



THIS JOURNAL IS PRODUCED WITH THE
SUPPORT OF THE PARLIAMENTARY
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
INFORMATION FOUNDATION

The Journal of the
Parliamentary and
Scientific Committee –
All-Party Parliamentary
Group

SCIENCE IN PARLIAMENT

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AUTUMN 2021

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Tackling global
challenges
through
interdisciplinary
research

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CLIMATE CHANGE IS THE ELEPHANT IN EVERY ROOM.

The UCL Climate Action Unit helps MPs and Peers to discover *how to act*.

The UCL Climate Action Unit aims to transform how society acts on climate change. Its approach is underpinned by a systems-based understanding of why governments, businesses and citizens are not acting at the scale and pace needed - and how this can be resolved. Earlier this year the Climate Action Unit worked with a group of MPs and Peers to explore how to - in the words of one participant - “play the best leadership role that we can”.

It's no easy job working in Parliament. It requires the ability to grasp the minutiae of a host of challenging issues affecting public life, as well as the skill to handle complex and wicked problems - without any subject-specific training to do so. This is especially the case for MPs and Peers confronted with the need to take action on climate change.

THE CONTEXT

Ask people in the street where the main responsibility lies for tackling this global crisis, and more than half will say: “It's up to governments”.¹ “What can I do?” individuals often ask - implying ‘not all that much’. And yet we expect our representatives to know what to do, even though they, like us, are citizens too.

Despite being awarded a prestigious title, the job comes with very little training or preparation. This is acutely true for parliamentarians working on the difficult subject of climate

change. Newly appointed representatives who abruptly need to become a master of all trades can find themselves having to learn on the job.

That's not to say they don't have access to the world's best experts when it comes to the science: they absolutely do. University academics and research institutions provide parliament with comprehensive briefings.² MPs and Peers also have access to the world's foremost summary of climate science for policy makers: the IPCC report.³ The UK government even has its own independent committee to advise how the nation can cut its carbon emissions: the Climate Change Committee.

THE CHALLENGE

But understanding climate science doesn't really help people know how to act on it - just as understanding the biology of cancer doesn't make us qualified to be a doctor. The



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acting part requires special skills, practice and experience. And acting on climate change is something all parliamentarians will need to do, since there is no area of public life which will ultimately be unaffected by the issue.

This is an enormous undertaking. So who or what provides that support; that place for MPs and Peers to develop a toolkit of skills fit for the challenge? This is the unmet need the UCL Climate Action Unit set out to fulfil. In March 2021, it delivered its first



Professor Chris Rapley CBE, Climate Scientist, UCL Department of Earth Sciences

UCL Climate Action Programme for UK Parliament - Key Facts

Eligibility: open to MPs and Peers from either House and all parties

Specifics: 5 online sessions delivered in March 2021

Aim: a series of activities to examine how people respond to the complex nature of climate change

Participant demographics: MPs from the Conservative, Labour and Scottish National Party, plus crossbench Peers. From rural and inner city regions across several nations

Figure 1

Climate Action Programme for UK Parliament (see Figure 1).

POLITICIANS ARE PEOPLE TOO

Research by Prof. Rebecca Willis, several years ago, already established that simply understanding climate change is insufficient to drive large-scale action. After conducting interviews with 14 MPs in 2017,⁴ Willis explained:⁵ “The politicians I spoke to understood the need to act on climate change. But it’s long been known that the way in which people act on scientific evidence is complex. We don’t just look at the evidence and calculate a rational response; instead our understanding is mediated by our social setting, outlook and experience. Politicians are no exception.”

This idea – that acting on climate change can’t be done without dealing with people factors - is at the core of the Climate Action Unit’s work. These ‘people factors’ are the individual differences in perception, opinion, lived experience, knowledge, understanding, values, worldviews etc. All of these affect

how the stakeholders involved engage in delivering concrete climate policy or action.

And so over the course of five weekly online sessions, a group of MPs and Peers were introduced to a set of psychological barriers and levers to improve the delivery of action on climate across society. These are succinctly known by the Climate Action Unit as ‘the seven insights’ (see Figure 2).

THE INSIGHTS

The programme is designed by a neuroscientist, a climate scientist and communication

specialists – which explains its atypical approach. If participants had wanted a geography lesson, they weren’t going to get one. Instead, the programme introduced them to the science of how people become divided on what actions are meaningful – a form of political polarisation. Or how an individual’s values affect what kinds of messages and actions resonate with them.

The participants also explored how stories of impending climate disaster often fail to drive action. Instead, what drives action is... **action**⁶. It may sound paradoxical, but by starting with the ‘doing’ - even if imperfect at first - one action will lead to the next. As a result individuals build their understanding and ability to do ever more.

There were lessons too about the language used to talk about climate change. One of the CAU insights illustrates the perils of using abstract and technical terminology - particularly because such words will develop different meanings with different audiences. “Ask a climate scientist and a risk expert what ‘conservative risk estimate’ means and you may find their interpretations of the word are actually the opposite of each other”, explained neuroscientist De Meyer.

THEORY APPLIED

From the outset, participants were given the space to apply these insights to the context of their own climate-related challenges. Some wanted to know how to deal with their constituents’ indifference and how to get climate change higher on their agendas. One MP was facing a constituency divided on Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTN); a local government scheme which has proven to be particularly polarising. Others were struggling to work out how to accelerate the uptake of low-carbon technologies in a particular sector (e.g. agriculture or shipping).

The programme is fundamentally about effective collaboration and communication: how MPs and Peers could do it better, and generate more action on climate change as a result.

In one particularly poignant conversation, two MPs who had been on opposite sides of a high-stakes debate earlier that day, came to realise that action on climate change could be worked out with something other than divisive party politics. The alternative? “Taking forward more cross-party backbench climate initiatives”, resolved one



Figure 2

of them at the end of the programme.

UNCONVENTIONAL OUTCOMES

The aim of the programme was to enable parliamentarians to think differently about their own levers for action. Feedback gathered during the programme suggests it worked.

"I really valued the opportunity to take a few steps back and consider the thought processes and instincts which underpin so much of our communication in relation to climate change," said one Labour MP.

"I understood the importance of seeing their challenge from another person's viewpoint, filtered through someone else's value system" added a Crossbench Peer.

Aside from sharing golden nuggets on how our human brains respond to the challenges of tackling climate change, the programme did something very

simple and practical for the MPs and Peers involved. It provided a confidential and non-judgemental 'space' for reflection.

"Ask a climate scientist and a risk expert what 'conservative risk estimate' means and you may find their interpretations of the word are actually the opposite of each other", explained neuroscientist De Meyer.

When asked what they liked most about the programme, one responded simply: "the chance to think". Another commented on how the environment created during the programme enabled "stimulating discussions" to happen across parties and houses.

NEXT STEPS

So what's next for this unusual parliamentary intervention? The Climate Action Unit is keen to deliver the programme for future cohorts. With COP26 fast approaching, and the real nuts-and-bolts work that will need to

happen afterwards, there is no time like the present.

"I strongly recommend this programme to any colleagues thinking about taking part" one MP remarked at the end of

session 5 of the programme. "All of us have a responsibility to be working on climate change, and all of us have a responsibility to make sure that we are properly equipped to play the best leadership role that we can."

So here is an open invite: If you are an MP or Peer who wants to take part in the next iteration of the Climate Action Programme for UK Parliament, email climateactionunit@ucl.ac.uk.

Sending an email is the first action: let's see where it leads.

Website:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-policy/climate-action-unit>

References

1 Source: YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,093 GB adults (18+). Fieldwork was undertaken between 28th - 29th April 2019. The survey was carried out online. In response to the multiple-choice question "Who do you think has the most responsibility for addressing the issue of climate change?" 53% of respondents answered 'government'; 12% answered 'businesses'; 18% answered 'individuals' and 17% answered 'others/don't know'.

2 POSTnotes on climate change, UK Parliament website.

3 IPCC, 2021: Summary for Policymakers. Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Cambridge University Press.

4 Willis, R., 2017. How Members of Parliament understand and respond to climate change. *The Sociological Review*, 66(3), pp.475-491.

5 Willis, R., 2017. What does climate change look like through the eyes of a politician? *Green Alliance blog*

6 De Meyer et al, 2020. Transforming the stories we tell about climate change: from 'issue' to 'action'. *Environmental Research Letters*, 16 (1), p.015002. □