

Co-leaders Autumn Conference speech 2022



30 September 2022

CARLA DENYER

Thanks so much for the fantastic welcome. It's great to be here in Harrogate. Thank you to Arnold for the kind introduction and to our chief executive Mary, for setting out so clearly our way forward as a party.

Every one of us knows this is a crunch moment for our country and for us as Greens. The next general election is critical, so whether that be in a few months or two years away – we intend to lead our party in making the absolute most of that opportunity and showing people the pathway to a Fairer Greener Country.

And after this week, good lord, the UK needs it.

What is this government doing?

It's been a week of complete chaos from a prime minister and a chancellor who have been in post less than a month.

Inflation rising higher and faster than we've seen in years.

The value of the pound at a record low.

A humiliating intervention from the IMF.

In pubs and gyms, staff rooms and supermarket queues everyone is talking about it – there is panic. Over mortgage rates, the prospect of lost pensions, over yet more spiralling costs.

And for what?

So that the Tories can give tax cuts to their mates. 45 billion pounds back

for the 1% at the top of the pile. They like it – everyone else can lump it.

Not only are the Tories incompetent – let's put paid to the now laughable notion that they are 'good on the economy' – but they're also clearly *committed* to deepening inequality in this country.

They want the rich to get richer and it's no skin off their noses if the poor stay poor.

We don't think that's fair.

And while Liz Truss may struggle to find the words to defend the government's actions, we won't be staying silent about that unfairness.

To the Prime Minister we say – listen to the people, listen to the experts, choose evidence-based policy over fanatical ideology, and reverse your tax cuts for the rich.

Borrowing billions just so that bankers can have their bonus back is not how you run an economy.

ADRIAN RAMSAY

So let's talk more about fairness.

It's something we teach our children about when they're really young.

Whether it's not cheating at monopoly or making sure everyone gets a turn at snakes and ladders.

I have shown my own children why we don't stamp on other people's sandcastles and that sharing out the chocolate buttons is the right thing to do.

The fundamentals of fairness are at the heart of how we raise our children, whether we're parents or Aunties, granddads or family friends. We know the value of fairness and we want our kids to know it too.

And yet, in the most critical parts of our society – our healthcare, our economy, in the provision of our absolute essentials; public services, energy, water – and in our *democracy* – the concept of fairness has gone completely out of the window.

The reality in our country is that the biggest issue we face is inequality. And that's not an accident: it's a consequence of over a decade of government by a Tory party that refuses to accept that inequality is a harm in itself, and that reducing it should be at the very heart of good government.

The politicians in charge are in effect, cheating at monopoly and stamping on our sandcastles.

And the Tory commitment to inequality we've witnessed this week isn't new.

From the deep, cutting austerity of the Cameron years.

To Theresa May telling struggling nurses “there is no magic money tree”

To Boris Johnson’s refusal to keep the £20 Universal credit uplift.

It’s all paved the way to where we are today. In chaos. Because whoever the leader, the Tories are a party that rewards their wealthy members and donors and doesn’t give a damn for the rest of us.

CARLA

And nowhere is this unfairness – this inequality – more apparent than in the cost of living scandal.

We know that inflation hurts the poorest the most – as those with the least spend a greater chunk of their income on the basics.

We don’t need to look any further than the supermarket shelves to see spiralling costs:

Bread up 17%

A packet of rice up 15%

Pasta up 50%

Everywhere people turn they’re seeing the things they need increasingly priced out of reach. And when it comes to energy – the situation is critical. In fact, it’s terrifying – and it demands immediate action.

A few months ago I met a group of elderly residents in the St Pauls area of Bristol – members of the Windrush Generation. Everyone I spoke to was already doing all they could to keep their bills down – more efficient appliances, thick curtains, turning down the temperature on their boiler, but they’re facing yet more price hikes and are running out of options.

ADRIAN

And it’s not just in Bristol.

What we’re seeing across the country is a deepening cost of living scandal.

Where councils are forced to create ‘warm spaces’ to keep people from freezing in their own homes.

Where the Citizens Advice bureau is inundated with caller after caller facing mounting debt.

And, where a small fraction of people – the profiteers, the company bosses and the dodgy landlords – keep making unimaginable sums of money while the rest of us suffer.

In 2022, in a wealthy country like the UK, we shouldn’t be asking people to make these humiliating choices.

To accept a situation that has been caused by a failed energy policy and a decade of economic mismanagement.

They want us to think that this unfairness is inevitable. That there is no alternative. But you and I know that just isn't true. This unfairness is a choice.

So let's look at the action the government has taken on energy.

In the weeks before the price cap freeze was announced, people all over the UK had been raising their voices, demanding emergency action. We put out our own proposal to make sure energy was affordable and I'm proud that helped push the government to conclude something had to be done.

Because below the surface of this energy crisis is a whole system that's critically unfair – built with layer upon layer of corporate profit baked in, and shareholders skimming off a reward at every level.

So while freezing bills was needed – the Government should have demanded something in return for the billions going to energy firms. This was the chance to take our rightful share from the companies who have been fleecing us for far too long.

Instead, what we're seeing is billions poured into corporate coffers. Bills frozen until – conveniently – just after a potential next general election – and absolutely no action to address the underlying causes of the energy crisis.

They could have – should have – gone so much further. And the Green Party would do, right now.

CARLA

We've got the leakiest homes in Europe – losing huge amounts of energy through badly sealed windows and poorly lined walls. We could be saving hundreds, thousands of pounds through insulation – reducing energy wastage, cutting bills and emissions. It really isn't rocket science. The cheapest bill is the one you don't have to pay.

We still rely heavily on fossil fuels to provide our energy despite renewables like solar and wind being significantly cheaper and greener.

So what's the solution?

We would introduce – immediately – an emergency tax package which would mean polluting companies and the very richest 1% of households contribute more, to fund a nationwide insulation and renewable energy programme, creating warmer, more comfortable homes and bringing bills down for good.

Rather than the Tories' feeble Windfall Tax, full of loopholes for the oil and gas industry, our Dirty Profits Tax would raise billions and accelerate the transition to renewable energy.

Instead of freezing the price cap at current high levels as the Conservatives, Labour and the Lib Dems want to do, rates that are *still* unaffordable for so many households, we would roll it back to where it was last October.

And we would bring the Big 5 energy retailers into public ownership, because only the government can make an intervention of this scale and ensure that we come out of this crisis more resilient and greener by insulating homes and transitioning towards renewables.

And there's even more practical, tangible things that could be done right now to make energy bills more affordable.

Remove standing charges which penalise households who are trying to keep their energy usage down.

Break the link between electricity and gas prices, to end the absurd situation where even when electricity is being generated cheaply from renewables, everyone pays the much higher cost of electricity produced by gas power stations. Imagine that in any other sector – one baker in a very expensive part of West London sells bread for £8 a loaf, so every bakery in the UK has to sell bread for the same price. Ridiculous.

And so the immediate answers *are* there, and so are the longer term solutions to the crises we face around the cost of living and the climate.

ADRIAN

The UK hosted the COP climate conference last year – remember that?

The former prime minister made commitment after commitment to action on the climate and yet here we are, with the climate and nature emergency clearly at the bottom of the government's agenda.

We are told this is because attention has turned *instead* to the cost of living crisis, that Britain has neither the time nor inclination to be distracted by the green stuff.

No. People aren't stupid – they can see that these two crises – the ones that keep us up at night – go hand in hand, and so do the solutions.

While the weather here in Harrogate today is wet – it's just a few months since this country was gripped by extreme, headline making heat. But beyond the keeping cool tips and photos of people at the beach – was a picture of a natural world in turmoil.

40 degrees. In Britain. It still doesn't sound right, does it? Yet as pensioners suffered in their homes, and critical infrastructure ground to a halt – we know that worse is yet to come. It exposed that as a country we're simply not prepared for the extremes of weather that will now become more common.

And that for the sake of lives and livelihoods we need all levels of

government to focus on ways of adapting to the changes that are already a certainty and act on commitments to tackle the climate emergency.

And that goes for the global picture too.

Pakistan has seen record levels of flooding this year with over 1400 lives lost and hundreds of thousands more devastated.

In Somalia a catastrophic drought has displaced more than a million people from their homes.

The warnings – if you can call them that – keep on coming and they continue to be ignored on a global and national scale. Rich countries including ours are failing in their duty to provide the necessary funding to the global south to deal with the dreadful impact of changes to the climate.

And policies at home are taking us in completely the wrong direction.

The removal of the fracking ban – fracking! Which communities have successfully campaigned so hard against, and won. Only for this to be bulldozed over by a government that doesn't care.

More drilling for oil and gas in the North sea. Flying in the face of any net zero strategy.

And, it's no overstatement to say that our natural environment is under direct threat from our own government.

Tearing up planning protections for wildlife habitats and water quality, once again favouring property developers over green spaces and local people.

Scrapping UK environmental protections that have been in place for decades. And removing their own so-called 'Brexit bonus' payment for farmers to manage the countryside for the benefit of wildlife.

Allowing water companies to pollute our beaches and rivers with sewage.

Conservationists and charities have come out hard against this destructive, dangerous set of actions because they know the harm they'll do. They understand that if nothing changes the consequences will be disastrous.

It's no wonder then that more and more voters from rural areas – traditional Conservative areas – are turning to the Greens as the only party willing to protect the environment and their communities.

CARLA

So then to our public services. The basics, the things we need for everyday life.

It's not just energy we want to bring into public hands, but our water and our railways too.

The current systems are out of date, falling apart, not fit for purpose – and

yet bills and fares rise while efficiency plummets.

For the past 40 years we have been sold a political ideology obsessed with deregulation, market freedom, and the government not interfering. Not just the Conservatives but also Labour governments have subscribed to the idea that public services and basic human rights run for private profit is the way forward – but look where that's landed us.

The privatisation of our major public services has been an acute and painful failure – one that continues. A lack of state influence in our economy hasn't made things more competitive, it hasn't made things more efficient and it has not lowered prices.

The Green Party wants to see these crucial services – energy, water, transport – back in public hands where they belong. Where decisions are made for the good of you and your family, for people – not to line the pockets of shareholders.

With these policies – and our core aim to transform society for the benefit of all – it is no surprise that former Labour voters are finding their home with us.

ADRIAN

And then there's healthcare. Nowhere is the need for services to remain in public hands more acute than in our health service. Underfunding and selling off parts of our NHS have led to chronic staff shortages, soaring waiting times and a hugely demoralised workforce. There are 6.8 million people on NHS waiting lists – people living in pain, struggling through daily life – waiting months and years for treatment.

When I met the General Secretary of the Royal College of Nursing a few weeks ago the stories she told me were harrowing. Severe staff shortages meaning that hospital wards are massively overstretched – there are currently 50,000 nursing vacancies in this country. Nurses frequently having to stay hours beyond the end of their shift while their children wait for them to get home. And even more shockingly, hospitals having to provide washing machines at work and nurses relying on foodbanks because so many are struggling to get by on what they are paid. Truly disgraceful and heartbreaking.

The NHS is in a crisis.

And yes it's a crisis of funding.

And yes it's a crisis of privatisation and outsourcing.

But it's also a crisis of inequality – and of an economic system that makes people sick.

We know that a wider gap between rich and poor leads to worse physical and mental health. And we know that working all hours of the day for jobs that pay poverty wages damages wellbeing.

And so the Green Party wants a properly funded NHS and a social care service that's free at the point of use.

But those things alone aren't enough.

We need an economic system that prioritises wellbeing, where targets are set to reduce inequality, not just pursue endless growth.

CARLA

It is easy to see why nurses, midwives, teachers, public transport workers, posties, all of our key workers, want to make their voices heard – why they're calling out the overworking, underfunding and real terms pay cuts that astonishingly means some of them are becoming homeless despite having full time jobs.

Cleaners, engineers, and barristers...are saying enough is enough. Because the conditions they find themselves in just aren't fair.

Working people are taking the really hard decision to walk out of the jobs they love, because they feel they have no choice but to take a stand – yes for their pay but also to safeguard standards of patient care already dangerously eroded, to ensure justice is done, and to make our rail network safe.

Like all of us, these workers, who are keeping our country moving and healthy and educated and connected – deserve decent pay and they also deserve to feel that they can do their jobs properly without being undermined and forced to cut corners by a system that cares more about profit than either them or the people they serve.

Bringing and keeping *our* public services in public hands is at the centre of the Green Party offer. Why?

Because it's practical and it's common sense. And most of all – it's fair.

ADRIAN

The way things are right now – the money and the power in our society are in all the wrong places.

Oil and gas companies flourish – families struggle to pay their bills.

Billionaires get tax cuts – nurses head to food banks.

Rich people are getting richer and everyone else is getting poorer, and more anxious and the new prime minister is – as we suspected – doing everything she can to maintain that status quo. She has doubled down on the Tories' lack of compassion and awareness for people's real life concerns as the cost of living crisis is allowed to continue and gather pace.

This government is nothing short of dangerous.

Whereas, at the Green Party we are in the business of common sense, of practical solutions and of putting people and our planet first.

CARLA

And that's why the people in this room and the millions around this country who have already found their home with us, are gearing up for the next general election. To get more Greens in parliament pushing for the fair action that's so desperately needed during this cost of living crisis and to tackle the climate emergency.

In May we gained a record number of new Councillors, taking seats in Tory strongholds and Labour heartlands. We pulled that off because of our unity, our shared belief in fairness. And our focus on the issues that most impact people's lives – economic inequality and the climate emergency.

We will take that drive and ambition, that shared belief into the next General Election, securing more of the Green MPs this country so desperately needs.

I can say that so confidently because we have a powerful far-reaching network of people, united by their passion to bring about a fairer, greener society, and ready to make it happen. To knock on doors, post leaflets, to be hands-on – delivering for their communities. Without them – without you – our members and supporters, this party couldn't hope to achieve its political goals. But with you, with us all pulling together, we know it is possible.

ADRIAN

So, parents, and grandmas and teachers and uncles will go on teaching our children about the difference between right and wrong. About not stamping on other people's sandcastles or cheating at monopoly.

And we, by getting Greens elected, can set about changing the rules of the game so that the banker doesn't always win.

Because we think – we know – that for a society to thrive, it has to be fair.

Thank you.

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