

## FEATURE

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# Democracy and climate change

**Rachel Mander** of Hope for the Future challenges us to speak out



Member of the Climate Assembly asks a question

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**G**reenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are embedded into all areas of human activity so addressing climate risk involves very deep structural change. Energy

generation; industrial agriculture and farming practices; manufacturing and construction; the production and consumption of goods, transport, housing; waste processing – all modern structures and systems are a source of GHG emissions. Although the Paris Agreement reflects an international political consensus, it leaves countries to set their own targets and methods of achieving carbon emissions reductions. This gives national governments responsibility for the delivery of deep structural change in their respective countries, within just a few decades: that's a huge democratic challenge.

### **Change requires “buy-in” and ownership.**

Long-lasting and sustainable changes will only come with democratic engagement and people taking “ownership”. Otherwise conflict can occur when new policies or measures are introduced. A noteworthy example is the *gilet jaunes* protest movement, which started in November 2018, when

the French government proposed an increase in fuel taxes. On a smaller scale are the protests of private hire drivers when London introduced the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) charging. This is what makes climate change a social and political issue, which cannot be solved through a reliance on science and technology alone.

Democracy is also of immense ethical importance. Given that we would reject the overturning of our democratic systems, and given that democracy is enshrined in law in many countries, we must find ways to manage climate risk within these systems. The importance of democratic governance should help us address climate risk. It provides us with both a negative motivation and positive incentive to act: while intensifying states of crisis as global temperatures increase may damage democracy, conversely our best hope of managing climate risk is through a focus on making our democratic systems more effective.

### **So is the UK using democracy to inform climate policy?**

Some would say “No!” Rebecca Willis, an expert lead at Climate Assembly UK, commented in her presentation at the Green Christian Festival that, “we need more democracy not less”. She described how the UK government has pursued a kind of “climate action by stealth” through changes within the centralised power sector. To achieve progress across many other sectors, particularly transport and housing, however will require much more thought because they affect people’s daily lives. They will be much riskier to decarbonise without thorough consultation.

The Climate Assembly UK last year, brought together people from all walks of life for regular meetings. The assemblies developed a participatory approach to steering the UK to a low carbon future<sup>1</sup>. Though the assemblies’ report has been presented to government, there is no obligation for the government to act on these recommendations; furthermore the assembly was commissioned by six select committees rather than Parliament itself.

### **Go and meet (online) with your MP!**

This really is a crucial way for concerned individuals to impact decision-making. MPs still talk about not hearing from their constituents about climate change in comparison with other issues. Just by requesting to meet, you are part of changing this. Meeting, even by Zoom, is the most effective way of engaging with your MP because it allows for a two-way dialogue and is the best way of securing an ask.

After all, MPs are only human and many will share our frustrations of not knowing how to make the changes they want to, because they feel constrained by both their political party and the Parliamentary system. Remembering this, and treating engaging with your MP as starting to build a relationship with someone, makes it much more likely to have a good outcome.

The most rewarding part of our work at Hope for the Future is seeing constituents who had effectively “written-off” their MP go onto have successful regular meetings with their MP and be able to say that they were the reason that particular questions were asked in Parliament. Some of the biggest successes have been with Conservative MPs; one of the first MPs we worked with was Alex Chalk, who introduced the Net Zero legislation to Parliament.

### **Engagement as worship and discipleship**

From a Christian perspective, I would encourage people to meet with their MPs as part of their worship and discipleship. It’s a way of using what we have (including in this case, citizenship of the country with the most influence over the COP26 negotiations in 2021) as best we can. Even if we cannot secure a particular outcome, we can be faithful in both having hope for what is possible, and use the process as a way of focusing our prayers.

### **How can people explore taking this further?**

Do get in touch with us at Hope for the Future ([www.hfff.org.uk/](http://www.hfff.org.uk/)). We have the experience, knowledge, and capacity to provide hands-on support to make sure your engagement with MPs or the local council is positive and effective. We will work with you to plan a meeting with your MP in a way which will resonate with their existing interests and provide them with a frame of reference for taking environmental action. Always, the focus for the meeting is gaining agreement on a concrete “ask” which can then be followed up. ■

Rachel’s talk on “A Better Future: Politics and Practicalities” as part of Green Christian’s Online Festival can be viewed at <https://greenchristian.org.uk/festival2020/>



Rachel Mander studied philosophy at Cambridge, before working in Parliament. Her environmental activism brought her to Hope for the Future where she works to enable faith communities to build effective relationships with their MPs around climate change. She is also an Executive Assistant at conservation charity A Rocha International, and a founding member of the Young Christian Climate Network (YCCN).

<sup>1</sup> [www.climateassembly.uk/](http://www.climateassembly.uk/)