

A bad Energy bill Conservative Home article

Over the last week there has been a big row about the state of some school buildings. More than thirty years ago various local Education Authorities and schools built some facilities using a porous type of cement. Subsequently there has been professional advice made public that this material can fail after a few decades of use. All professionals involved with building construction and maintenance have known that if they are responsible for any such buildings they need to be regularly checked, strengthened if there are signs of deterioration or replaced in serious cases.

A worried Minister and senior officials in the Department for Education were concerned at the lack of actions over these buildings and so sent round a questionnaire, drawing attention to the issue and seeking to find out what was going on. The law provides for local responsibilities under the devolved framework for education. The Local Education Authorities and the Governors and senior managers of the state schools are responsible for the upkeep and safety of their buildings. Where an LEA school has subsequently become an Academy Trust the responsibility switched to the Trust though the Trust may well expect the LEA to assist where it took over buildings that contained this concrete without a proper disclosure by the LEA.

It is a bizarre row that the Opposition are making, saying it is for the government to reveal its list of schools with problems, when the government's Information comes from the schools and the schools have to follow up and remedy the issues. Surely the burden of disclosure rests with the LEAs and the schools who must know which schools are at risk and what they are doing about. The big majority of schools can today put on social media a simple statement they have none of this concrete. The ones that do have it should put out a fuller statement saying how they have handled the issue and if there are any consequences for lessons next week. Ministers have not visited most of these schools and do not know the condition of the buildings. They do not control the maintenance budgets and contracts. The whole idea of localism is to get these kind of decisions taken by people on the spot who work or visit the buildings regularly and understand the issues. Ministers can of course as they did in this case highlight possible problems for local Councils and institutions to resolve, but Ministers should be careful not to assume control and with it responsibility. What is the point of all the cost and personnel involved in local government and school government if they do not even mend the roof?

The government is generally in danger of trying to do much and intervening too often, often at great expense. The Energy Bill is another good example. This Bill sets out a course for large scale spending on carbon capture and storage. This will need to be highly subsidised, or if charged to customers will be a further ratchet in the UK's high energy prices, forcing more UK industry to close and more imports to replace it. The idea behind carbon capture is if money is spent harvesting CO₂ and storing it in old gas wells the UK could burn a bit more fossil fuel in the knowledge that the extra CO₂ that produced will be taken out of the air by the carbon storage

system.

There are several problems with this idea. If other countries do not do the same the UK is left with dearer energy. We will make less and import more. World CO2 volumes will increase by at least all the extra CO2 long haul transport from abroad for the goods may generate, and may increase further because for example the goods come from China still burning a lot of coal in its energy mix. The extra costs will in the first instance attract substantial government subsidies and spending, putting more upwards pressure on interest rates and limiting the scope for tax cuts. If at the same time as putting in carbon storage the government continues to run down UK produced gas and imports more LNG that will also raise CO2 output worldwide as LNG generates so much more CO2 than North Sea gas down a pipe.

It is a bad idea that the UK should allocate £20 billion spending to this technology before competitors agree to adopt it and at a time when total public spending is too high. The Energy Bill contains other interventions that will damage UK busines and cost too much. The government is wrong to take heavy handed powers to make people insulate their homes or adopt particular heating and transport technologies. The market is best placed to develop great green products. Like smartphones and on line shopping green products will sell themselevs when they cut our energy bills and give us a better life. Create a good framework for setting up and growing a business, with lower taxes to attract corporate investment. That would progress the green revolution better than hundreds of pages of restrictive regulation, windfall taxes and imposition on individuals.

Governments can try to do too much. When it tries to back winners it often finds losers apply for the money. When it tells people what to do and what to buy it builds up their resentment and is often self defeating. When government seeks to cut carbon dioxide output in the UK it usually boosts it globally by requiring CO2 heavy imports. When it seeks to help devolved governments and institutions who have not sort out their own problems it just ends up taking the blame for their failings. The government should learn from the bad misjudgment of the Mayor of London to tax older vans and cars, leading to a rush of lawbreaking with many attacks on much hated cameras.