

Andrew Miller MP
Chair
Science and Technology Committee
House of Commons
7 Millbank
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8 May 2013

Dear Mr Miller

I understand that you have recently launched an inquiry into public understanding of climate change and its policy implications. It may be helpful if I provide a high level perspective of these issues from the point of view of the Committee on Climate Change.

The Committee was, of course, established by the Climate Change Act 2008 with duties in particular:

- to provide advice to the Government on the level of carbon budgets to be set in the UK, on track to an 80% reduction in emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050;
- to provide an annual report to Parliament setting out our views on the progress that has been made towards meeting carbon budgets and the 2050 target.

In providing our advice in relation to carbon budgets there is a number of matters which we are required to take into account. These include scientific knowledge about climate change, relevant technology, economic and social circumstances. Whilst public understanding of climate change is not directly identified as a separate matter for us to consider, it clearly plays in to acceptability of carbon budgets and how they are met – through issues around acceptance of the science, costs, and views about technologies. It is therefore an important consideration in our work.

Our own perspective is that whilst evidence on public levels of concern about climate change have shown some variation over time, overall public acceptance of the reality of climate change is strong and views are supportive of actions to reduce emissions. Nevertheless, our perception is that there is a good deal of variation in levels of understanding and once we get below the highest level of concern, a degree of confusion exists about what are the most appropriate steps to take.

There is some evidence (e.g. from UKERC supported work into public values, attitudes and acceptability) that there is broad public support for energy system change away from high hydrocarbon dependency; and that, when information is presented objectively and deliberatively, then concerns about affordability need not translate straightforwardly to rejection of paths with higher short-term costs. But it is also clear from this research area that public acceptability is complex, and influenced by a wide range of factors.

In relation to the science of climate change and cost of taking actions, there are a number of siren voices, given unjustified attention by some parts of the media, which confuse matters (indeed, that is partly their aim). It should not therefore be a surprise that messages received by the public are sometimes confused.

The Government has not succeeded in presenting a compelling narrative to the public over the need for action, and the components of an effective response. It has at times been alarmist, and has given mixed messages. For example, on the one hand it is the intention of the Government to be “the greenest Government ever”, and it has put in place a short-term framework, broadly consistent with required actions to 2020. On the other, it seems willing in its Gas Generation Strategy to countenance a “dash for gas” and includes a scenario for investment in gas generation that would be inconsistent with achievement of the 4th carbon budget. And it has not yet put in place a set of policies to provide the incentives for people and businesses to act.

We have set out our assessment of cost-effective measures to meet carbon budgets and the 2050 target. Failure to meet those scenarios would make reaching carbon targets more costly. It is therefore important to understand what barriers exist to the acceptance and take-up of those measure and new technologies. As we develop our analysis further, we are also now working hard to develop the narrative to communicate effectively why it is economically sensible to invest early in low carbon technologies, so as to build a resilient energy system, insuring us against risks of dangerous climate change and rising energy bills. This must take in the international context, the impact of shale gas, and it must address affordability and competitiveness concerns.

While we will be able to go some way to communicating this to the wider public, it will ultimately be for the Government to put low-carbon investment at the heart of its economic and growth strategies, to communicate the benefits of such strategies to the public, and to back this up with policies and incentives to turn a positive narrative into action on the ground.



Lord Deben

Chairman, Committee on Climate Change