate change is already a disaster for many across the world, from the cyclone that recently struck Mozambique to the protracted droughts in east Africa. If we continue on our current path, we face unimaginable losses for every Member's constituency and for people and communities across the world. But here's the thing: it does not have to be that way. We are running out of time, but there is still time, so let us use it well and start today by declaring a climate emergency.

What does it mean to declare an emergency? The motion sets out some guidance. It means reducing our greenhouse gas emissions as rapidly as possible and down to net zero before 2050, with short-term targets for the green energy transition and sustainable modes of transport. It means properly funding environmental protection domestically and legislating to reduce waste, moving towards a zero-waste economy. It means capturing the green jobs of the future and mitigating the impact of transitioning to a low-carbon economy on workers and regions. It means bringing wildlife and biodiversity back to levels that I am too young to remember but by which, as we know from David Attenborough, nobody is too young or too old to be captivated. Perhaps more than anything, declaring an emergency means that we will devote the time and resources to the problem that are commensurate with its scale. We can start that today by declaring a climate and environment emergency. The motion gives us a basis on which to act, and that is why I commend it to the House.

🕒 6.51pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy >

(Greg Clark)

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This excellent debate has been vigorous and well subscribed, as befits a subject of such profound importance. What has been established so clearly is that a deep sense of responsibility for protecting and improving our environment is shared across both sides of this House.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) for her maiden speech. She used warm words about her predecessor and said that he used his sense of humour to engage with people. I think she has bought his book on how to be an MP, but her speech today showed that she is already making great strides, so I do not think that she needs too many lessons. Having been in front of her predecessor at the Select Committees on which he served, I know that he could also be a fierce interrogator, and I am sure that she will learn that skill as well.

Like the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who gave a profound speech, reflecting on some of the lessons of leadership both in his term as Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change and as leader of the Labour party. He was right in saying that moral authority comes from being able to act, and that is one of the reasons why, even though we are a small country in terms of the contribution we make to emissions, we have the moral authority that comes from being a leader. We must continue that with our action. He pointed out that we of course have different visions of how we get there, which is legitimate, but that is not to decry the motivation we share.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) offered a good example of what we can do in our constituencies. We should look to the climate vision on her website to see whether we can emulate it across all our constituencies to embrace our role as local leaders, as well as leaders in this place. My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) reminded us that nuclear has played and will play a distinguished role in ensuring that we can generate power free from emissions.

Finally, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) whose work in opposition on producing a paper on the low-carbon economy established considerable consensus across this House and was seminal in shaping the Climate Change Act 2008, which the right hon. Member for Doncaster North led—I know that he will recognise that contribution.

The tone of this debate underlines why we should not create division in this House where there is none. When it comes to environmentalism and climate change, one of this country's proudest achievements is that we have displayed to the world in international forums an impressive national determination to lead our country and the world, with the baton of responsibility being passed from one Government to their successors.

Mrs Thatcher, as many Members have said in this debate, was the very first global leader to acknowledge at the UN

“what may be early signs of man-induced climatic change.”

Her speech in 1989 bears rereading for those who may not be familiar with the profundity of her anticipation of the problems with which we are grappling. It is not just the anticipation of the problems; she was a woman of action. If we think back to what she did—it was thought impossible at the time—virtually to eradicate CFCs across the world. She described the task of Government

“to follow the best advice available. To decide where the balance of evidence lies. And to take prudent action.”

Over the years, we have done that.

The last Labour Government passed the Climate Change Act with cross-party support, and the right hon. Member for Doncaster North will acknowledge that the Conservative party, then in opposition, participated in amending the Bill to increase the ambition from 60% targets to the current 80% targets. When it started its life, the Bill included a 60% target; and when it left this House, the target was the 80% proposed by the Stern review.

If we take the motion as moved, there is no reason to fracture the consensus that has been such an important feature of this area. The first sentence of the motion reflects what we have recognised all along: the need to reduce emissions is urgent and compelling and we should heed the advice of the scientists who comprise the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. We have always considered that to be right, and I am glad we agree.

The second sentence rightly calls attention to the consequences of global warming for the natural environment and society. Going back to 1990, again, Mrs Thatcher said:

“Weather patterns could change so that what is now wet would become dry, and what is now dry would become wet... The character and behaviour of plants would change... Some species of animals and plants would migrate to different zones or disappear for ever.”

The third sentence of the motion calls on the House to increase the UK’s targets under the Climate Change Act and to ensure that we capture the benefits of the low-carbon economy. As all Members know, the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) and I commissioned the Committee on Climate Change, after the Paris accord, to advise us on precisely how we can reflect this raised ambition in our targets. As we know, it will publish that assessment tomorrow. We did not ask for that advice in order to ignore it; we intend to act on it, and we are proud of the progress we have made.

I have been reading some of the policy documents that were being debated when we were forging this consensus in 2008. Between 1997 and 2007 our greenhouse gas emissions were increasing, and they were increasing at the rate of 2% a year between 1999 and 2004. Since then, we have transformed our performance and our reputation. Since 2000, few countries in the world, and none in the G20, have gone faster than Great Britain in decarbonising their economy. We will continue to set the pace over the years ahead, during which the battle to halt catastrophic climate change will be won or lost. We intend to win.

The motion concludes by urging further action to restore our natural environment and to create a circular economy. Through the environment Bill, the Agriculture Bill, the industrial strategy and our clean growth strategy, we will do precisely that.

I hope we can maintain this common purpose. The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles set out her party’s position. There is not one person who joins my party who is not concerned about the heritage of our planet. Conservation, preservation and the inheritance of future generations are a deep instinct of every Conservative. It is not new; nor does it sit at variance with our governing policy. Indeed, our traditional concerns for the environment and a prosperous economy should not be seen as in contradiction to each other. As we consider the threats from climate change, let us remember that, without prosperity, people also become extinct. Enterprise has been the greatest rebellion against extinction in the history of the world, so the economy and climate change have to be brought together.

The only thing that will work to deal with climate change is where the market is adapted to ensure both prosperity and the conservation of our environment. I am proud that Britain is an advanced capitalist nation, but one with a deep respect for its environment.

Mr Nicholas Brown >

(Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab)

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claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House declares an environment and climate emergency following the finding of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change that to avoid a more than 1.5°C rise in global warming, global emissions would need to fall by around 45 per cent from 2010 levels by 2030, reaching net zero by around 2050; recognises the devastating impact that volatile and extreme weather will have on

UK food production, water availability, public health and through flooding and wildfire damage; notes that the UK is currently missing almost all of its biodiversity targets, with an alarming trend in species decline, and that cuts of 50 per cent to the funding of Natural England are counterproductive to tackling those problems; calls on the Government to increase the ambition of the UK's climate change targets under the Climate Change Act 2008 to achieve net zero emissions before 2050, to increase support for and set ambitious, short-term targets for the roll-out of renewable and low carbon energy and transport, and to move swiftly to capture economic opportunities and green jobs in the low carbon economy while managing risks for workers and communities currently reliant on carbon intensive sectors; and further calls on the Government to lay before the House within the next six months urgent proposals to restore the UK's natural environment and to deliver a circular, zero waste economy.

Sue Hayman >

(Workington) (Lab)

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On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am proud to be part of a Parliament that has passed a motion declaring a climate and environment emergency. However, I want to draw attention to the fact that the motion included a certain set of actions for the Government to carry out. It calls on the Government

“to increase the ambition of the UK's climate change targets under the Climate Change Act 2008 to achieve net zero emissions before 2050, to increase support for and set ambitious, short-term targets for the roll-out of renewable and low carbon energy and transport, and to move swiftly to capture economic opportunities and green jobs in the low carbon economy while managing risks for workers and communities currently reliant on carbon intensive sectors; and further calls on the Government to lay before the House within the next six months urgent proposals to restore the UK's natural environment and to deliver a circular, zero waste economy.”

Mr Speaker, may I ask what parliamentary levers are available to this House to ensure that such action is taken?

Mr Speaker >

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The process of government, and the process of scrutiny of Government by Parliament, otherwise known as continuing debate.

Mr Nicholas Brown >

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On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In view of your statement to the House earlier about the results of the Peterborough recall petition, I hope it is helpful, if you will allow me, to inform the House that I will move the writ for the by-election at start of business tomorrow.

Mr Speaker >

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Thank you. That is certainly informative, and I appreciate what the right hon. Gentleman, on behalf of Her Majesty's official Opposition, has said.