

# Climate Obstruction in Scotland

## *The Politics of Oil and Gas*

WILLIAM DINAN, VICTORIA ESTEVES,  
AND STEVEN HARKINS

### **INTRODUCTION: WESTMINSTER, HOLYROOD, AND THE BLACK, BLACK OIL**

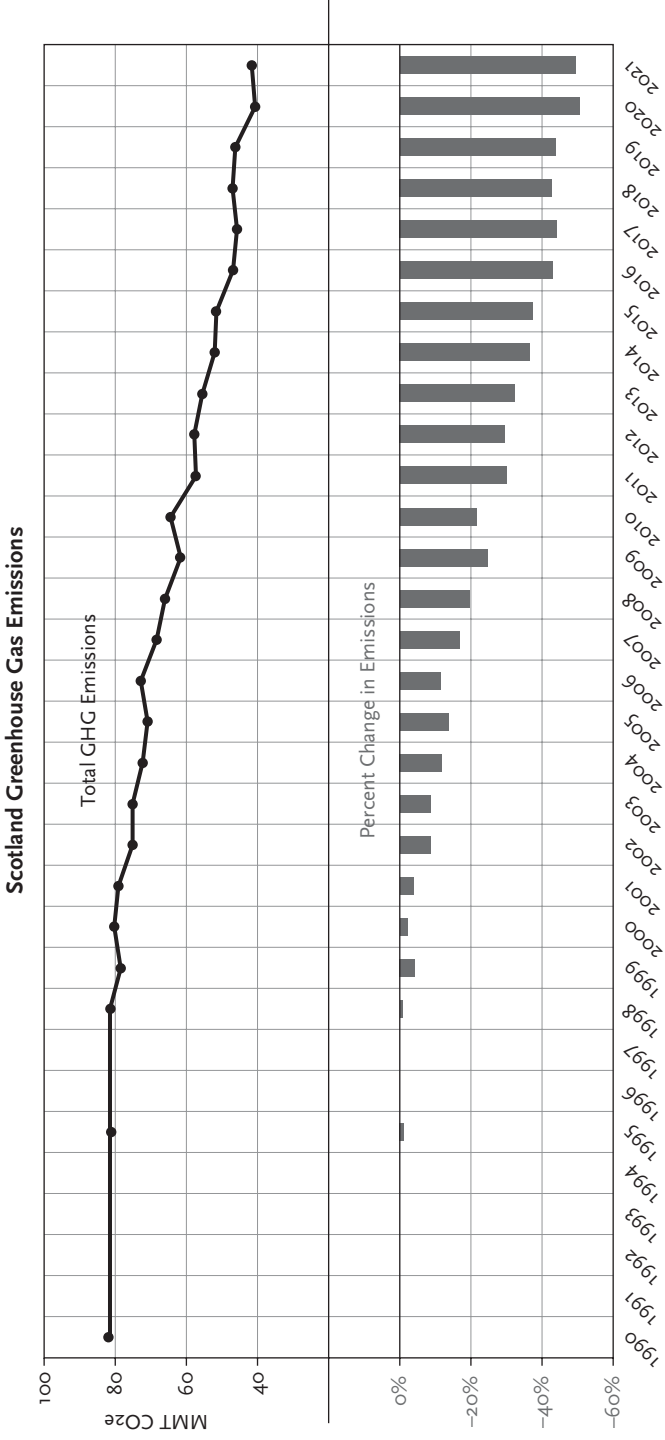
Obstruction of climate action is a pressing policy issue in territories where the oil and gas industries are established economic and political actors. Scotland remains part of the United Kingdom but, since the reopening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, has devolved powers in relation to environment and planning. Given Scotland's abundance of natural energy resources, policy concerning their exploitation has been central to ongoing debates about the nation's economic prospects and constitutional future. This distinctive political and economic context provides a unique case study for examining the evolution of climate change obstructionism in Europe.

Since the discovery of significant fossil fuel reserves in the North Sea in the late 1960s, the UK Parliament (Westminster) has been keen to foster and support investment in oil and gas exploration. The Scottish Parliament (Holyrood) has charted a more ambiguous course since 1999. Successive Scottish governments have tried to balance economic and environmental concerns: seeking to protect jobs based on oil and gas exploration and refining while acknowledging the growing climate crisis and the need for a new industrial strategy based on a 'greener' economy. Outside of

government, a constellation of economic interests (oil and gas companies, trade associations, and trade unions) emphasize the economic costs of disinvestment from fossil fuels, such as the loss of well-paid jobs in the oil and gas sector. These actors are at the forefront of climate delay in Scotland. Their arguments are reflected in policies that often favour short-term protection of oil and gas jobs, including those in related supply chains. This is the main practical form of climate obstruction in Scotland and represents a compromise consensus that climate advocates have struggled to disrupt, despite growing awareness of the climate emergency in policy circles.

Scotland's contribution to the United Kingdom's historical greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and projected future emissions (based on current nationally determined contributions [NDCs]) is significant (Figure 3.1). Agriculture, business, and manufacturing are key contributors to Scotland's overall GHG emissions profile. Energy supply in Scotland in 2020 accounted for 5.368 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents (MMT CO<sub>2</sub>e), with oil and gas extraction accounting for 1.134 MMT CO<sub>2</sub>e (compared with 0.936 MMT CO<sub>2</sub>e for England and 0.056 MMT CO<sub>2</sub>e for Wales; Figure 3.1).<sup>1</sup>

A focus on oil and gas is instructive because extraction is a policy arena 'reserved' to the UK government. The respective powers relating to climate held by the UK and Scottish parliaments complicate policy analysis but also open political opportunities to those lobbying against climate mitigation. Energy policy and regulatory powers are reserved to Westminster, which means the Scottish government possesses few policy instruments to control licencing and extraction. Holyrood does have 'devolved' powers over planning (including new infrastructure) and environmental standards (air quality, pollution, etc.) The UK government has been criticized for approving new exploration in the North Sea. According to the independent Climate Action Tracker, 'Developing new oil and gas reserves is incompatible with the 1.5°C temperature limit and will not help address the current energy crisis'.<sup>2</sup> The policy trajectory in London supports continuing to exploit the reserves available from the UK continental shelf (UKCS). Moreover, the UK Treasury remains reluctant to impose windfall taxes on oil and gas companies despite soaring energy prices and attendant profits in the sector during 2022–2023. The UK Treasury recently offered 90% tax relief to companies investing in North Sea extraction. In 2022, the UK government also briefly lifted the moratorium on unconventional gas extraction (UGE) from shale, commonly known as hydraulic fracturing or fracking,<sup>3</sup> guided by a policy objective of boosting energy security in the United Kingdom. This trend illustrates the dynamics of energy politics within the United Kingdom, with different factions within the same



**Figure 3.1** Total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (in MMT CO<sub>2</sub>e) and percentage change in emissions in Scotland between 1990 and 2021, inclusive. Source: Total GHG emissions based on data provided by Scotland's Nationally Determined Contribution submission for Kyoto Six Greenhouse Gas Totals.

parties pursuing quite divergent policies. The current Scottish government has a policy presumption against fracking, which is exercised via planning powers. However, there is no legislation in Scotland banning it, and, as outlined further on, the debate around fracking surfaced some of the key tensions within the Scottish polity around economic development and climate commitments.

While Holyrood has demonstrated some leadership on climate policy, a recent independent assessment of Scotland's climate targets by the UK Committee on Climate Change (CCC) states, 'In 2019, the Scottish Parliament committed the country to some of the most stretching climate goals in the world, but they are increasingly at risk without real progress toward the milestones that Scottish Ministers have previously laid out'.<sup>4</sup> To address the gap between rhetoric and practice we examine the role of key actors in policy debates around climate in general and oil and gas extraction in particular. We argue it is necessary to examine the strategies and activities of corporate actors in this field and then define how we understand and assess climate obstruction, historically contextualizing the politics of oil and gas in Scotland. We analyse select key moments in Scottish climate politics, notably the debates around the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 and onshore UGE (2012-9). We explore some of the recurring framings of climate and energy issues in Scotland and discuss how these are communicated in mainstream and social media. While we do not directly explore questions of public opinion around climate change, we use the communication about the issue to explore how delay and obstructionist narratives continue to circulate in policy and public discourses on climate in Scotland.

### **Contextualizing corporate climate obstructionism in Scotland**

To understand climate obstructionism and policy delay in Scotland, a focus on private corporations and 'market organizations'<sup>5</sup> is necessary, not least because many of the key policies associated with climate mitigation privilege these organizations. Undoubtedly, those organizations with most to lose from progressive climate policy are those with the greatest carbon footprints and impacts, and they mobilize to defend their interests. Market organizations (e.g. private enterprises, trade, or business associations) can be considered independent actors, but they operate within political, social, and economic contexts and cannot ignore regulation or wider cultural norms and expectations—what has been referred to as 'market environments' wherein businesses have structural, instrumental, and

discursive power.<sup>6</sup> As such, the political and business strategies that market organizations pursue reflect a balance of their economic interests and their assessments of what is achievable in relation to policy and legislation. For those operating at different levels of governance, there is a need to consider the political opportunities and risks associated with their lobbying activities in different polities (referred to as ‘forum shopping’ in political science literature). Indeed, one of the functions of corporate communications strategies is to ensure there is some alignment and consistency across political boundaries and that corporate positioning on, for example, climate issues appear credible to different stakeholders and publics at different levels of governance.

Scotland could be considered a market environment where there are some possibilities to advance climate mitigation and reduce GHG emissions, given the stated ambitions of the Scottish Parliament to respond seriously to the climate emergency. Our analysis complicates this picture by drawing attention to the significant policy constraints that the current devolution settlement presents to policymakers in Edinburgh. But the analysis also demonstrates the enduring power (structural, instrumental, and discursive) of the oil and gas industry operating in Scotland. For climate obstructionism and delay to be a successful strategy pursued by oil and gas interests, they do not need to convince all policymakers, civil society, or wider public opinion. Fostering short-term conditions under which meaningful climate policies are seen as too politically difficult or economically costly has proved to be a remarkably resilient approach in Scotland.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE POLITICS OF OIL AND GAS IN SCOTLAND**

As Marriott and Macalister observed, ‘The discovery of substantial reserves in the British North Sea changed the fortunes of BP, Shell, north-east Scotland and the British state’.<sup>7</sup> Since the discovery of oil and gas reserves in the North Sea, UK government policy has rapidly developed and exploited these resources, with investment flowing into the northeast of Scotland throughout the 1970s and 1980s. These reserves were a boon for the UK Treasury. During the 1970s, political sentiment in Scotland was shifting, and the campaign for Scottish independence gained ground. The case for independence rested, in part, on the opportunity to build a Scottish state on the proceeds of oil and gas exploration. While the political project of Scottish independence stalled in the late 1970s, North Sea exploration and production grew significantly. The key political and policy

developments relating to energy in Scotland since the late 1980s have included the decline and demise of coal as a source of employment and, later, power generation.

Privatization, the flagship policy of the neoliberal Thatcherite government at the time, has been perhaps the key to explain the power dynamics of current UK energy production. According to Marriott and Macalister ‘the disposal of state-held North Sea oil and gas assets—specifically, the upstream interests of both the British National Oil Corporation (BNOC) and British Gas and, arguably, the British government’s majority shareholding in British Petroleum (BP) proved to be the spearhead of a privatization wave that was to sweep Great Britain, first, and then much of the rest of the world, during the 1980s and early 1990s’.<sup>8</sup> Prominent among the major energy corporations based or operating in Scotland were those brought into being by privatization. BP (Scotland), Scottish Power, Scottish and Southern Energy, Scottish Gas (part of Centrica), and British Energy all were leading players in the Scottish business scene.

Historically, the Scottish policy arena has been viewed as more corporatist and consensual than that in the rest of the United Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> The style of governance in Scotland has been described as a ‘negotiated order’ between business and political elites. The tight networks that comprise this quasi-corporatist negotiated order have tended to be business friendly. Prior to devolution, large industrial interests in Scotland enjoyed political access to decision making via the Scottish Office, the Westminster department charged with managing and administering Scotland. During the 1980s and 1990s, the energy sector including oil and gas producers could use the Scottish Office to press their case with other UK government departments, particularly the Treasury. Little of this political activity attracted media attention. According to Professor Paul Stevens, oil and gas interests in Scotland ‘steered away from publicity. They preferred to be covert rather than overt because oil companies had never been popular. And they didn’t really have to lobby too hard because [of their big tax revenues] they were pushing an open door with government’.<sup>10</sup>

With the advent of Scottish devolution, initially little changed. The extractive industries located and operating in Scotland responded to the twin strategic threats of growing policy awareness of climate change (after the collapse of the Global Climate Coalition in 1998) and the devolution of political power to the newly created Scottish Parliament in 1999 by retaining a focus on maintaining relations and lines of communication with key political contacts. In parallel with significant political mobilization by business globally to respond to the wider policy challenges associated

with sustainable development agendas, there was also increased political activism by business organizations to shape the policy agenda of the new Scottish Parliament.<sup>11</sup> The New Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition administration in Edinburgh quickly set about scoping the policy challenges associated with climate change confronting the new institutions.<sup>12</sup>

The energy sector continued to enjoy privileged access to decision-makers in Scotland. In 2000, a special Scottish Utilities Forum was created to address key issues for the sector. The impetus behind its creation was to bring high-level politicians and business leaders together to exchange views under Chatham House rules (a convention that protects the privacy of participants, in which media cannot identify the sources of statements). According to participants, it evolved into a forum for briefing and sectoral lobbying. While some members soon began to question the purpose of the forum, its very existence illustrates an enduring style of corporatist politics. The participating energy companies remained keen to keep policy dialogue going, particularly if it were to address trade issues. A compromise was reached wherein the forum would continue to run while the companies might more usefully address their other concerns through the Scottish Parliament's cross-party group on oil and gas. It was agreed that this cross-party group should therefore be encouraged to widen its scope to consider the kinds of 'downstream' (i.e. consumer) issues that would be of benefit to Scottish Utilities Forum members.

Cross-party groups are one thread of the fabric of business and politics in Scotland. Peak business organizations such as the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors and Chambers of Commerce are networks that provide venues and opportunities for lobbying. In addition, policy debates hosted by think tanks and interest groups also offer space for exchanges between public affairs professionals and the political class in Scotland. Attendance at party conferences and fringe events (sponsored side events not part of the official conference) is also a key feature of the lobbying scene in Scotland and is routine for the big energy companies. As one industry source recounted:

We go to all the party conferences here . . . and we will also do cross party fringe meetings . . . it's very good because they are all well attended by the politicians and the activists and so on, . . . I think *particularly in Scotland . . . politics permeates everything, you know, it is very high profile, it's very close. So you can't stand aside from that*, so we're heavily involved in . . . socially responsible subjects such as fuel poverty [that] are closely linked, obviously to politics large and small 'p', and are linked to our business' [emphasis added].<sup>13</sup>

## **BP: Corporate strategy in Scotland**

The case of BP illustrates some of the strategies oil and gas companies have used to secure their social and political licence to operate in Scotland. These strategies are ultimately focused on delaying and obstructing climate mitigation policy: as well as having dedicated communications and public affairs personnel in Aberdeen (upstream), Grangemouth (downstream), Edinburgh (managing the wider swathe of political relations in Scotland), and, of course, London (its headquarters, but managing relations with Scottish politicians at Westminster), the company had a relatively early focus in the late 1990s on social investment and strategically understanding sentiment among political influentials, including critics.<sup>14</sup> BP's rebranding as 'Beyond Petroleum' in 2000 coincided with growing concern about its social licence and a drive to position the company as becoming increasingly serious about climate.

Locally, the company was often accused of lacking commitment to Scotland. To help tackle this perception, in 2001, the company commissioned private economic consultants to independently attest to BP's economic importance to Scotland.<sup>15</sup> An advisory board in Scotland was formed, seen as a means for the company's management to take the temperature of the Scottish political class and develop its corporate strategy in Scotland, drawing in advice and expertise.<sup>16</sup>

BP invested significantly in promotion and communications. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) featured heavily, with a sophisticated political and community strategy implemented in Scotland. For example, in April 2001, BP supported a think tank, the International Futures Forum (IFF), to bring strategic thinking and policy analysis to bear on real-world problems. The public affairs value of IFF's Scottish work was that it gave BP the opportunity to demonstrate its engagement with the broader policy agenda of the Scottish and UK governments. BP's stated long-term aspiration was for the IFF to eventually become a resource for Scottish policymaking on economic regeneration.

Indeed, the IFF morphed a few years later into the Scottish Parliament's cross-party Futures Forum. In 2006, the Forum invited perhaps the highest-profile climate sceptic at the time, Bjorn Lomborg, to the Scottish Parliament. Lomborg's visit was hosted by Fergus Ewing, a Scottish National Party (SNP) Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) who also chaired the cross-party group on oil and gas in Holyrood. Ewing praised Lomborg's work, describing it as 'rigorous', 'dispassionate', and 'non-polemical'. He rejected criticism of Parliament's hosting Lomborg from members of the Green Party as 'puerile'. Lomborg's message was that climate change would

benefit the flora and fauna of Scotland and that ‘cutting carbon emissions believing that will have make much of a difference is almost illusory’.<sup>17</sup>

BP had been keen to position themselves as realist policy actors, willing to innovate and invest to explore business-friendly climate solutions. Some of that corporate profiling was undertaken in Scotland. The company pioneered an early version of emissions trading (often referred to as ‘cap and trade’ schemes) as a means of driving down CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and increasing efficiency. For example, the BP refinery business at Grangemouth sold some of its internal corporate carbon credits to the extraction business in the North Sea Forties field. That transaction released investment in the facility at Grangemouth, all at very low cost to the company.<sup>18</sup> It had the advantage of reducing emission from the production process, driving business focus on this issue, whilst also giving BP tangible evidence that it was serious about its commitment to addressing climate. The company developed the scheme alongside other speculative climate solutions, including carbon capture and storage (CCS) in Scotland and ‘a commitment to spend £4.5 billion over the next decade on wind power, solar energy, and hydrogen and gas-fired power stations’.<sup>19</sup>

To that end, in addition to its new ‘Beyond Petroleum’ tagline, BP purchased some renewables companies. At the same time as it was supporting the IFF in mapping a new socially responsible twenty-first century, it was also seeking to dispose of much of its refinery business, including the facility at Grangemouth, in central Scotland. The shorter-term PR and policy benefits of ‘the second Scottish enlightenment’ were made quite clear. The political impact of this strategy and its social investment for community regeneration helped build goodwill for the corporation, which maintained its wider social license to operate and eventually helped facilitate its corporate exit from the community. Based on BP’s own statements, ‘The objective was to keep talking with decision makers, don’t let [media coverage] get in the way of the conversations you’re having with people who can really make things happen’.<sup>20</sup> BP’s refinery business was ultimately sold in 2005, to INEOS, a company that would be at the forefront of promoting fracking in Scotland a few years later.

### **Scotland acts on climate?**

A key milestone in Scottish climate politics was the passage of the Climate Change Act (Scotland) in 2009. This act set ambitious targets for emissions reductions and put Scotland at the forefront of polities seeking to underpin their decarbonization transition policies with demanding targets dictated

by primary legislation. The 2007 SNP manifesto committed to create a ministerial post for climate change and to introduce a climate change bill 'with mandatory carbon reduction targets of 3% per annum and also set a long-term target of cutting emissions by a minimum of 80% by 2050 above the UK target of 60%'.<sup>21</sup> The manifesto reflected the lobbying efforts of environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who pressed the party to adopt a radical climate agenda. The passage of the manifesto into legislation within two years involved considerable political manoeuvring, resulting in a significant feat of cross-party cooperation as all parties in Holyrood supported the legislation.

While it is tempting to see this high point of climate policymaking as ushering in a new era in Scotland, such a view is confounded by the political powers available to the Scottish Government, where the legislative levers to regulate North Sea production are reserved to London. Moreover, it underestimates the existing social movements and economic interests in Scotland keen to slow and obstruct the transition to a decarbonized economy. While these interests lacked a strong parliamentary voice in Holyrood and enjoyed little media prominence or support, they re-emerged when the issue of fracking became a matter of planning and political controversy in 2012.

### **Fracking the transition: Advocating for unconventional gas**

In Spring 2011, Dart Energy announced plans to develop a coalbed methane (CBM) project in central Scotland, a location identified as a promising site for exploration in the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> In response to a planning application in August 2012 for permission to drill twenty-two wells at fourteen different sites to explore for CBM, the local authorities in Stirling and Falkirk (also home to the Grangemouth refinery) set in motion a protracted planning, regulatory, and political dispute that illustrated the challenges Scotland faced in meeting the targets set in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act of 2009. Tensions between short-term growth and long-term sustainability came into play, with those promoting fracking emphasizing the economic benefits that unconventional gas extraction could bring to individuals (jobs), communities (a share of shale gas revenues), and the nation (a sustainable future) if managed responsibly. The framing of fracked gas as a desirable transition resource aligned with climate objectives was a key plank of the business and trade association platform advocating for permission to drill, which was designed to assuage local planners and national politicians.

The planning application for CBM attracted many objections and widespread opposition in local communities near the proposed drilling sites, many of which had experienced the environmental costs of methane flaring, noise, and transport pollution associated with coal mines, along with the social cost of their closures during the 1980s. The application became the subject of a prolonged public inquiry. The actors involved in the planning inquiry (and subsequent public debate over the viability and desirability of fracking in Scotland) illustrate the complex interlinkages between scientific expertise, policy, planning, and economic interests.<sup>23</sup> While the key advocates for fracking have been careful not to be associated with denialist tropes, there is nevertheless unmistakable evidence of delay and the use of transition arguments to secure further fossil fuel development. For example, in 2014, an early independent scientific assessment commissioned by the Scottish government delivered a decidedly ambiguous verdict on what many observers and experts saw as a clearly problematic technology in terms of climate.

The impact of unconventional oil and gas resources in Scotland on the Scottish Government's commitment to reduce greenhouse gases is not definitive. There could be minimal impact from unconventional hydrocarbons if they are used as a petrochemical feedstock, but lifecycle analysis of an unconventional hydrocarbon industry is required to inform the debate and provide a clearer view on the impact of their development.<sup>24</sup>

This statement was particularly useful to proponents of fracking, such as INEOS and the trade association UKOOG, who could now rely on scientific uncertainty around emissions and climate targets to press for unconventional gas development across Scotland. The argument that shale gas could be considered a green bridging technology recurred frequently. While the nuance was lost in most public debate, shale gas was agreed to be greener than coal,<sup>25</sup> though coal is known to be the dirtiest of fossil fuels. This comparison does not imply that shale gas warrants the sustainability lustre that corporate spin attempted to bestow on fracking technology or the resource itself.

While the licencing of onshore gas extraction remained a Westminster power (until 2018, when these powers were devolved to Scotland), the Scottish government used its planning powers to implement a de facto moratorium on fracking in Scotland between 2015 and 2018. Nevertheless, the efforts of those holding Westminster-granted licences to exploit shale resources in Scotland were confronted with growing public opposition. INEOS had acquired exploration licences across central Scotland in 2014,

and it set about an extensive public relations and public affairs campaign to convince both Scottish policymakers and the public of the necessity of shale exploration. Climate change was notably downplayed in this communications campaign, with the emphasis firmly on the economic arguments for development.

INEOS has already committed to full and open consultation with local communities and has also promised to share 6% of the revenue from its wells with homeowners, landowners, and local authorities. INEOS . . . believes a combination of community consultation and a fair share of the profits could lead to much greater understanding and acceptance of this important technology.<sup>26</sup>

INEOS organized community meetings and roadshows across central Scotland to sell their vision of shale exploration as a joint venture between corporation and community, wherein CEO Jim Ratcliffe claimed ‘we would see INEOS giving away £2.5 billion in the next 10 to 15 years’.<sup>27</sup> The public relations consultancy Mediazoo were hired to help manage media relations and community consultation programmes, the latter described by critics as an effort to ‘love bomb Scottish communities to stop worrying and love fracking’.<sup>28</sup>

As part of its campaign, INEOS produced audio-visual content that was shared online and across social media channels to promote shale exploration: ‘There is widespread concern about the environmental risks of fracking based on misinformation, which is at odds with the scientific consensus that extraction is safe and compatible with our climate change ambitions’.<sup>29</sup> Neither the scientific consensus nor the ‘our’ whose climate ambitions are invoked were explained. Instead, the narrative emphasized the transformational impact shale gas could have for local employment in extraction and high-skills manufacturing. The visual rhetoric in one promotional video downplayed the impacts on local amenities and traffic disruption. Panning shots of green fields and largely unspoilt farmland were used to convey an image of a relatively unobtrusive and unproblematic technology. Renewables technologies were compared unfavourably with the proposed shale gas wells. Using a hypothetical example of a four-well drilling site, INEOS claimed that ‘In the first decade it would take about thirty-two wind turbines to generate the same energy created by these four gas wells’. None of the assumptions that underpin these rhetorical claims is substantiated (the periodization, the recoverable gas from shale reserves in central Scotland, the size and efficiency of wind relative to shale, etc.). The video superimposes a large wind farm over the shale gas well pad to emphasize the visual impact of turbines and then displays a panning

shot of a wind farm in silhouette with more than fifty turbines, subtly exaggerating the comparison. Ted Crotty, a director at INEOS, claimed ‘the local residents would be up in arms about it’.

In fact, residents were up in arms about the proposed fracking development rather than renewables. There had been no applications to site large windfarms in central Scotland, but the renewables comparison served as a red herring to distract from the wider climate questions. While issues associated with fracking, such as earth tremors and water contamination, are addressed in INEOS’s promotional video, nothing is said about the climate impacts of the technology. The issue is framed exclusively in terms of a narrow range of poor choices: rising energy prices, decreasing North Sea reserves, and coal as an undesirable substitute are core messages. The necessity of importing fracked gas if shale development was not permitted in Scotland is presented as the only other policy alternative—and was indeed the business decision pursued by INEOS in 2016.

In another video INEOS commissioned, the case for gas is made by highlighting all the current consumer goods (e.g. plastics and synthetics) and creature comforts that are made possible by gas. The narrative is constructed around a young couple looking at their energy bill and debating whether to ‘get rid of gas’. As household items disappear, the lights go out, and eventually the couple are left naked, the viewer is invited to consider that current lifestyles and civilization are not possible without gas.<sup>30</sup>

According to seasoned industry observers, INEOS ‘signifies a new type of institution in the industry and gives a picture of the UK oil and gas world as it now is and is set to be in the future. It has scant need for journalists, unlike the corporations which used the media to build a positive profile even as they largely lobbied ministers behind the scenes. The likes of INEOS are straightforwardly hidden and largely closed to scrutiny, except via their own public presentations’.<sup>31</sup>

The fracking debate exposed fault lines not only in the geology of central Scotland, but within the ruling political party in Holyrood, the SNP. While the Scottish government publicly disavowed UGE development (with many SNP candidates elected on an anti-fracking platform in 2016), INEOS CEO Ratcliffe claimed that, privately, senior SNP ministers were supportive of fracking.<sup>32</sup> This account tallies with the political intelligence anti-fracking campaigners were picking up as they lobbied against UGE development. Key ministers like Fergus Ewing were known to be consistent supporters of the oil and gas industry and sceptical about climate change more generally. It is likely they used their ministerial clout to resist an early ban on UGE developments. Key elements of SNP policy around climate now directly undermined the arguments the party had advanced in the 2014

independence referendum, which relied on projected oil and gas revenues to help make the economic case for independence and underwrite a new Scottish exchequer in an independent Scotland.

While INEOS was at the forefront of the public relations effort to secure acceptance of shale development in Scotland (including a failed court case against the Scottish Government in 2017–2018, which sought damages if fracking in Scotland was banned), other companies and vested interests were also actively promoting fracking. Their preferred framing of UGE never addressed the wider climate impacts of fossil fuels and instead focused on the necessity of gas as the optimal transition fuel. A ‘balanced sustainable approach’ to energy sourcing became code for short-term exploitation of shale reserves. Both large landowners (such as the Duke of Buccleuch’s estates) and smaller oil and gas companies (Dart Energy, IGas, Cluff Natural Resources, BCG Energy, and Aurora Energy Resources) were involved in lobbying for unconventional gas extraction. The proliferation of new exploration and supply-chain companies highlights another feature of the contemporary oil and gas industry in Scotland: it is increasingly differentiated, financed by private equity and interests not domiciled in Scotland, and no longer dominated by the ‘majors’. Here, the roles of trade associations and peak business organizations become significant in understanding how climate policies can be delayed and obstructed.

### **North Sea for net zero: A new climate obstructionism**

In 2000, BP and Shell accounted for nearly 40% of the UK’s oil production. By 2019, this share of the market was halved, with new entrants buying up concessions and licences.<sup>33</sup> While an estimated 20 billion barrels of oil could yet be extracted (from the UKCS), the economic viability of such development will depend on global oil prices and taxation policy, neither of which can be controlled by Holyrood. The economic opportunity is clearly articulated by the UK’s Oil and Gas Authority (OGA), while any ‘economic/environment trade-off appears to be absent from the OGA’s deliberations to date’.<sup>34</sup>

The UK Government commissioned the Wood Review (2014) to examine the future exploitation of North Sea reserves. The recommended maximizing economic recovery strategy that emerged was completely shaped by industry preferences. Indeed, the industry association Oil and Gas UK was explicitly thanked in the foreword to the final report.<sup>35</sup> The review barely acknowledges the climate crisis. In recommending a new regulator for the mature UKCS, the report justifies an industry-friendly

regulatory model by arguing that such a body would not have to compete with the other priorities of the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), not least a global deal on climate change.<sup>36</sup> The OGA was created very shortly after this review in 2015 and rebranded as the North Sea Transition Authority (NSTA) in March 2022. NSTA claims to be ‘fully committed to enabling the achievement of the UK government’s commitment to reach net zero emissions by 2050’,<sup>37</sup> which is to be realized by ‘licensing of exploration and development of the UK’s offshore and onshore (England only) oil and gas resources, gas storage and unloading activities in accordance with the [Net Zero] Strategy’.<sup>38</sup> This UK government strategy to incentivize North Sea extraction stands at odds with scientific advice on addressing climate change and the policy trajectory of the Scottish government.

The origins of NSTA as an industry-friendly regulator created to promote fossil-fuel exploration is symptomatic of a form of policy denialism that pretends continued exploration is compatible with commitments the UK government has made during the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) negotiations, let alone climate science. Simply rebranding a pro-exploration regulator as a transition body represents a deeply cynical communicative logic. A similar repositioning strategy can be seen in the private sector. Oil and Gas UK, the trade association for the fossil fuel industry in the North Sea, has been rebranded as Offshore Energies UK (OEUK).<sup>39</sup> The OEUK website is vague about its foundation and rebranding, simply asserting a (misleading) pedigree stretching back almost half a century.<sup>40</sup>

OEUK stresses the role its members can play in reducing emissions from their operations. It is silent about the emissions to be generated from the billions of barrels its members are busily exploiting from the UKCS. Much play is made of investments in carbon capture, usage and storage (CCUS), and hydrogen as a means of contributing to net zero. Echoes of BPs social investment strategy in Scotland are to be found in OEUK’s commitment to maintaining the skills base of communities around Aberdeen and promising up to 40,000 new energy jobs (many of which appear to be linked with as-yet untried and unproven technologies).<sup>41</sup>

The promise of new jobs is one enthusiastically embraced by trade unions representing gas fitters and offshore workers. The GMB trade union had been vocal supporters of fracking in Scotland and have consistently argued for the protection of jobs in the oil and gas industry, despite recognizing that climate change is happening. Gary Smith, GMB’s general secretary, argued, ‘If we want to avoid the double disaster of a climate crisis and a jobs crisis, then we need a balanced energy policy across our regions and nations that

supports workers and communities on the journey to “net zero”.<sup>42</sup> Here the union adopts the language of climate mitigation, stating that ‘GMB recognizes that we are in the grip of a climate crisis created by man-made global warming, and that global warming is the gravest long-term threat that faces the planet’.<sup>43</sup> However, the union (and others in the sector) also warn that an accelerated or arbitrary journey to net zero risks mass job losses and ‘exporting’ demand. The union supports the UK government’s net zero target for 2050 but has focused on campaigning against transition policies that substitute away from gas and oil: ‘Some economists have even argued that “renewable energy conveniently requires less labour for operation and maintenance” than traditional energy sources, and that the UK should speed the transition to renewables to save on long-term labour costs. GMB rejects this cynical attempt to undermine good quality employment’.<sup>44</sup>

Notably, the GMB represents members in industries with the highest gross carbon emissions in the United Kingdom and has repeatedly prioritized the protection of jobs ahead of climate goals. While this is an understandable policy position, it is well aligned with industry’s repeated preference for indefinite and short-term prioritization of business as usual, which has been a key theme running through climate obstructionist discourse in Scotland. It also often means that trade unions are at the forefront of opposing climate policies in public debate.

## **CLIMATE OBSTRUCTIONISM IN SCOTLAND: DISCOURSES OF DELAY AND DENIAL**

Outright denialism in the mainstream Scottish press, casting doubt over the causes of climate change, is increasingly rare: ‘To assume that our behaviour is a primary cause of planetary climate change seems to me an expression of hubris, an overweening pride, that is matched only by our arrogance in forecasting its effects for a century ahead when we are unable to do much more than improve on chance in predicting next week’s weather’, as one opinion writer put it.<sup>45</sup> The legacy press in Scotland is no different from other media organizations in featuring voices from business and politics in their construction of events. While this practice largely excludes extreme climate deniers, there are spaces for such arguments to surface. In 2013, for example, the Alliance Party was launched to campaign against windfarms in Scotland. As an official party, its arguments received mainstream media coverage. The most prominent and consistent climate criticism in the press is sourced from industry groups, although their position

is now couched in the language of net zero. Recently, outgoing OEUK Chief Executive Deirdre Michie argued against the ‘environmental populism’ of windfall taxes on oil and gas at the end of 2022 and for further fossil fuel development.

Projects like the Cambo field [an off-shore oil field in the North Atlantic] are part of a low-carbon journey that will support energy security, jobs, the economy and the net-zero future that everyone wants to see. Like all future UK oil and gas projects, the Cambo field is designed with lower-operating emissions in mind. It has been built ‘electrification-ready’, with the potential to import renewable power when it becomes feasible in the future.<sup>46</sup>

This line of argument represents an important strand of mainstream opinion in Scotland. It appears realistic and reasonable, particularly in the context of more fringe voices who circulate denialist speaking points, misinformation, and disinformation.

### **Online discourses of delay and denial**

Some frequent letter writers campaigning against net zero policies still get published occasionally in the mainstream press. Whilst outright climate denial seems to be losing ground in online spaces, the undermining of climate solutions—resulting in delay—is growing, and public opinion appears split. A third of British people surveyed currently believe it is impossible to forego fossil fuels.<sup>47</sup> While Scotland is not home to climate denial think tanks, their work is reported to the Scottish public via British media outlets. Although Scottish public debate is increasingly distinct from the ‘national’ British policy conversation, their respective public spheres do overlap. Further untangling our current understanding of the relationship between the online sphere and opinion on climate issues, research shows that British social media consumers are also potentially exposed to misinformation, like their TV-watching counterparts.<sup>48</sup> The online space remains a problematic realm of discussion in relation to climate denial.

A recent development in the United Kingdom has been the advent of right-wing news channels, like GB News. While the live audiences for these channels are very small compared with mainstream news of established broadcasters, content from GB News circulates widely on social media. A leading presenter on GB News, Neil Oliver, recently resigned from the Royal Society Edinburgh (RSE). ‘In discussion with Mr Oliver, he understood that his current views on various matters, widely aired on television,

put him at odds with scientific and broader academic learning within the Society. Following discussions, he offered to resign his association with the RSE with immediate effect'.<sup>49</sup> Oliver's broadcasts have featured vaccine scepticism and climate denial.

Whilst broad public discussion of climate change can be scattered across social media, particularly Twitter (now X) and YouTube, efforts to influence debate in the form of independent online publications and blogs are present. These visible spaces of climate sceptic opinion include *The Scottish Sceptic* blog as well as UK-based spaces with Scottish-specific subsections or articles, such as *Climate Scepticism*, *The Daily Sceptic*, and *The Conservative Woman*.

*The Daily Sceptic*<sup>50</sup> is a British online publication that often criticizes environmental initiatives. It features two Scottish writers, Andrew Montford and Richard Lyon. Montford is a Scottish writer who compiled *The Climategate Inquiries* for the Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF) in 2010, and is a well-known name in climate sceptic circles via his online publications. The UK's *Daily Sceptic* features essays on renewable energy and Scottish climate policy by Richard Lyon, a former senior oil and gas operations manager who also runs *The State of Britain* blog.<sup>51</sup> One of the most common critiques within these publications relates to renewable energy in Scotland. Its core arguments allege that renewables destroy wildlife, offer unreliable supply, are too expensive, and will harm the economy.

The overarching rhetoric that permeates broader discussions around climate denial or delay are reflected within these online publications, which twist facts using misinformation and exaggeration. Lyon criticizes 'weather-dependent energy scavenging devices',<sup>52</sup> further amplifying misinformation regarding renewable energy. While this might be tempting to dismiss, worryingly, 27% of Britons surveyed say they share this belief.<sup>53</sup>

*The Conservative Woman*<sup>54</sup> is a British publication that addresses right-leaning views and concerns. Two of its contributors are Scottish climate sceptics Clark Cross and William Loneskie. In line with *The Daily Sceptic*, Cross's pieces for *The Conservative Woman* are also critical of electric vehicles and wind energy. Criticism of Scotland's net zero goals are a favourite theme.<sup>55</sup> This outlet adopts a less scientific approach, emphasizing economic arguments to undermine climate solutions. Cross and Loneskie's positioning vis-à-vis identity is markedly different from Montford's and Lyon's: while the latter lean into their credentials (both in terms of expertise and work experience), the former do not, but potentially offer more relatable content. This divergence in terms of identity and communicative tactics allows delay and denialist messages to reach a much broader

audience whilst also demonstrating the diversity of climate change sceptics in terms of their sociopolitical alignments.

## CONCLUSION

As shown, discursive framings of climate obstruction and delay in Scotland include economic arguments against action, the use of transitioning tactics (including positioning gas as a critical bridging resource), and critiques around the reliability of renewable energy. Such economic arguments include the short-term importance of the oil industry and the lack of secure and well-paid jobs to replace those associated with extraction and refining. Critiques of renewable energy are framed in terms of energy instability and impacts on local fauna and flora. Energy security has been a theme of climate obstruction for many years, and it has been revived to promote fracking in Scotland, and more recently, to address wider geopolitical concerns about energy supply and the associated price increases and ‘cost of living’ crisis.

The political influencing strategies of the oil and gas industry in Scotland appear to largely avoid engaging in media and public debate and seek instead to build relationships and support with key political advisors and decision-makers—UK government departments in particular. In addition to developing CSR initiatives to maintain social ‘license to operate’, the oil and gas industry in Scotland has sophisticated public affairs programmes that track political sentiment toward individual companies and issues-management strategies that closely monitor political and regulatory agendas associated with climate policy. More research on these influencing strategies is urgently needed if the public and policymakers are to understand the scale of corporate led climate-delay efforts. The woefully weak lobbying disclosure regulations in Westminster and Holyrood are a significant barrier to public understanding of policymaking in general, and climate politics in particular.

The recent enthusiastic embrace of net zero rhetoric by key trade associations and trade unions representing oil and gas interests in Scotland illustrates their repositioning as realist actors in climate policy networks. Net zero is a remarkably business-friendly approach to addressing climate issues as it allows fundamental changes to business practices and strategies to be postponed almost indefinitely. While oil and gas interests have offered symbolic concessions to climate concerns, they have also been highly effective in securing their own short-term economic interests. In the Scottish

context, this success is due largely to the pro-exploration policy position of the UK government.

While the Scottish government has championed climate mitigation, it would be a mistake to assume that there is either wide or deep consensus that such policy goals can easily be pursued in the short to medium term, even if the respective division of powers between Scotland and the United Kingdom were to change. Many within the SNP are supportive of the oil and gas industry, and, while onshore extraction was hugely unpopular with the electorate, factions within most of Scotland's political parties (save the Greens and Scottish Socialists) have been prepared to consider such development. With offshore extraction, the British political class has repeatedly sought to protect investment and employment in oil and gas. The hard decisions around fossil fuel disinvestment and transition have been continually postponed. This is the practical effect of the widespread political lobbying efforts to sustain the inherently unsustainable extractive industries. While there is a rhetorical recognition of the climate emergency in Scottish politics, the oil and gas industry in Scotland continues to operate and expand.

The connection between discourses of climate delay and denial and public opinion also requires further research. While establishing the oil and gas industries' preferred framings of climate issues is reasonably straightforward, the impacts of these framings requires greater exploration. That work needs to examine the attitudes of policy elites as well as those of the public. While online climate deniers can be dismissed as unserious and uninformed, it would be a mistake to assume that their ideas and arguments have no effects. Understanding the diffusion and circulation of climate denial on social media is a prerequisite to effectively informing publics about climate science, improving understanding of climate policy, and motivating climate action.

## NOTES

1. Estimates drawn from BEIS, 'Greenhouse Gas Inventories for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: 1990–2020', 20 September 2022, [https://naei.beis.gov.uk/reports/reports?report\\_id=1080](https://naei.beis.gov.uk/reports/reports?report_id=1080).
2. <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/uk/>. Accessed 22 March 2023.
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-takes-next-steps-to-boost-domestic-energy-production>. This policy was quickly reversed when Rishi Sunak became UK Prime Minister in October 2022.
4. Climate Change Committee (2022, 7 December), 'Scotland's Climate Targets Are in Danger of Becoming Meaningless', <https://www.theccc.org.uk/2022/12/07/>

- scotlands-climate-targets-are-in-danger-of-becoming-meaningless/. Accessed 22 March 2023.
5. C. Perrow and S. Pulver (2015), 'Organizations and Markets', In: Riley E. Dunlap, and Robert J. Brulle (eds.), *Climate Change and Society: Sociological Perspectives*, online edition. New York: Oxford Academic, <https://doi-org.ezproxy-s2.stir.ac.uk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199356102.003.0003>. Accessed 22 March 2023.
  6. Ibid., and S. Pulver (2007), 'Making Sense of Corporate Environmentalism: An Environmental Contestation Approach to Analyzing the Causes and Consequences of the Climate Change Policy Split in the Oil Industry', *Organization and Environment*, 20, 1: 44–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026607300246>.
  7. J. Marriott and T. Macalister (2021), *Crude Britannia: How Oil Shaped a Nation*. London: Pluto Press, p. 81.
  8. Ibid.
  9. A. Brown and D. McCrone (1999 March), *Business and the Scottish Parliament Project: Report*. Edinburgh: Governance of Scotland Forum, p. 71.
  10. Professor Paul Stevens, Professor of Petroleum Policy and Economics, University of Dundee, cited in Marriott and Macalister, *Crude Britannia*, p. 5.
  11. P. Schlesinger, D. Miller, and W. Dinan (2001), *Open Scotland? Journalists, Spin Doctors and Lobbyists*. Edinburgh: Polygon.
  12. A. Kerr, S. Shackley, R. Milne, and S. Allen (1999), *Climate Change: Scottish Implications Scoping Study*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Central Research Unit.
  13. Interview, author archives.
  14. Interview, author archives.
  15. DTZ Piedad Consulting (2001 March), 'The Economic Impact of the Activities of BP in Scotland'. DTZ. Edinburgh, 99/70325.
  16. Interview, author archives.
  17. <https://www.scotsman.com/news/climate-change-good-scotland-professor-2456075>.
  18. Marriott and Macalister, *Crude Britannia* .
  19. Ibid., p. 201.
  20. Interview, author archives.
  21. SNP (2007), 'It's Time: Manifesto for Scottish Parliament Elections', p. 29. <https://blog.stevenkellow.com/scottish-parliament-election-manifesto-archive/>
  22. David K. Smythe (2020), 'Inadequate Regulation of the Geological Aspects of Shale Exploitation in the UK', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17, 19: 6946, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17196946>.
  23. A. Watterson and W. Dinan (2016), 'Health Impact Assessments, Regulation, and the Unconventional Gas Industry in the UK: Exploiting Resources, Ideology, and Expertise?', *New Solutions*, 25, 4: 480–512, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1048291115615074>; and A. Watterson, and W. Dinan (2020), 'Lagging and Flagging: Air Pollution, Shale Gas Exploration and the Interaction of Policy, Science, Ethics and Environmental Justice in England', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17, 12: art. no. 4320, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17124320>.
  24. C. Masters, Zoe Shipton, R. Gatliff, et al. (2014), *Independent Expert Scientific Panel: Report on Unconventional Oil and Gas. Project Report*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government, p. v.
  25. Ibid., p. 63.

26. <https://www.ineos.com/inch-magazine/articles/issue-7/shale-gas-the-game-changer/>. Accessed 26 March 2023.
27. 'Jim Ratcliffe Talks About INEOS £2.5bn Shale Gas Offer', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EolzsjygaTk> 0:40–0:44. Accessed 27 March 2023.
28. <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/13205767.revealed-energy-giants-plans-lovebomb-scotland-backing-fracking/>. Accessed 26 March 2023.
29. <https://www.ineos.com/businesses/ineos-shale/why-shale-gas/>. Accessed 27 March 2023.
30. INEOS (2015), 'The Importance of Gas', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVwuJEbFxec> Accessed 27 March 2023.
31. Marriott and Macalister, *Crude Britannia*, p. 293.
32. <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/13421511.government-must-come-clean-fracking-ineos-boss-claims-ministers-privately-supportive/>. Accessed 28 March 2023.
33. Marriott and Macalister, *Crude Britannia*, p. 275.
34. J. Armstrong, and J. MacLaren (2017), 'The Oil and Gas Sector', In: K. Gibb, D. MacLennan, D. McNulty, and M. Come (eds.), *The Scottish Economy: A Living Book*, p. 115. London: Routledge.
35. I. Wood (2014, February), 'UKCS Maximising Recovery Review: Final Report', [https://www.nstauthority.co.uk/media/1014/ukcs\\_maximising\\_recovery\\_review.pdf](https://www.nstauthority.co.uk/media/1014/ukcs_maximising_recovery_review.pdf). Accessed 30 March 2023.
36. Ibid., Annex A. 'Arguments for a New Arm's Length Body', p. 55.
37. <https://www.nstauthority.co.uk/the-move-to-net-zero/>. Accessed 30 March 2023.
38. <https://www.nstauthority.co.uk/licensing-consents/>. Accessed 30 March 2023.
39. <https://www.offshore-mag.com/regional-reports/north-sea-europe/article/14233757/oguk-becomes-offshore-energies-uk>. Accessed 31 March 2023.
40. <https://oeuk.org.uk/who-we-are-offshore-energy-industry/>. Accessed 31 March 2023.
41. <https://oeuk.org.uk/net-zero/>. Accessed 19 September 2023.
42. GMB (2021), <https://www.gmb.org.uk/news/political-and-industrial-failures-will-fuel-climate-and-employment-crises>. Accessed 31 March 2023.
43. GMB (2021). 'Congress 2021 CEC Special Report on Energy and the Environment', p. 5.
44. Ibid., p. 8.
45. J. Stewart (2002, 12 June), 'Merchants of Doom Give Wrong Message', *The Scotsman*, p. 4.
46. A. Grant (2022, 13 December), 'Outgoing Boss of Oil and Gas Trade Body Warns Against "Environmental Populism" Amid North Sea Debate', *The Scotsman*.
47. Climate Action Against Disinformation (2022), *The Impacts of Climate Disinformation on Public Perception*. CAAD, p. 22. <https://caad.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/The-Impacts-of-Climate-Disinformation-on-Public-Perception.pdf>
48. Ibid., p. 45.
49. <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/23773004.neil-oliver-tv-presenter-resigns-royal-society-edinburgh-fellow/>.
50. <https://dailysceptic.org/>.
51. <https://richardlyon.substack.com/>.

52. R. Lyon (2023, 18 January), 'The Dangerous Fantasy of Scotland's Net Zero Energy Transition', *The Daily Sceptic*, <https://dailysceptic.org/2023/01/18/the-dangerous-fantasy-of-scotlands-net-zero-energy-transition/>
53. Climate Action Against Disinformation (2022), p. 10.
54. <https://www.conservativewoman.co.uk/>.
55. C. Cross (2021, 9 March), 'Twenty-Five Years of Hot Air', *The Conservative Woman*, <https://www.conservativewoman.co.uk/twenty-five-years-of-hot-air/>; W. Loneskie (2023, 8 February), 'Save the Planet—Stop This Net Zero Lunacy', *The Conservative Woman*, <https://www.conservativewoman.co.uk/save-the-pla-net-stop-this-net-zero-lunacy/>.