

Tory MP escapes discipline over anti-windfarm comments

Written by Darren

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The Conservative party has said it has no plans to discipline Chris Heaton-Harris for plotting with a Telegraph columnist to help him stand as an anti-windfarm candidate in the Corby byelection, even though the MP was the official agent for the Tory campaign in the constituency.

After speaking to Heaton-Harris and watching the video evidence, Tory officials said they wanted to focus on the big issues, but admitted he had been silly.

The home secretary, Theresa May, said he had been guilty only of silly bragging, prompting the renewable energy industry to describe the party's response as beyond belief.

The Labour leader, Ed Miliband, said the episode showed that the Tory Corby campaign had become a shambles.

Michael Dugher MP, Labour's vice-chair, added: "Even the Tory campaign manager doesn't think people should be supporting the Conservative candidate. If Chris Heaton-Harris doesn't have faith in the Tory candidate and his party, the public shouldn't. Last week the Tories withdrew the whip from Nadine Dorries for going on I'm A Celebrity. For a Tory MP to support a rival candidate in a byelection in order to try to change government policy is surely an even more serious betrayal of his party. David Cameron should show some leadership."

The columnist James Delingpole stood down as a candidate after the energy minister, John Hayes, gave an interview in the Daily Mail declaring the end for onshore windfarms.

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Heaton-Harris has apologised for the impression he gave when being secretly filmed by Greenpeace activists posing as anti-windfarm campaigners. The decision not to discipline Heaton-Harris two days before the byelection may reflect the proximity of polling day but also the popularity of the MP and his anti-windfarm cause on the Tory backbenches.

The Labour peer Lord Foulkes accused Heaton-Harris of trying to sabotage his own government's policy and claimed the government's energy policy had descended into yet another coalition shambles.

The government energy spokesman in the Lords, Lady Verma, refused to comment on Heaton-Harris's remarks or whether she had recently said she regarded her brief as a load of hot air.

Lord Cormack, another Tory peer, sprang to Hayes's defence, saying when the minister said "enough is enough he echoed the feelings of many people throughout this country and we believe he is a hero".

The decision not to discipline Heaton-Harris will be taken by opposition parties as a further sign that the mood against renewable energy is now so deep in the Tory party that Downing Street does not have the political strength, or will, to rein it in.

The decision also left Hayes unscathed since the Tories believe there is no documentary evidence that he gave an unauthorised interview to the Mail marking the end of onshore windfarms as part of a conspiracy in which Delingpole would stand down as a candidate in Corby.

Hayes was ordered by the energy secretary, Ed Davey, not to make the speech but was not informed that Hayes had given an interview with the Mail which was then lifted by the Telegraph.

Within hours of the Hayes interview hitting the streets, Delingpole appeared on the BBC's Daily Politics show to declare he could stand down as a candidate since he had won his battle to

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prevent any more windfarms being built in the UK. Hayes has yet to say if he spoke to either Delingpole or Heaton-Harris about what they were doing in Corby, or about the contents or timing of his speech.

The episode leaves the Department of Energy riven between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives, a dispute that is threatening billions in renewable investment. Simon Hughes, the Liberal Democrat deputy leader, said: "Some Conservatives are clearly so hell-bent on disrupting the coalition's green agenda that they're prepared to stab their own candidates in the back to do it. The coalition's position on windfarms and green energy will not change because the Liberal Democrats will not let it. We are committed to making this the greenest government ever.

"The Conservatives should be in no doubt, we will hold them to their promises on the environment."

On Channel 4 News on Tuesday night Hayes said: "In respect of onshore wind, with what is built, what is consented and with a small proportion of what is in the planning system, we will have reached our ambition in respect of our renewable target. End of story."

The Department of Energy then issued a statement saying its policy "was to have targets in the future for renewable energy and no decision has been made on what proportion of that energy will come from different sources".

The statement was designed to show that windfarms may be needed to meet carbon reductions post 2020.

The RenewableUK deputy chief executive Maf Smith said: "The energy minister's comments risk undermining investor confidence, jeopardising much-needed renewable energy projects and the many thousands of jobs they would create throughout the UK. This is a deliberate attempt to recklessly re-write coalition policy just before the most significant government intervention in the energy markets for a generation – the publication of the energy bill later this month.

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"The energy secretary, Edward Davey, has made it clear that Hayes's views do not represent government policy, and the prime minister has offered reassurances that government policy on renewables remains unchanged.

"As for Chris Heaton-Harris campaigning behind his party's back on behalf of a rival, it beggars belief that such behaviour should pass unnoticed by his leader.

"It is now critical that [David] Cameron stops this policy brinkmanship and sends a clear message to all investors that his government is absolutely committed to providing stability for the entire energy sector – otherwise investment could be lost in all forms of power generation, not just in renewables. On matters as crucial as keeping the lights on and homes warm while tackling climate change, we cannot afford to play 'push-me-pull-you' politics."

Caroline Flint, the shadow energy secretary, responded to Hayes's "end of story" remarks saying: "Onshore wind power is the cheapest and most developed form of clean energy, with the potential to create thousands of badly needed new jobs in Britain. But government splits are undermining this key growth industry and putting Britain's energy security at risk.

"David Cameron promised to lead the 'greenest government ever' but his failure to control his own ministers and MPs is scaring away investors and job-creators in the clean energy industry."

In the Lords, Lord Lawson called on the government to abandon the energy bill altogether.