

An energy strategy

There are some good developments as the government seeks to change energy policy. There is rightly much more attention to security of supply, and to the need to develop our own energy sources to eliminate reliance on imports. There is an understanding that for the next few years most UK people will have petrol or diesel cars and vans, and will heat their homes with gas or oil or solid fuel boilers. For the period of transition prior to many more people heating and travelling with electricity there needs to be a reliable supply of oil and gas at affordable prices. The strategy accepts that we need to use more of our own oil and gas from the North Sea. There is a review of onshore gas. The best answer to the issues that poses is to adopt a model which allows any community or landowner to say No to drilling, but to allow communities willing to see such developments a share of the turnover or profits or offer them free or discounted energy.

For the longer term the government favours a major commitment to nuclear. There has been a long history this century of PMs wanting more nuclear only to find it is watered down and delayed by a range of forces against. The best hope the government has of changing this is probably to back the development here of a suitable small modular reactor that can be produced at scale mainly in factories and assembled on site with suitable substantial concrete workings for containment. The UK could become an exporter of such technology to extend the production runs and lower average unit costs. There are sites around the country where larger nuclear stations are closing who might welcome a new replacement and would have some of the skilled people necessary to run it.

The government still favours more wind farms. It does now accept that these will not satisfy our demands for power on calm days or on days when the wind blows too strongly. It is therefore investigating ways of storing the power on windy days and nights to use on days of high demand and little wind. This is going to be necessary to keep the lights on. It also needs to account properly for the cost of the windfarms themselves and for any backup or storage needed to make them reliable for consumers.

Meanwhile the next few years whilst people still need plenty of fossil fuels for home heating and transport and industry remains fuelled by gas we are going to need more gas as a stop gap. The government needs to work closely with industry and grant the necessary permits in good time to help this endeavour.