

Keeping the lights on

I have long thought keeping the lights on by ensuring sufficient energy is available at all times is the crucial prior demand of a successful energy policy. A good energy policy also needs to balance affordable cost for people and business alongside environmental objectives.

I posted here my latest public questions to Ministers. I think they need to announce more additional electricity capacity for the balance of this decade as they push through their electrical revolution. I want them to see the logic of their use of gas as a "transition" fuel and see that it is safer and greener to rely on more UK produced gas rather than imported LNG or natural gas from the continent. We have just seen how we face extremes of prices by relying on the world market. Surely we need more domestic contract gas at longer term prices which smooth the volatility.

This week the Secretary of State told me that the answer to my fears will be more nuclear. It is true they have one large nuclear plant in construction that will bring us more power this decade. Hinckley C will add 3.2GW to the system. What he did not point out is they also plan to close all but one of our current nuclear stations by 2030, so the amount of power generated by nuclear will fall over the next eight years even allowing for the new opening. The closures will reduce our old nuclear capacity by 8.1GW, or a net loss of 4.9 GW allowing for the new opening. If the government wishes to keep nuclear at 17% of our total electricity generation, its current level, they will need at least one extra large new nuclear plant and a fleet of the smaller plants they are now trying to work up to approved systems and products. If they want nuclear to take over more of the work currently done by gas and help meet the rise in demand as more cars and heating systems convert to electricity there will need to be an even bigger expansion of nuclear.

So let me accept the government's assurance that come the next decade there will be more small nuclear sets, more large nuclear stations, and the nuclear industry will be able to meet rising demand after say 2035 once it has replaced all the current stations to be closed. That still leaves us with more than a decade when nuclear will not be the answer to keeping the lights on when the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine. I repeat my questions. Will they procure more stand by capacity? Will they keep the old coal power stations available as an ultimate reserve, as they needed to use them this autumn and again today as I write this ? Will they expand gas generating capacity as a gap fill? How long would it take to bring on more pump storage and hydro schemes to supplement wind and solar?

Can we have some numbers please from the government to reassure us the lights will stay on at all times without rationing or special measures?