



Response to Rt Hon Kwasi Kwarteng

3 September 2020

Dear Mr Kwarteng,

We appreciate your response to our letter of 8th of July and hope to continue this dialogue. We have responded to various points in your letter below.

We believe that the government's policies are falling short of what is required to prevent irreversible climate change and would like to arrange a meeting to discuss how we can support and collaborate with you on the action required.

Climate breakdown

The IPCC's Special Report on 1.5 degrees warming gives a remaining emissions budget (beginning on 1 January 2018) of 320 billion tonnes (Gt) of CO₂. Based on current emissions trends, this budget will be exhausted in early 2025¹. The UK Government's aim to reach zero carbon by 2050 is therefore likely to result in between 2 and 3°C of temperature increase.

It is worth looking at some of the predicted impacts of this approach (we have included references from reliable sources for all the substantial points in this letter). Heating of 2°C is predicted to result in 56cm of sea level rise by 2100 which is enough to inundate many island nations, much of Bangladesh and huge areas currently relied on for agriculture such as the Nile delta². The same level of global heating is predicted to expose 388 million people to water scarcity by 2050³.

The World Bank has concluded that 3°C of global heating could result in over 140 million climate migrants across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America by 2050⁴. The United Nations' figures are higher at 200 million⁵. These figures are more than a hundred times as large as the Syrian crisis. It is hard to see how this level of displacement could occur without widespread conflict, the collapse of nations most affected and the rise of fascism in the destination countries for refugees.

It is also important to acknowledge that climate change is already having a serious impact, resulting in an estimated 300,000 deaths a year and annual losses of \$125 billion⁶. Most of these deaths occur in the poorest parts of the world, even though the 50 least developed nations contribute less than 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions⁷.

You refer to the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) stating that it is not credible to reach net zero emissions earlier than 2050 but this position is politically expedient rather than science led and it is not shared by the undersigned. The CCC also observed that measures to address climate change in the built environment are lagging far behind even the government's low level of ambition. The CCC's Progress Report

to Parliament concluded that “since the Climate Change Act was passed, nearly two million homes have been built that are likely to require expensive zero-carbon retrofits and have missed out on lower energy bills”. Current policies represent a troubling example of short-term thinking; avoiding minor costs in the short-term while saddling our children’s generation with far greater costs in 10-20 years.

Across built environment professionals there is widespread acceptance that upgrading the UK’s draughty and inefficient homes is the best approach to building our way out of a recession while also addressing climate change and reducing fuel poverty. The sums currently allocated by the government to this challenge are derisory, particularly bearing in mind the benefits that would be delivered economically, environmentally and socially.

Nature and wildlife

In October 2010, the UK signed up to the Convention on Biological Diversity which included 20 targets for 2020. The public body (the JNCC) which monitors progress against these targets concluded in their 2019 report that the UK will fail to meet 15 out of 20 of the targets and noted that “There is an overall picture of ongoing species decline”⁸. Some UK species have declined by over 90% since 1970. The complex, interconnectedness of ecosystems means that the loss of keystone species can result in ecosystem collapse.

In 2019 a petition titled ‘Restore nature on a massive scale to help stop climate breakdown’ on the government’s ‘Petition Parliament’ website attracted over 100,000 signatories⁹. The government’s response stated a long-term aspiration to increase woodland cover from 10% to 12% by 2060. This is surprisingly unambitious given that many of our European neighbours have over 30% forest cover (the UK is in 36th place in Europe by percentage – well behind the following: Austria = 47%, France = 37%, Germany = 32%, Italy = 35%, Spain = 37%, Switzerland = 31%¹⁰)

In your letter you mention a £640 million Nature Climate Fund but this figure is dwarfed by the £27 billion proposed to be spent on roads. It is clear that spending forty times as much on projects that damage the environment, as is spent on projects that protect the environment, is going to have a net negative effect. The proposed expenditure on roads is also curious given that even the president of the Automobile Association considers it unlikely that road traffic will ever return to pre-COVID levels¹¹.

To meaningfully address the decline in the rest of the living world - the life support systems on which humans depend - is going to require a fundamental change of mindset. We need to stop seeing the rest of the living world as something to be plundered for resources while protecting small areas, and to start seeing it as a web of living systems into which we need to fully integrate human activities. If we are to shape a positive future, this change of mindset needs to inform everything we do and be backed up by the measures we described in our letter of 8 July.

Growth

We are surprised that you mention a 75% growth in our economy while cutting emissions by 43% over the past three decades because this has been widely discredited, and is disproved by figures from the Office for National Statistics¹². This is precisely the kind of creative accounting that has done so much to undermine faith in governments amongst young people such as Greta Thunberg. The emission cuts you allege, do not include aviation, shipping or the goods that we import. When these are factored in the emissions reductions are around 10%. Nearly all of this has been achieved through the relatively easy step of reducing reliance on coal; meanwhile there has been very little progress on decarbonising other parts of our economy (in spite of there being an abundance of solutions).

In your letter there appears to be a lack of distinction between types of growth and an implicit belief that endless growth is possible on a finite planet. As an illustration of the problem, a 3% year-on-year global rate of growth (considered by many conventional economists as a ‘healthy’ level) would result, in just 23.5 years, in a doubling of our impact on the rest of the living world. Given that we are already breaching a wide

range of planetary limits it is clear that this approach spells disaster. There seems to be an unwillingness to address this even though new models (such as Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics) exist in well-developed form. It is important to distinguish between 'sustainable' and 'regenerative' practices. The former, in nearly all cases, means an approach for which the negative impacts are partly mitigated and is therefore still part of a degenerative cycle. To describe this as 'clean growth' is a dangerous delusion. The urgent need is for regenerative practices that deliver net positive impacts. The solutions exist but we feel that the government's current policies are doing very little to encourage them.

Conclusion

It is clear from current trends that we are heading for near-term collapse of ecosystems and medium-term collapse of societies. Far from providing reassurance, your letter provides clear evidence that the government's policies are woefully short of what is required to prevent this. The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way. Britain led the world into the industrial age and we have all the right skills to lead the world out of it. This is without doubt the greatest, and most urgent, innovation opportunity of a lifetime. The industry is ready to take action and we urgently need Government to play its part, as our original letter describes.

We feel strongly that change is needed, and it is needed quickly, we would like to collaborate with you and understand what support you need to make the changes required. Hence, we would like to arrange a meeting with you to talk about how to move forward. Please do let us know how to arrange this. We would also like to encourage you to support the Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) Bill.

Yours sincerely

The Steering Group of Construction Declares* (representing over 1,500 UK companies) <https://www.constructiondeclares.com/>

Architects Climate Action Network (a network of over 1,000 individuals) <https://www.architectscan.org/home>

London Energy Transformation Initiative (a network of over 1,000 built environment professionals) <https://www.leti.london/>

*incorporating

UK Architects Declare

UK Structural Engineers Declare

UK Building Services Engineers Declare

UK Civil Engineers Declare

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¹ See Knorr, Wolfgang 'The Climate Crisis Demands New Ways of Thinking from Climate Scientist' <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-08-04/the-climate-crisis-demands-new-ways-of-thinking-from-climate-scientists/>

The article refers to emission figures from the Global Carbon Project until 2017 for energy and cement production plus land use change, 2018 using preliminary estimate by LeQuéré et al., Earth System Science Data, 10, 1-54, 2018, DOI: 10.5194/essd-10-2141-2018. 2018 land use emissions assumed unchanged against previous year.

² <https://interactive.carbonbrief.org/impacts-climate-change-one-point-five-degrees-two-degrees/>

³ Ibid

⁴ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2018/03/19/groundswell---preparing-for-internal-climate-migration>

⁵ Baher Kamal, "Climate Migrants Might Reach One Billion by 2050," ReliefWeb, August 21, 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/climate-migrants-might-reach-one-billion-2050>

⁶ 'The Anatomy of a Silent Crisis', Global Humanitarian Forum report, p1 <http://www.ghf-ge.org/human-impact-report.pdf>

⁷ Ibid, p3.

⁸ <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/united-kingdom-s-6th-national-report-to-the-convention-on-biological-diversity/>

⁹ <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/254607>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_countries_by_forest_area

¹¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carltonreid/2020/04/03/motoring-boss-questions-whether-uks-27-billion-road-plans-can-survive-virus-crisis/#581b97101585>

¹² See table 3 and the background data in 'Net zero and the different official measures of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions' which shows that the UK's carbon footprint (calculated on a consumption basis) reduced from 861 Mt CO₂e in 1997 to 784 in 2016 which represents a reduction of 9%

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/netzeroandthedifferentofficialmeasuresoftheuksgreenhousegasemissions/2019-07-24>