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A Pragmatic Energy policy for the UK

by

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“Energy is the life blood of civilisation; without a secure supply we slide into anarchy and barbarism” IF

Over the next decade more than one third of our electricity generating capacity will be retired; that is some 23GW of ageing coal, nuclear and oil-fired stations. What will replace them? Not new nuclear stations which cannot be built in time despite the recently rekindled Government enthusiasm for nuclear power. New clean, coal-fired power stations could, but there is a strong environmental lobby opposing their construction; renewable electricity, particularly wind, has been advocated as the solution, but the Government’s own figures (BERR 2008) show that we cannot expect more than 14 per cent renewable electricity by 2020, well short of the published targets. The outlook is bleak. The default position is to build more gas-fired power stations, which can be built reasonably quickly but that locks us into an even greater reliance on imported, expensive natural gas for our electricity supply which compromises our energy security.

There are already plans to build 9GW of new gas-fired generation; no doubt more will follow as stalemate occurs with new coal, and yet more procrastination over carbon capture and storage technology (CCS) which could transform the prospect of CO₂-free coal generation, but a demonstration plant will not be available before 2014, if then. Time is running out.

The Government is belatedly realising that a market-led energy policy will neither deliver a secure electricity supply nor protect the environment from climate change. Matters are not helped by those politicians that boast that the UK leads the way in Europe, whereas we are third from the bottom in the renewable energy league table and CO₂ emissions are higher now than when the Labour Party came to power in 1997. Even more worrying and paradoxical is the statement by the Energy Minister, Mike O’Brien on the Today programme (November 12) that despite stark warnings from industry and figures on the Government’s own websites, not only will the lights not go out by 2015 but they will shine more brightly. There seems to be a hopeless mismatch between political rhetoric and engineering reality. For informed consumers it is like watching a slow motion train crash.

How can we address first the **short term** problem, the impending energy gap opening up in the middle of the next decade and then develop a **longer term** strategy to meet the “challenging” target of an 80 per cent reduction in CO₂ emissions, running up to 2050?

We need to commission the equivalent of two new power stations every year through the next vulnerable decade. As an emergency measure the lives of some of the nuclear stations due to be decommissioned over the next few

years could be extended but at some considerable cost. In the same way, coal stations due to close by 2015 because they will not meet the new EU emission targets could be kept going, but this will attract large fines from the EU.

New electrical connections to Norway and Germany and a second line to France could give us the added security of being part of the European super-grid and they could be laid relatively quickly, within three years.

Gas storage facilities should be markedly increased as a matter of urgency; we lag far behind our European neighbours and this exposes us to the volatility of the gas market. "Electricity from waste" incinerators could be built around large conurbations and provide substantial generating capacity (as well as easing the landfill problem). Improved energy efficiency via much tougher building regulation could also play a part. The supply infrastructure must be strengthened to make these actions workable.

These suggestions are not new but need to be part of a strategic plan which must be implemented urgently. It will require Government intervention and real political will.

In the **longer term**, post 2020, nuclear power will come into its own and a mix of renewables, not just wind, (the Severn Barrage for example) will stand alongside gas and coal-fired generation with carbon capture (CCS) in place. It will be expensive and if we are to even approach 80 per cent reduction of CO₂ by 2050, all CO₂-free electricity, including nuclear, should attract a premium to encourage its installation.

Action, not yet more consultation, is required now if we are to implement a workable, pragmatic energy policy. Recovery of our weakened economy depends upon it.

"A Pragmatic Energy Policy for the UK", which includes "A Route Map to Energy Survival in the UK" can be downloaded from www.fellsassociates.com.

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