

Importing electricity

Some contributors asked me to say more about our growing import dependence. The UK has been a net importer of electricity since the second quarter of 2010. In the last century we had a policy of security of supply and national self sufficiency. The latest government quarterly report for the third quarter of 2021 stated that the net imports of 7.6TWh for that period was the "highest value ever". Imports reached 8.4 TWh whilst exports were 0.8 TWh. Our main exports are to Ireland which took 0.8TWh over the three months. The biggest single source of imported power is France, followed by the Netherlands. One of the reasons for the increase in imports was the poor performance of wind power.

Scotland which usually supplies substantial power into England from its large windfarms supplied 50% less in the third quarter. Scottish wind farms are given priority to supply when they are up and running, taking precedence over England based gas plants in accordance with the decarbonisation policy.

Fuel imports from the EU rose by 50% in the third quarter on a small base and imports from the rest of the world rose by 34% on a larger base. The UK also exported some fuel to the EU over that time period.

There is no evidence to support the proposition that the UK has a good business exporting wind based energy to the continent at scale when the wind blows well. The French system is usually well supplied by nuclear power, whilst continental wind farms also tend to do well when the wind is blowing across northern Europe as a whole. The danger is when there is plenty of wind market prices for surplus power are often low.

So the questions to ask are

1. Why have we allowed ourselves to become so dependent on imported electricity from Europe, when the continent is short of gas and oil, wishing to close down its coal activities and dependent on Russian gas? What are the prospects for French nuclear given the age of the fleet and the high replacement costs and delays in construction?
2. How central is security of supply in policy formation?
3. What is the relative cost of wind power and gas generated electricity given the need for more back up power for wind provision and adjusting for priority access to customers afforded to wind power?
4. When could we become a serious exporter of electricity making a profit from the transaction in the way some argue we could?