

More energy please

The Business Secretary seeks to reassure us that the UK will have plenty of cheaper green energy in due course. That will be very welcome. It will need to work with or without the wind blowing and the sun shining. He also needs to check we have enough energy for the next decade whilst we await completion of these investments. Presumably they will need battery and or hydrogen and or water power storage of wind power. Recent experience has shown electricity capacity is tight when the wind does not blow. Current gyrations in a world gas market temporarily starved of enough gas is causing real problems for UK users and for some electricity generators.

The truth is if you wish to have a steel, chemical, food, glass, cement, and other main process industries today you still need plenty of good value base energy from gas or some similar primary fuel. That is why Germany is busy negotiating to buy yet more quantities of Russian gas to keep her factories turning when she has little gas or oil of her own. It is also why she persists in mining yet more coal and burning much of it despite the general advanced country agreement to phase it out quickly. That is how she maintains her status as Europe's leading industrial economy.

The UK should be better placed. The UK has access to more gas and oil under its own geographical jurisdiction. The government now proudly tells us we produce half our own gas, but the figure needs to be higher. It is, after all, much greener to use our own gas down a relatively short pipe than to haul LNG half way round the world with all the extra fuel that takes to transform the gas and power the ship.

Last month with little wind the UK had to restart three coal fired power stations. Thank goodness those had not been dismantled and knocked down as the others had, as they helped keep the lights on. The government needs to ensure we have enough reserve power to run. Maybe it needs to convert more to biomass which can provide stable power whatever the weather.

In due course we may have large scale battery or hydro or hydrogen storage of excess power generated by renewables on sunny or windy days. We may have more reliable hydro systems. What we cannot rely on is imports in an energy short world. We should not expect others to mine coal, burn gas and make things for us. The UK has to help find the acceptable energy and generate the necessary power, as we always used to. For many years we produced our own energy as an island of coal in a sea of oil and gas, with plenty of electricity capacity of a wide range of kinds.

The government for this decade needs to factor into the figures the progressive closure of most of our nuclear power stations which today generate around 17% of our electricity. In due course there may well be ways of making steel, glass and cement that do not need so much gas, and ways of heating our homes without the gas boiler. In the meantime we need to make sure we can cover our needs.