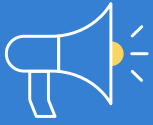


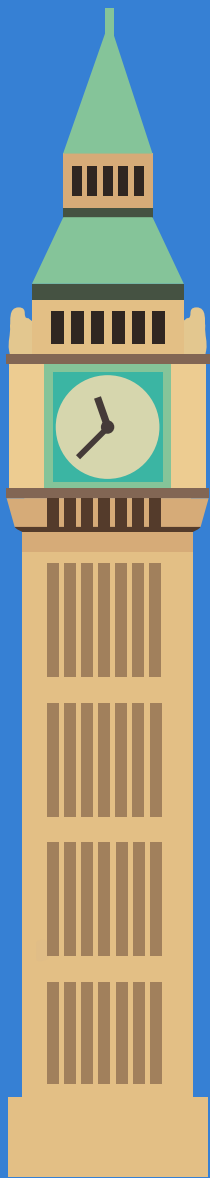
The new energy Secretary

Claire Coutinho appointed Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero

2023



Claire Coutinho MP was appointed Secretary of State for Energy and Net Zero on the 31 August 2023. She replaces Grant Shapps, who has been appointed Secretary of State for Defence following the resignation of the previous Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace. Before this appointment, Coutinho was the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Families and Wellbeing, and an MP for the East Surrey constituency.



Political Outlook

Claire Coutinho's appointment to the cabinet is unlikely to provoke any seismic change in the UK's Net Zero and energy policy. With Grant Shapps viewed by Downing Street and CCHQ as one of the Conservative Party's best communicators, his move away from the department may indicate a shift of focus away from energy and net zero before the next election, with a focus instead on defence and national security in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Coutinho is a renowned proponent of Brexit, whilst also being a former member of the Conservative Environment Network (CEN), who describe themselves as an "independent forum for conservatives in the UK and around the world who support net zero, nature restoration and resource security". Her appointment is a big win for the CEN, who are one of the largest and historically influential policy organisations within the Conservative parliamentary party and will now hope to have another supportive voice within the Cabinet. CEN will hope to further their mission to support "science-based environmental action, which empowers individuals and harnesses the power of the free market to protect the environment".

Coutinho is also on the advisory board of centre right think-tank, Onward, which focuses on economic and social policy, as well as modernising the Conservative Party. Her outlook is broadly consistent with Onward's stated values of conservatism that "recognises the value of markets, supported by a streamlined state that is active not absent ~ unapologetic about standing up to vested interests, putting power closer to people, and supporting the hardworking and aspirational".

What does this mean for policy?

There is unlikely to be a major change in energy policy for the government. Given Coutinho operated as a backbench MP for an unusually brief period of time, there is little evidence available to analyse her difference of opinion with the government's track record on environmental issues. Nevertheless, in her maiden speech in 2020, Coutinho championed the offshore wind sector in the UK, whilst her links to CEN demonstrate a longstanding commitment to enhancing both the UK's renewable energy and nuclear energy sectors. CEN particularly have been vocal proponents of the UK's onshore wind potential, and they may now have an avenue through which to pursue that in the cabinet. Onward also supports loosening the current public opinion constraints on UK onshore wind, in part by mandating investment in local communities in an attempt to offset the local impact of wind turbines.

Whilst the loss of Shapps will be a blow to the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero's communications prowess, it does not necessarily mean that the government are taking the issue less seriously internally. Since the relative success of the Uxbridge and South Ruislip by-election on an anti-ULEZ platform, it has been suggested that the Government may be planning to abandon many of its environmental commitments in an effort to stoke a 'culture war' on the issue. Whilst government environmental commitments may become less of a media focus, this is unlikely to be the case from a policy standpoint. The Net Zero Scrutiny Group, made up of the more environmentally sceptic wing of the Conservative Party, is dwarfed in both size and influence by the eco-conscious Conservative Environment Network, demonstrating where the strength of sentiment lies within the party itself in terms of policy.



What does this mean for your projects?

As we get closer to a general election, Coutinho is a non-disruptive appointment that is unlikely to greatly impact your projects. She will likely represent a continuation of current government policy as a long-time close ally of Sunak.

However, Coutinho has earned a reputation as a competent administrator, capable of handling complex and challenging briefs. Thus, your projects may benefit from a Department for Energy Security and Net Zero that is professionally and efficiently organised.



Political Career

Coutinho ran for the East Surrey constituency in the November 2019 election, a Conservative seat at every election since 1918, and highlighting the faith the party had put in her. She was quickly appointed as a Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) at the Treasury and joined the advisory board of Onward in early 2020.

Coutinho resigned as a PPS following the Pincher scandal in 2022. Allegations of sexual misconduct relating to Chris Pincher MP, then Deputy Chief Whip, emerged that the government initially claimed to have no prior knowledge of before his appointment, and which subsequently turned out not to be the case. She then supported Rishi Sunak in the subsequent leadership contest following Boris Johnson's resignation.

She was appointed as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People, Health and Work by Prime Minister Liz Truss in September 2022, before being promoted to Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Families and Wellbeing by Rishi Sunak in October 2022 when he became Prime Minister.

Her appointment as Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero means that she is the first MP of the 2019 intake to join the cabinet and becomes one of a small group of post-war cabinet ministers to be under 40 years of age.

Personal Background

Claire Coutinho is a London-born Conservative MP whose parents emigrated from India in the 1970s and are of Goan Christian heritage. Her parents both have a medical background and sent Claire to James Allen's Girl's School in Dulwich, from where she went on to study mathematics and philosophy at Oxford University. She worked as an associate at the investment bank, Merrill Lynch, for four years after leaving education before joining the Centre for Social Justice and becoming a programme director at the Housing and Finance Institute. She subsequently moved to KPMG before becoming a Special Adviser at the Treasury, initially under Julian Smith before joining Rishi Sunak who, at that time, was Chief Secretary to the Treasury.



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