



Energy Security and Net Zero Committee

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The Rt Hon Claire Coutinho MP
Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero

By email.

Thursday, 28 September 2023

Dear Claire Coutinho,

I write to you as Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee after consulting my colleagues on the Committee on the announcements by the Prime Minister last week.

The approach to net zero by the Government has obviously come under a huge amount of scrutiny in the light of those statements and I am sure you will be able to provide more clarity to the Committee when you come to speak to us on 8 November this year.

It is important that we recognise some of the positive steps that were announced. There is indeed a need to see more onshore wind farms, more capacity to capture and store carbon, more investment in baseload energy generation that is consistent with net zero and to facilitate more rapid development of energy infrastructure. We welcome all of the Prime Minister's commitments to quickly put these into the public domain and we look forward to scrutinising their implementation.

In the meantime, there are a number of issues on which I believe the Committee needs more immediate comment and clarity.

The UK has been reasonably coherent in its approach to climate ever since the 1990 Climate Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Mrs Thatcher's Government began our dedication to the UK being a shining example of good practice and driving global action through the UN to mitigate the consequences of human driven climate change. This has survived several changes of government and even Brexit and Covid did not diminish the cross-party consensus on driving action to tread ever more lightly on the planet. We would like to understand how the timing of this statement, just prior to political party conferences, and the lack of engagement with

other party political leaders or elected representatives of the devolved assemblies, drives a consensus rather than potentially allowing climate to become a party political football with all of the detriment that this might entail.

The Prime Minister seemed to undermine the actual gains that have been made under previous governments, suggesting that they have sought to reach net zero simply by wishing it. He suggested that a Westminster consensus was a bad thing, that there was only 17 minutes of debate on the carbon budget. The Prime Minister will be aware that when the House is in consensus there is rarely a need to use the Floor of the House to debate that issue, beyond the formalities of fulfilling the procedural necessities. We would like to know how Mr Sunak proposes using more Parliamentary time to consider future carbon budgets. We would like to understand whether he intends to diverge sufficiently from the previous cross-party consensus that debate on the Floor of the House will be inevitable.

We note that, should he have given his statement to the House, only 24 hours earlier, then he would have achieved his aim of bringing this kind of debate to Parliament rather than during a recess when Parliament would not be able to examine or analyse his proposals for almost three weeks. Will the Secretary of State commit to future fundamental changes to the Government's approach to net zero being made in Parliament rather than in less formal press statements?

We recognise the issues raised by the Prime Minister on pushing government spending on net zero when the country faces challenges on costs of living. We fail to understand, however, how the announced delays will actually make anything cheaper for the average person. It would seem that costs are simply being delayed, possibly to a time when those costs will be higher. Indeed, part of the reason for pushing green industries in the UK and facilitating switching to net zero alternatives, at scale, is to reduce the costs to consumers. We would like to see what analysis the Government has made about the costs to individual households in the UK and how changing the timescales will reduce the impacts upon them.

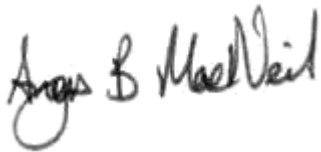
There has been great play made by Ministers in the past of the gains, in economic growth, to be made by playing a leading role in achieving net zero. The Prime Minister's statement would suggest that those Ministers were simply being wishful and that there were no economic benefits, and therefore the proposed delays would not sacrifice any of those notional gains. We would, in the principle of honest debate, like to see any analysis the Government has made to demonstrate that there would be no costs in delaying these net zero policies.

We agree with the Prime Minister that Westminster, both Parliament and Government, need to engage with net zero in a pragmatic, proportionate and realistic

manner. We agree that there are great gains to be made from the new green industries of the future. We fail to understand, however, how delaying our engagement with the actions that we all agree are necessary can, in any way, be described as an ambitious environmental agenda.

We hope that your response to this letter helps us to better understand the thinking and analysis that has led the Prime Minister, with your support, to unilaterally change net zero policy in the UK.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Angus B MacNeil". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A'.

Angus Brendan MacNeil
Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee