

National Climate Change And Biodiversity Service

A PCS workers' plan for
an alternative civil service



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An alternative vision for the Civil Service: the pressing case of climate change

The era of global warming has ended and “the era of global boiling has arrived”, the UN secretary general, António Guterres, has declared.

In those circumstances, the notion that it is business as usual for the Civil Service or society as a whole, clearly is not sustainable.

Therefore we argue in this pamphlet that there needs to be a radical overhaul of how the UK Civil Service works. This would only be one element in the solution – you still need political will and a plan – but without effective state mechanisms there is no hope in ensuring net zero.

Background

The UK civil and public services have been under a decades old drive to reform in the name of efficiency savings and cost cutting. This is from both Labour and Tory administrations, and the ConDem coalition.

The reality of this for workers has been a relentless attack on their pay, jobs, terms and conditions. With increasing privatisation of public services and outsourcing, it has weakened the services they deliver and led to an ideological rolling back of the welfare state.

Today we have multiple crises facing us from the costs of living and energy crises, to public health and climate change. The twin impacts of Brexit and Covid-19 revealed two important things that were not surprising to those working in the UK civil and public services at least.

In the case of Brexit, the extent of which

the hollowing out of expertise and experience showed that major transformations to our economy cannot be done on the cheap without both financial and human resources. In terms of the Covid-19 pandemic, the extraordinary commitment and adaptability of civil and public service workers illustrating just how vital they are to the economic, political, and social well-being of the nation.

Covid-19 gave a glimpse of what could be possible when the vital role of the civil and public services was briefly recognised. It also showed how the state can be transformative, act with urgency, and coordinate resources for the public good. Key civil service departments had to rapidly adapt for example in delivering the Coronavirus Job Retention or furlough scheme and benefit changes. Factory production lines, in consultation with unions, were quickly repurposed to produce ventilators or PPE equipment.

Now there is also the increasingly pressing challenge to respond to of climate change and biodiversity loss. Unfortunately we have politicians so hostile to public and democratic institutions, that it promotes inefficiency and profit making at the expense of organising the civil and public services in a way that can lead on the rapid and far reaching action that we need to address the climate crisis.

This is why we urgently need to develop an alternative vision and call for a radical rethink about how the machinery of government is configured to achieve our climate change and biodiversity targets. At the heart of this is the proposal for a National Climate Change and Biodiversity Service which for the rest of this pamphlet we will refer to simply as the National Climate Service (NCS).

Climate jobs and the case for a National Climate Service

In the spring of 2009, the Campaign Against Climate Change trade union group (CACCTU) conference conceived the idea to produce a report calling for the creation of climate jobs as a response to the environmental and economic crisis.

Through a collaboration of trade unionists, academics, and environmental activists, the first One Million Climate Jobs Report was published later that year.

A climate job is clearly defined as a job that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions, rather than existing jobs in environmental services for example. New climate jobs would be purposefully created by the government in renewable energy, retrofit and insulation, skills and training, transport, agriculture and so on.

“We want something more like the way the government used to run the National Health Service. In effect, the government sets up a National Climate Service and the new NCS employs staff to do the work that needs to be done. That way we can be sure it is done. Given what the scientists are telling us, we need to be sure.” CACCTU, 1MCJs report 2009.

While the climate jobs report has had a few updates since then, a central demand for the creation of a National Climate Service, based on the NHS, remains.

PCS was at the forefront of developing the climate jobs campaign but until 2022, we had given little thought to what a National Climate Service could look like in practice. Following Annual Delegate Conference (ADC) that year which mandated the union to promote the creation of a National Climate Service, we decided to start looking at this in more detail. This led to a motion passed by

ADC in 2023 (A13) which called on the NEC:

“...to work up a plan, to be published as soon as possible after this ADC, which sets out how the UK Civil Service can be organized to deliver net zero. This should be done in partnership with the devolved administrations, councils, and other democratic structures within the country. As part of this, the union should set out proposals for a National Climate Change Service – an operational arm of the civil service staffed by UK civil servants, to deliver key aspects of a decarbonisation plan.”

The union is now in the process of starting to develop this plan.

A civil and public service workers' plan

PCS members across the civil and public services, including outsourced areas, have a wealth of knowledge, experience and expertise that cover all areas of the economy. Nothing happens without civil servants, whether in Westminster departments, or devolved nations.

Ultimately, policies of government will be designed and delivered with the involvement of many of our members. Whether in areas more directly involved in work aimed at tackling the climate and biodiversity crisis, or in HMRC or job centres. And many feel passionate about taking real action within Government to reach our targets on greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity.

Unfortunately, despite the UK Parliament declaring a climate emergency in 2019, and a deepening climate crisis, report after report from across Government tells us that there is little to no coordination across departments, and no cohesive plan to do what's needed.

The Committee on Climate Change June 2023 report expressed more concern saying that their “confidence in the UK meeting its goals from 2030 onwards is now markedly less than it was in our previous assessment a year ago.”¹

This is why a national climate and biodiversity service is so important. Current policy for driving forward action on climate change and biodiversity is spread across different departments and there is no one body charged with making sure what needs to happen is happening. This means taking a lead role in overseeing energy transition, decarbonisation of buildings – residential and public, electrification of our transport system, waste management and the circular economy, agriculture, and so on.

This is more than re-arranging the climate and biodiversity deck chairs into a new super department. In developing his proposals for a National Health Service, Bevin wrote:

“As I see it, the undertaking to provide all people with all kinds of health care, using virtually the whole of the medical and other health professions to do it, creates an entirely new situation and calls for something bolder than a mere extension and adaptation of existing services.”

Something bolder is exactly what we mean.

The aim is to focus on key sectors, bringing them under full public ownership, in order to design the programmes needed at scale, and employing the necessary workforce, with retraining and reskilling where required. In short, creating the jobs needed – properly paid and unionised jobs – to undertake the huge tasks facing us to rapidly decarbonise our economy and restore our natural world.

This includes setting up publicly owned companies such as in construction similar to

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the building and maintenance arm which was in place until the 1990’s. This employed thousands of electricians, engineers, architects, general construction workers etc, all on civil service terms and all unionised.

Carrying this out under public ownership is important as only government can undertake the level of planning and coordination needed at a national scale, with delivery focussed at a local, regional or devolved level. The endless flip flopping of policy over the years has seen a stop-start on initiatives with workers trained up to only then lose their jobs as policies change such as in the solar power sector in 2016 when subsidy cuts saw 12,000 jobs disappear overnight.²

However, even with policy certainty, we cannot rely on markets or private actors to drive such an ambitious programme. We know already from the renewable energy transition for example, the focus is on return on investments i.e. profits, rather than on social or environmental aims.

Public ownership is also important as we want to ensure the institutions are in place that will provide real social protections and support for workers as we transition into a new decarbonised economy. This means financial as well as training/re-skilling support funded by government in liaison with further

1. Better transparency is no substitute for real delivery – Climate Change Committee (theccc.org.uk)

2. UK Solar power industry loses over 12,000 jobs after Government slashes subsidies | The Independent | The Independent

education colleges, and our members working in job centres who will have a key role in delivering a just transition policy.

Public ownership itself is not a guarantee therefore democratic control and accountability is an important part of how this is set up. This would include a role for workers/trade unions, citizens, environmental groups etc.

PCS alone cannot devise such a plan but we are the best placed to get this started. However this initiative needs wide support from both sister unions, and allies in the climate and environmental movement.

What's next and how can you get involved?

To take this forward, we need the widest possible discussion. We have already commissioned a report from the Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU) at the University of Greenwich to help shape our thinking. This is not a blueprint but a starting point.

Therefore we welcome meeting other groups to explain what we are doing, and to hear your thoughts.

After forty years of neo-liberal capitalism, hollowing out of our public services, privatisation, and outsourcing, we realise that our ideas may seem idealistic. However as we point out above with the example of the civil service construction function, what seems impossible today, was the previously the norm.

It is also important as the attack on so called 'green-policy' is increasingly being framed by the right-wing as a threat to individual liberties and a cost on already hard-pressed working classes. These are the same anti-

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green lobbyists or climate deniers who have derided and decimated our civil and public services over the past forty years and are only acting in their own class interests.

The plan we are developing is not just one of hope but one of justice – economic, social, environmental and political justice. Therefore in developing the NCS, it is equally an exercise of political education to show that not only is there an alternative, but that we have the collective power to make this happen if we can recognise and build our confidence to push for radical change.

If you want to know more and get involved, please contact us at: green@pcs.org.uk

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