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### Article

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# What's in store for UK climate policy in the next five years? Reflections from environmental leaders past, present and future

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## Abstract

In light of the UK's 2024 general election and new government, UK policy on climate change is likely to see a shift in direction. This paper presents the proceedings of an event held at the UK Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) (RGS-IBG) in February 2024, exploring the path ahead for UK climate policy. Four expert panelists were asked to reflect on the achievements and shortcomings of climate policy over the past five years and to provide insights into the future of climate policy for the coming five years. Presenting the transactions of this panel, this dialogue paper aims to highlight the interrelationship between research and scholarship, media portrayals, and political discourse on climate change in the UK, demonstrating how preconceptions and dominant ideas in each sphere will shape action and policy in the coming years.

## KEYWORDS

climate discourse, climate politics, energy policy

## 1 | WHAT'S IN STORE FOR UK CLIMATE POLICY OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS? POLITICS, REGULATION, ENERGY AND ACTIVISM IN UK ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

In light of the recent 2024 general election and the formation of a new UK government, it is anticipated that the UK's approach to climate change policy may shift. The expiration of the UK's Climate Change Strategy 2021–2024 coincides

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with this transition, making this year a significant moment to assess the current state of UK climate policy, acknowledge the progress made over the past five years, and deliberate on future priorities.

This paper presents the proceedings of an event held at the UK Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) (RGS-IBG) in February 2024, exploring the path ahead for UK climate policy over the next five years. Bringing together environmental leaders past and present, it includes reflections from four panellists: John Selwyn Gummer, Baron Deben Conservative peer for Winston, Suffolk, former Chairman of the Climate Change Committee, and Secretary of State for the Environment; The Right Honourable Kerry McCarthy, Labour MP for Bristol East, Shadow Minister (Climate Change and Net Zero) from 2022 to 2024, and now Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Energy and Net Zero; Professor Carly McLachlan, Professor of Climate and Energy Policy, and Director of Tyndall Manchester; Dr. Donal Brown, Director of UK Programmes at the climate change charity Ashden; and chaired by Bob Ward, Director of Policy and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science's Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, and Chair of the London Climate Ready Partnership.

The panel of experts reflected on the successes and shortcomings of climate policy over the past five years and shared their insights into the future of climate policy for the next five years. The debate brought together perspectives from across the political spectrum and academic and non-profit sectors to provide an integrated and forward-thinking view of climate discourse as it influences climate policy under the new government. Instead of merely summarising the state of UK climate policy, the dialogue emphasised the interplay between research, media representations, and political discourse on climate change in the United Kingdom, illustrating how prevailing ideas in each sphere influence action and perspectives in the others.

This topic is of pressing importance in UK public discourse, where climate change is notably politicised and differentiated. Attitudes towards—and even public ‘belief’ in—climate change are strongly influenced by social, demographic, and cultural factors (Parsons, 2021), while political orientation and ideology are ‘amongst the most significant influences on climate change’ (Whitmarsh & Corner, 2017, p. 122). In the United Kingdom, as shown in the British Social Attitudes Survey, younger people are more likely than older people to be concerned; those with more education are more concerned than those with less; and women are more concerned than men (Phillips et al., 2018). From this perspective, climate politics is thus built from a coalition of diverse interests rather than a homogenous group.

Understanding the intersecting interests of the groups that drive climate policy is a crucial task for climate geographers. This range of perspectives shapes the terms of the debate—influencing not only the policy that is formulated but also the questions that are asked and answered. Aiming to shed light on the connection between the current politics of climate change in the United Kingdom and the underlying knowledge and interests driving it, this paper bridges the gap between academic research on climate change and the real-world politics of climate policy. By demonstrating how these are intertwined and how they influence each other, this work intends to provide a platform for scholars, both within and outside the field of geography, to interpret the decisions being made on the future of the UK's climate.

This paper draws out four key themes from the discussion, highlighting the reflections of the speakers in the areas of climate change as a political arena, the interplay between regulation and behaviour change, energy transitions and the role of activism in shaping environmental discourse. These themes address the key policy priorities facing UK climate policy and reflect the divisions that shape political, business and academic attitudes to these questions. By curating and interpreting this landscape, the aim is to provide insight into the diverse and intersecting positions on environmental policy positions in the UK government today and moving forward. The paper seeks to set these themes as benchmarks against which to interpret changes in the landscape of UK environmental governance as the new government progresses in its work in the next five years.

## 2 | POLITICS

Famously characterised by Eric Swyngedouw (2013) as a ‘strange non-political politics’, debates over UK climate policy have rarely broken out into open contestation, at least at the level of governance. This has partly been due to the adoption of sustainability language by the UK's Conservative government, which held power for 14 years between 2010 and 2024 and billed itself in its early days as ‘the greenest government ever’ (Cameron, 2010). In equal measure, it has been a feature of the UK's progress in certain indicators of sustainability, most notably its headline domestic decarbonisation of 49.5% since 1990 (CCC, 2024), which has allowed successive Prime Ministers to frame Britain as a world leader in tackling climate change. In other words, this has been an issue that both dominant parties have taken to heart, so as the new Labour government takes power, the question arises as to how and in what ways the overarching approach to the issue

will change. The following statements, by Conservative peer Lord Deben and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, Kerry McCarthy, give some sense of where such fault lines may lie. As Lord Deben began:

So, it is important to acknowledge that public awareness of climate change is increasing. When things don't go as planned, people tend to hold the government accountable, regardless of their political affiliations. Even those who supported the Reform Party tend to fault the government for not taking sufficient action in adaptation and mitigation efforts. It's essential to align ourselves with the fact that the message we've been advocating for all these years, a message Mrs Thatcher recognised many years ago, is undeniably true and increasingly evident. During the by-election in Uxbridge and South Ruislip in July 2023, I was dismayed by the Labour Party's lack of strong advocacy for the London Low Emission Zone (ULEZ). It's essential to convey to the voters that their decision impacts the quality of the air our children breathe and that we need to be forthright about the consequences while also uplifting and inspiring people with potential improvements in their quality of life.

When addressing immigration, it's important not to be overly lenient. Those who discuss immigration, especially from the political right, need to realise that the impact of climate change will significantly worsen migration patterns worldwide. For example, in a place like Niger, where temperatures exceed 50°C for three months, people won't be moving to seek better opportunities; they'll be moving to survive. This is a crucial distinction to consider. And if people are concerned about migration, they have got to face the fact that they've got to beat climate change. In the meantime, they must do the things that make it possible for people to continue living in the countries where they are. Now, that means restoring our aid budget to the level it was at least before, rather than the scandalous reduction, which this government did. It also means helping those countries protect themselves from climate change and move from where they are to where they need to be without the intervening period of dirty production. That is what we must do.

Secondly, we must also remind people that it is important to understand that a world overtaken by climate change relinquishes control over migration and political stability. The far-reaching geopolitical impacts of climate change are already substantial and contribute to many of the world's issues. This situation is only expected to worsen in the future.

The criticism of both major parties is that neither has the courage of their convictions, and some have questionable convictions. So, what we must look for is to encourage our leaders to recognise that there is a very clear narrative to tell you: either fight climate change or have a declining economy. You have worse lives for people, and it costs people more. That is the truth. Whatever the Reform Party says, it is based upon ignorance, stupidity, and determined opposition to any facts, not just science, but any facts. They are not interested in that.

What they are trying to do all the time is to pick people's prejudices. Our need is to ensure that we have a society where we can work together, irrespective of our political parties, to achieve the end that we need, which is the fastest move towards net zero that we can, helping the rest of the world to move fast and remembering that both the good things and the bad things in this battle can be shared pretty equally across the political spectrum. Net zero in 2050 was a Tory concept. The Labour Party passed the Climate Change Act, but the Conservative opposition at the time wrote it. If you look at what the Liberal Democrats have done in all those circumstances, they have been extremely helpful towards what we are trying to do.

Let us not divide; let us unite and recognise that together, we can win this battle. In the next five years, whoever is in the government will need the support of all of us because it will not be easy. And there will be more siren voices than you have ever heard because people want easy answers to complex questions. And as somebody once said, there is no difficult question that does not have an easy answer that is wrong. And that is precisely what we must fight against. In doing so, our priority is to lift people's hearts so that they realise that a problem can be turned into an opportunity and that the world we create will be a better world for ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren.

Lord Deben's statement reiterates some common government positions in recent years: cross-party collaboration and the diffusion of credit and responsibility for environmental policy. In other words, he frames the issue of climate change effectively as outside of the arena of politics, a position which Kerry McCarthy fails to refute in her statement:

As we look ahead to the next five years, it is crucial to focus on key priorities. Echoing Lord Deben and his committee, it is imperative to establish long-term consistent policy regimes. The continual changes in policy do not yield positive results, and the feedback received is often left unaddressed. Therefore, I hope a new government will adopt a more cohesive, long-term approach that spans departments and uses consistent language.

We embed it in every decision. This links to Lord Deben's idea that a wartime footing is like a lens that everything has to go through, a sort of net zero test, the net zero framing, and you need all departments to pull in that way, so you have to stop doing bad stuff. You cannot just do shiny green stuff that you can cut a ribbon on and look great. It's important to reconsider certain practices, such as expanding the road network and allowing non-zero carbon homes and so, raising the floor and installing these shiny ceilings. Additionally, it's crucial to prioritise community engagement more than ever before.

In Rishi Sunak's rollback speech [where he announced a U-turn on green targets on September 2023], there were a couple of things that I thought he was not far off there! One of these was to up the grant for heat pumps. And I was thinking, that is good! Everyone has been crying out for that. So that was a little jewel amid it all. But the other thing he said was that there has not been enough public conversation and dialogue about this, which is true. But the answer is not to follow up on that conversation with actions. The answer is to have a public discussion and use it to identify the next logical step, but that isn't what he's done.

### 3 | REGULATION

Although not framed as a party political issue, such divisions within the landscape of UK climate change politics tend to manifest along familiar lines: should the UK's green transition be driven by government regulation and investment or emerge from changes in business and consumer behaviour? This discrepancy over structural versus individual approaches to tackling climate change shapes the politics of its administration (Brownstein et al., 2022). Advocates of the former have called in recent years for stricter rules on sustainability for UK businesses, arguing that 'standards, regulations, economic incentives (e.g., taxes and subsidies), and information (incl. labelling schemes)' are necessary for sustainable products and services to compete in a market environment (Schrader & Thøgersen, 2011). Advocates of individual-led change, by contrast, have tended to prefer a theory of change focused on behavioural nudges and raising public awareness (Gwozdz et al., 2020). Where policy sits on this spectrum significantly influences its future trajectory. However, as most politicians tend to adopt a nuanced stance between these two extremes, analysing the balance between them becomes a crucial task in the early days of the new government.

However, as Kerry McCarthy argued, pragmatism underpins the Labour Party's approach to climate governance. In her words, 'presenting things in a way that makes perfect the enemy of the good is not beneficial'. You can be as ideological and visionary as you like, in other words, but the need to act is imperative when it comes down to this: 2030 is getting closer and closer by the day. We must start acting now, and we do not have the luxury of indulging in these big visions. Moreover, as she continued, attitudes towards regulation transcend party boundaries:

Politicians are terrified of regulation and, you know, the stick as a tool. But it feeds into this point about a long-term honest conversation with the country and the direction we need to head in. Arguably, net zero is a regulation that focuses minds on the challenge. Okay, we've rolled back a bit on the ban on petrol cars [Labour has since committed to supporting a ban on new petrol cars by 2030], but that also coalesced an industry around an objective. And we need similar things in housing. We need similar things in industry and elsewhere. So, it doesn't have to be a big, scary political thing. It is about honest conversations with people on the direct direction of travel. In the meetings that, every round table I do with businesses, they call out for regulation. Whether that's small climate tech startups or bigger companies, they want that sense of certainty because it helps drive the market in a specific direction.

However, there has been some ideological resistance on the government's part. One issue is the consistent stoking up of the whole bonfire metaphor: the bonfire on red tape, the bonfire on quangos and all that sort of thing, which was very much part of the Brexit referendum debate as well. So, the government portrays regulation as a burden on business when, as I said, business wants it, but there is also a general reluctance to intervene. For example, when Cameron had a nudge unit, you were allowed to nudge people to buy healthier food by putting apples near the checkout rather than chocolate. Still, you were not allowed to do anything that went a little bit further than that.

I am not suggesting you tax chocolate milk, but you know what I mean. Suppose you look at the plastic bag levy; the 5p charge on plastic bags reduced use by over 80% within the first year. So that's how well direct intervention works. The next step would've been something like plastic water bottles, but if you rely on people to bring their cups along, they might get 5p off at Starbucks if they bring their cups, but it just doesn't work in the same way! So those [direct intervention mechanisms are different - and that is how you achieve change at the scale and pace that we need to achieve change].

As Carly McLachlan explained further, this extends beyond politics to widespread suspicion of regulation on the part of the public, which often manifests in hostility to the mechanisms of net zero legislation and policy:

We need to be bolder and more consistent with regulation because leading organisations ask for that. So, it is bizarre that the Conservatives, traditionally the party of business, are being called upon by businesses to do more and be more consistent on climate change. Yet, their actions fly in the face of that.

So, I hope that in the next five years, we move to a position where we set the regulatory environment to give that consistency and let people know that they can plan for, you know, heat pumps in homes. They can prepare for what we're doing around transport, private vehicles, etc. It has to be both: the challenge is far too great to imagine that we could do it all through voluntary means. If you were going to do it all voluntarily, you would have to create a tax regime that meant that you disincentivise the things you didn't want and incentivise the stuff you did want. The only other tool you have is to regulate and say this is just how we want to do things.

Yet there's this sort of strange framing that, even though we would never roll back on things like health and safety regulation—people think generally that's been a really good thing—when you get to the climate, politicians believe, well, we could water that down a little bit. So, we must try to move to a place where that regulation is consistent, and people can plan for it.

As Kerry McCarthy concluded:

I believe it's important to recognise that individual and system changes are necessary. We should cast our nets wide, as none of us exist in isolation. We are all interconnected with others, whether through our workplaces or communities, and we have numerous opportunities to come together and create positive change. During times when it feels overwhelming and the progress seems stagnant, remember that even small collaborative efforts can make a difference. It's not just about individual actions as consumers but also about joining forces with others. While national governments may fall short, connecting with others can foster a sense of empowerment. Uniting our efforts will be crucial for everyone in the next five years.

## 4 | ENERGY

The primary difference between government-led and business-led approaches is evident in their plans for the UK's energy transition. While all parties acknowledge the necessity of some form of transition, how this issue is framed is vital to shaping policy direction. Key points of contention in this landscape include the timeline, the level of infrastructural investment, and the application—or lack thereof—of an energy justice perspective. As outlined by Bridge et al. (2013, p. 331), 'ensuring the availability and accessibility of energy services in a carbon-constrained

world will require developing new ways—and new geographies—of producing, living, and working with energy'. Yet the specific pathways leading to this 'new energy paradigm' (ibid.) remain unclear, presenting a broad range of geographical futures. On a basic level, low-carbon electricity generation could be pursued via large, remote actors (nuclear, offshore wind or large-scale solar), or through highly decentralised micro-generation centred on individual households. Similarly, the policies which would achieve either pathway from domestic investment in demand reduction to the protection of overseas supplies require important choices around the geographical scale at which energy systems ought to be governed (Bridge et al., 2013). For example, as outlined by sustainable business advocate Donal Brown, whether we link the issue of energy to the broader contexts of poverty and inequality plays a significant role in the policy arising:

We operate in a context where energy or fuel poverty is almost at record levels. The invasion of Ukraine has resulted in increased gas prices—which in turn has pushed, by some estimates, over seven million people in this country into fuel poverty, often meaning they must choose between heating and eating. The gap between what people who reside in fuel poverty and what would bring them out of fuel poverty is now over £7,000 a year, which is as high as it has ever been. Recent research by the Young Foundation has found that the poorest 40% of households are also at risk of falling into transition poverty. Once we think about some of the changes and the expensive modifications that we will have to enact to achieve our net zero objectives, this is a real demographic and economic challenge we are now facing in the context of climate change.

We must massively accelerate the adoption of key low-carbon measures in our homes. So, you can see that what we need regarding the adoption of heat pumps, where we are today and where we need to be within the next five-year period, is a massive acceleration. But it is an even steeper adoption curve for insulation. Unfortunately, we are just not getting anywhere near this agenda now. This is crucial for achieving this transition in a just and fair way, and it is central to bringing the country with us on the net zero agenda.

I have identified several key priority areas for government in the next five years, aligning with our advocacy efforts' focus at Ashton. We call it a six-point plan for cheaper bills and warmer homes. Firstly, to underscore the importance of government leadership, it is crucial to have a well-defined, long-term plan in place. We advocate for a 10-year plan to upgrade the energy performance of most homes falling below energy performance certificate C or in the bottom half of the UK's housing stock. Without a clear long-term strategy, the industry will be hesitant to invest. It is imperative to establish certainty and facilitate necessary public discourse and engagement. Therefore, government leadership and backing are essential to empower entities like local authorities to execute this initiative.

In broad terms, this blend of government-led private stimulus underpins the Labour Party's approach to energy transition, as outlined by Kerry McCarthy here:

Still, I think, to start with, that the need for clarity and consistency is important because otherwise, you don't have leverage in that private sector investment. And we have had to row back a bit on the £28 billion [after Keir Starmer announced the halving of Labour's green investment pledge from £28 billion to £15 billion]. However, we are still very much committed to setting up GB energy and national wealth funds and other things, such as retrofitting five million homes. So, we want to signal that we are committed to this. And Keir Starmer has made clean power by 2030, which is overly ambitious, one of his five missions. We also talk a lot about mission-driven government. So that is what we would do. But whenever I speak to any business or anyone with any money to invest, they say if you can create that certainty, you remove political risk from the equation. You help create markets. And it is down to things like regulation. One example is charging infrastructure grants. You do that, and then the market takes over. So, we are looking for what is needed sector by sector. We need to talk a lot about energy, but there are other sectors like waste, resource efficiency, transport, food, and land use. So, we need to have equality across all of them.

On a larger scale, the issue of nuclear energy continues to play a role in energy debates. Regarding its future role, Lord Deben had the following to say:

I believe in some nuclear energy contribution, and the Climate Change Committee has said this in its reporting. However, this does not mean to say that every kind is sensible. Sizewell C, for example, is nonsense. It will not arrive on time or do what it should, and it is an entirely expensive operation of an old-fashioned way of producing nuclear power. I don't understand why we should be indebted to EDF (Electricité de France) and the French government. I'm usually terribly European, but I don't know why we should do that on this occasion...

...We do need some nuclear power, but the thing that is so exciting is that it is less than we thought because what is happening is that the development of batteries has proceeded so well. The fact that we have offshore wind around the country means there are very few occasions when there is no capacity for power generation because there are very few occasions when there is no wind. That was always our worry. There is a huge amount that we can now do to generate and store power, so the amount of nuclear energy we need is much more restricted.

Nevertheless, the Climate Change Committee has gone into it repeatedly because it would be convenient if we didn't want to have any nuclear power, but we must accept that we need a bit. We must keep the lights on, and you do not keep the lights on by doing the wrong things. You keep the lights on by having a balance of these things. Nuclear is necessary but in a smaller proportion than before.

However, underpinning this and other questions is the inescapable issue of time. As with decarbonisation more broadly, the pace of any energy transition plays a crucial role in its political positionality. Discussions over nuclear power often neglect this aspect of the conversation. Yet, as Carly McClachlan outlined in response, the issue of timescale means that such discussions in practice relate to an entirely different energy landscape than the one we see today:

The timescale of decarbonisation is so important. Net zero has become this byword for anything we're doing about anything to do with energy or greenhouse gas emissions. However, a key issue is that we need to decarbonise very quickly to meet our climate change commitments, and that needs to be better set up for new nuclear energy. The longer-term view on what you are doing about the energy system post-2035 and post-2050 brings that conversation in more. But as you say, that role might decline as the technologies develop more around batteries and renewables. We have gotten slightly confused in this debate because you must say you're delivering net zero to have a voice at the table. But it's unclear how nuclear would provide on the timescale we require for net zero that aligns with our Paris Climate Change Agreement commitments.

It is the only energy technology whose cost curve has gone in the wrong direction over time. It has become more expensive, while every other technology has become cheaper. Coal is more expensive. That is also perhaps true—but we should not do more of that either! We may see a different cost curve with the Chinese if they build as many reactors as they claim, but we are building a couple of models, and that's not working to bring down the costs.

## 5 | ACTIVISM

Although much underplayed in the politics of domestic governance—as noted above, there has been party political consensus, rather than debate over the issue in recent years—the issue of timescale is intimately connected to the politics of climate change more broadly. The rise in radical activism, especially since the founding of Extinction Rebellion in 2018, accompanied by Fridays for Future activists like Greta Thunberg and Vanessa Nakete and followed by XR splinter groups Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil, have all placed the issue of time at the centre of their arguments. From the rallying cry, 'We don't have time', to specific demands either for net zero or the ending of fossil fuel usage by 2025, from XR and Just Stop Oil, respectively, the pace of change in the UK's environmental impact is a more important battleground than the idea of decarbonisation in itself. Attitudes to these more radical groups and their calls for accelerated change were outlined on the one hand by Lord Deben, who argued that members of such groups should focus on the formal channels available to them:

I met with young climate activists at COP. They had gone there very much with the message, 'We are here to expose the role of the fossil fuel companies in influencing the COP outcome', which is fair enough, that is right. We need transparency. But I did say to them it would be good and say things like Just Stop Oil do, that they said very enthusiastically, 'bring on more onshore wind'. Now, despite the 'greenest government ever' claims brought in by David Cameron, there's a policy in place that allows one person to object to onshore wind development, effectively preventing any such projects from moving forward. This has led to a lack of onshore wind development due to what can be perceived as a somewhat nimbyish approach. It may not seem as thrilling to focus on calling out wrongdoings and having villains, especially for a younger audience. However, in some respects, not taking action carries a greater cost than taking action. This is crucial for our economic future, achieving economic prosperity, and living more sustainably. It's important to have advocates for this positive change as well.

And very often, what they do [instead] does not help us do that. I was a warmup for Elton John at Glastonbury last year, and all these people were keen on this sort of action. And I had two meetings of 250, 300 people, and I did to them what I'm now going to do with this audience, which is very simply, I said to them, 'All right, before we get on to Just Stop Oil, hands up those people who have been to see their local MP to talk about climate change in the last six months'. It was six out of 250 in one and five in the other. Now, the fact of the matter is, if we do not use the mechanisms that we do have, then one does have to say, using the saying, they do not think they can do anything.

So, I said to them, well, the first thing you can do is to stop me finding, as I go around the country, MPs saying no one ever asks about climate change on the doorstep. And many parliament members excuse their being somewhat behindhand in telling you about their views on that basis. And I say to you all, I hope everybody here now says to themselves, 'I will get an appointment with my local MP and talk to him or her about climate change and what he or she is doing'. If we all did that, we would begin to have a real effect because my problem with Just Stop Oil is that the people they are trying to influence are the MPs. After all, they are the only people who will make the necessary changes, so if they manage to put off the constituents, that's counterproductive.

I sympathise with hardworking people doing their best and finding that they can't get to work because somebody has behaved this way. You have to say, well, I agree with them, but is this the best way to do it? I have more sympathy when you have exhausted the system you can use. But if you do not exhaust that, I think you should not go and be a bit selfish by protesting. In some senses, you look at people protesting and feel that what they are doing is for themselves, and it makes them feel better. But I do not think that works. People want people who are prepared to work hard to deliver.

(Lord Deben)

Towards the end of his statement, Lord Deben alludes to a key facet of the debates over radical activism: the purported conflict of interest with the needs of working people. This has been a prominent feature of conversations around climate activism, at least since XR activists boarded the roofs of commuter trains in Canning Town, sparking a public backlash amplified in the media (BBC, 2019). More broadly, this conflict between workers and environmental activists—often labelled 'eco-zealots' or the 'eco-mob' in right-wing media such as the UK's *Daily Mail* (and others such as the *New York Post* in the US)—has played a key role in the governance of climate protests under the Conservative government. Moreover, as Kerry McCarthy's statement on the issue outlines, any change under Labour may be slight:

Whenever we have had Extinction Rebellion protests in Bristol, it tends to be people from Stroud and Glastonbury when you find out once they have been arrested, or just the Bristol ones are cleverer at not being arrested. But quite a lot of Bristol does not fit the stereotype of, you know, green unicycling, vegans, whatever. And I say that as someone who has been a vegan for over 30 years. I have never tried unicycling, but only as I am pretty sure I would be terrible at it. I have no coordination at all.

But a lot of the people in Bristol are struggling to make ends meet, that you might call white van man people living out on estates. They associate the activities of groups like Extinction Rebellion with arty protests, and

that makes it more difficult for me to talk to the rest of the demographic about climate change and the environmental issues that people do want to talk about.

For example, we recently had a by-election in Kingswood, my neighbouring seat, due to Chris Skidmore resigning from the Tory ranks over the offshore petroleum and licensing bill, which is all about this push for more oil and gas licenses. Many people work in the manufacturing sector in Kingswood, so Rolls Royce, Airbus and the National Composite Centre are all at the forefront of that green transition. So, you know, in terms of that technological change, you can go out and about it. People are talking about green apprenticeships and skills and jobs for their grandchildren, and they get that. This is our industrial strategy. As I said, it is like Biden's doing in the United States, where they take a dim view of the more bohemian side. So, I suppose the question is, what result are you trying to get from portraying or highlighting that we're at risk of climate catastrophe? To whom are you talking? Will it bring about what we must do to combat that climate catastrophe? We need everybody to get on board. Are you likely to achieve that, or are you talking into your circle?

It does not cut through or win more people over, just anecdotally from talking to my constituents. And I think that is key. What is the purpose of those kind of movements? If the purpose is to shift the centre ground on discussions on climate, so you get lots of people saying, 'I like what they say, but not their methods', then actually they probably are being successful, as for many years you've had an actual dwindling number of out and out climate change, denialist chat, particularly in professional circles. You don't meet loads of people in big organisations, in the leadership of big organisations, who would say out and out that they don't believe in climate change. And so actually they are shifting mindsets, and I think that is the goal of that kind of movement: to try and shift what the centre ground is, so you create some space for people to appear moderate, pragmatic, reasonable, but not painting stuff orange or glueing themselves to things.

And I understand the frustration that people who have worked in this space for a long time feel, that there's not a sense of urgency, but it's also about agency. Some people who think it is all left to do have been pushed into that space, but whether it alienates people or nudges them along is a question. And it depends partly on what they do. Some things, like Greta Thunberg's school climate strikes, did have a good impact. And it brought school children across the piece on board—and their parents—and that worked. I am not sure throwing soup at the Mona Lisa cuts through in the same sort of way. I understand that people are very frustrated because we are not moving fast enough, and they know how damaging this is and how much we must do. So, one ought to be sympathetic to people who do that, and we ought to realise that the message they're carrying is the one we should take on board.

(Kerry McCarthy)

## 6 | REFLECTION: DIALOGUING CLIMATE POLITICS

The early days of the UK's Labour government have highlighted new opportunities in environmental policy. Nevertheless, much remains uncertain in terms of the UK's direction. The framing of UK climate policy should not be limited to analysing party interests alone. Instead, it is crucial to delve into the complexities of environmental knowledge and public opinion, as they play a pivotal role in shaping the political landscape (Carter, 2014; Lockwood, 2013). Questions such as *how*, *why*, and *to what end* will increasingly take centre stage as new, proactive climate policies are implemented and not implemented by the Labour administration.

By examining the narratives, assumptions, and debates that influence climate policy, this paper has aimed to equip geographers with an understanding of UK climate policy's cultural, economic and geopolitical aspects. Otherwise, while a degree of focus on ideology is inevitable within the current landscape of climate discourse, a deterministic logic—rooted entirely in party politics—obscures a more nuanced and contested policy environment (Jordan et al., 2018). By exploring the questions underpinning climate policy, the dialogue presented here thus offers geographers the opportunity to reshape how we think about the interests driving climate policy and how we frame the politics of a changing climate.

By considering the underlying assumptions that shape climate policy governance, their contestations and confluences, the aim here has thus been to give a sense of what to expect as a new ruling party takes up the challenge of responding to the UK's environmental challenges. Rather than focusing purely on policy positions already announced, the dialogue here has been arranged to explore where differences of framing exist between the two parties and within the landscape of climate policy more generally. As the conversations presented here outline, these contestations centre on the rate of change the United Kingdom should seek to pursue in its decarbonisation efforts and the scale at which these efforts should be governed. In other words, how fast should the United Kingdom seek to reduce its environmental impact, and what role should government play in accelerating this process?

As the United Kingdom enters the next phase of its climate governance under the new Labour government, it is essential to focus on these questions clearly because, as outlined in the above conversation, these crucial areas of debate often exist beyond formal climate governance. Party political agreement over the overarching form of climate policy has forced demands for more rapid decarbonisation into the realm of radical activism, while political differences over the government's role in the energy transition are distinguished primarily in the extent of stimulus offered to private sector investment in green technologies. Therefore, a critical analysis of this landscape of climate politics is crucial to understanding the various achievements and shortcomings of the United Kingdom's climate policy and imagining alternative pathways through the weeds of political consensus.

The four themes discussed in this paper serve as cross-cutting lenses to interpret the shifts in the UK's climate policy landscape as the new government advances in its term. These lenses—politics, regulation, energy, and activism—act as barometers of discourse to gauge meaningful changes in environmental governance. By exploring how different sectors narrate these themes, this paper has thus aimed to set a benchmark against which future discursive analysis may.

While these early points of engagement constitute only a tentative perspective for exploring climate change narratives under the UK's Labour government, they nevertheless have the potential to inform a more deeply situated place-based UK climate change knowledge. Further work might speak in greater depth to the cross-cutting narratives that shape climate messaging, as could an exploration of the questions addressed in this paper applied across different places and generations—and, of course, beyond the United Kingdom itself. The dialogue outlined in this paper is thus a call to add a more holistic interpretation of climate politics to the toolbox of climate change policy and analysis, seeking to tackle one of the UK's wickedest political problems and grandest political challenges.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Transcript data is available on request.

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