

My Intervention to the Minister during the SNP Opposition Debate on Scotland's Future

Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): The SNP was very critical of the electricity and energy regulation in the UK, and said that it wanted change in it. It did not seem to realise that all our current regulations are those of the European single electricity market, and that it is only because of Brexit that this Government are now consulting on changing those unsatisfactory regulations.

John Lamont MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland: That is a useful reminder that, while the SNP advocate breaking away from the rest of the UK and breaking away from Westminster and London, it wants even closer ties with Brussels and all the challenges and bureaucracy around that. I always welcome the opportunity that the SNP gives us to talk about the benefits that we all get from being part of the United Kingdom, and all the positives and strengths that come from working together across the whole country. The United Kingdom is the most successful political and economic union that the world has ever seen. In challenging times, we are stronger together. We are better prepared to deal with any crisis, particularly an issue on the scale of the energy crisis, or of the very thing that created the energy crisis—Vladimir Putin's awful war in Ukraine.

In these volatile times, I continue to believe that the last thing people need is greater uncertainty. This is a time for unity behind a common purpose, not division that would split us apart. The challenges facing all of us across Scotland and the whole of the United Kingdom demand all of our attention.

On the substance of the motion, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh East well knows, the Scottish people do not see another referendum as a priority. There is no consensus across Scotland on another referendum and all the division and distraction that that would bring. We already know the process by which a constitutional question can be asked, because it happened back in 2014. We had a referendum and the people of Scotland decided our future by an overwhelming majority. That happened after there was consensus across political parties in the Scottish Parliament, in civic society and among people across Scotland. That is not where we are today.

If SNP Members want to focus their arguments solely on opinion polls, then what do they have to say about the polls, including recent ones, that show that people do not want another referendum on Nicola Sturgeon's timetable? No matter how many polls there are that show a majority of Scots against another referendum, the SNP still wants us to go through the distraction of an all-consuming constitutional debate. It is all it cares about—another referendum at all costs.

[My article for Wokingham Today about Housing Development](#)

Wokingham needs a new local plan. Recent years have seen a lot of housing development which places strains on schools, surgeries, roads and green spaces. I would like to see a new local plan with a more sustainable rate of new housebuilding, with further additions to services and infrastructure to catch up with the new homes. The Borough draws up the plan, which is then tested in front of an Inspector giving people and businesses the chance to query the proposals.

The Government is currently putting through a levelling up Bill which aims to make investment more even around the country, and to provide more development and construction in those places that want the extra jobs, the new homes and facilities to enliven their areas. Places like Wokingham should be willing to share the dynamism of new homes and new employment more fairly by letting more of the investment go to places in greater need. The Levelling Up Bill had a lot to say about positives to promote the left behind towns and cities. I and a group of MPs also wanted it to say more about letting places with plenty of investment have more say over the pace of future change in our communities.

We tabled amendments to the Levelling Up Bill. One concentrated on dropping mandatory government targets for more housebuilding, which gave too much of it to the areas already full of new homes and new development. Others tackled the problem of developers gaming the system. They would accept the planning permissions granted under a local plan. They would then fail to build out those permissions and instead apply for more permissions outside the local plan areas for development. We proposed dropping the five year supply of land requirement which was often manipulated against a Council even though there were plenty of planning permissions outstanding. We argued for more control over the pace of build out of the permissions already granted within the plan instead of granting additional permissions.

The Government considered all of these proposals and agreed to change its Bill to meet our concerns. They have promised a system to speed build out of permissions where a Council has granted them under a plan. They agree not to use the five year supply of land argument to provide more planning permissions outside the plan, where an agreed plan is being worked through. They accept that whilst the Government will offer guidance on housing numbers, the Council should determine what is a realistic number that can be built given local circumstances. They accepted that where a Council has built a lot of homes in the past that should not be used as an argument for sustaining a very high rate of build. It should be an argument for considering a slowdown. They are strengthening the money that Councils can take from developers to assist with putting in the necessary public

facilities to support the new homes.

I welcome the government's change of approach which gives the flexibility our Council needs to take more account of our local circumstances, to get some credit for the recent rapid build rate and allows us to protect more of our landscape, farmland and green gaps between settlements.

[My Intervention to the SNP Spokesman during the SNP Opposition Debate on Scotland's Future](#)

Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): As I understand it, the hon. Gentleman wants Scotland to pull out of the UK but join the European Union. How easy does he think that would be, given the EU's stubborn attitude towards the Catalan claims and its support of Spain resisting even a referendum?

Tommy Shepherd MP, SNP Spokesman: The difference, of course, between the EU and the United Kingdom is that Scotland can leave one but not the other. I can imagine how the right hon. Gentleman might have felt if he and his Brexit colleagues, who wished for Britain to leave the EU, had been told, "Well, you simply can't do that. You have no right to do that," because that is the situation that is being presented to Scotland with regard to the UK.

In my view, which I think is accepted, Scottish independence requires two things. First, it requires the majority consent of the people who live in Scotland, and they need to express a wish for that to happen. Secondly, it concerns a negotiated settlement with this place and it will eventually require an Act of this Parliament. Those two things were fused together in the 2012 Edinburgh agreement, but because of the UK Government's reticence, we will have to decouple them and take them separately.

Our ambition now is to find some means to allow people in Scotland to express their view. It does not sit well for the UK Government to take a stance of actively trying to frustrate and deny that happening. This motion, if they were to vote for it today, fixes the problem, because it gives the Scottish Parliament the power to organise the first of those things—to determine the view of the people. We are asking for the Scottish Parliament to have the power not to legislate on the Union or on becoming an independent country, but merely to consult the people and to articulate on behalf of those who elected the Holyrood chamber. That is the opportunity that is offered by the motion's proposed Bill, and I hope that hon. Members will take it.

The more that we tell people that they cannot have something, the more they want it. We have seen that in recent opinion polls with the surge in support

for independence. Most significantly, in last week's opinion poll, we saw a clear majority of people saying that there should be another referendum on this question before the end of the Scottish Parliament's term in 2026—that is the first time that there has been a clear majority on the timing of the referendum.

All that is happening as a result of the UK's obstinance, insistence and denial of the democratic mandate in Scotland is that the case for independence is being fuelled. If it comes to a situation where there is a conflict between the British constitution and the claim of right of the Scottish people, it is our responsibility, which we will not shirk, to make sure that the latter triumphs over the former.

What happens when there is no wind ?

This is an article the Telegraph asked me to write for their publication:

For more than a decade I have been asking Energy Ministers how do we keep the lights on when the wind does not blow? There has been an almost universal enthusiasm to finance more windfarms. We were told we would get more than half our power from renewables. The stated capacity of UK wind turbines is over 25 GW, which compares to demand on a cold day of a little over 45 GW.

This autumn and winter we have lived through periods of little wind, when the wind electricity output can be as low as 1% of our total needs despite having theoretical capacity for many times that. I have been repeating my question. If low wind coincides with dark evenings and mornings when there is no solar power the grid has turned to maximising output from gas generators. It has had to call up the few older coal stations that managed to avoid the passion to demolish them.

I have usually been told that the UK will import any extra energy it needs if there is a cold snap with little wind. The Regulators and the industry rushed to put in more interconnectors to the continent so we have that flexibility they promised.

I remonstrated that we cannot rely on an energy short Europe if we run out of power. Most of the continent has no domestically available gas or oil, and was dependent on Russian imports which always contained a political risk. Unfortunately the violent conduct of Russia this year has led to an early ban on the imports that sustained Germany and Italy, leaving the EU trying to cut energy use to match the shortfall in supply. Relying on imports means paying very high prices.

There have always been problems with adding too much wind power to our system. Much of the wind power is best generated offshore in

Scotland where there is availability and on good days more wind. This needs an enlarged high voltage network to bring it south to where it can be consumed, with losses along the way. Too much interruptible renewable power on the system makes balancing the grid more difficult, with more need for back up generation that can be available almost instantly if the wind drops. Relying on European imports does not work when the EU is also experiencing a cold period with little wind, especially if enough of the ageing French fleet of nuclear power stations continue to struggle to stay open.

Import dependence is also bad in other ways. It means exporting well paid jobs. It means paying large taxes on energy away to a foreign Treasury instead of keeping them at home to pay some of the NHS bills. It gives the UK less control over energy when there are supply constraints that need managing. When electricity was first privatised there were three aims of policy. The first was to ensure security of supply, with the industry and regulators ensuring a useful surplus over normal maximum demand from domestic stations. This was seen to be an important part of our national security. The second was affordable power, by developing a system which always used the cheapest power available. The third was environmental. In the first decade after privatisation the industry made huge advances, replacing coal stations where only around a third of the underlying energy emerged as electrical current with gas fuelled combined cycle stations that improved energy efficiency by more than half, allowing cheaper prices and a much cleaner output. There was plenty of margin for cold days when something went wrong with a power station or two.

The government has wisely said it is going to make national security of supply a main aim again. To do so it needs to recognise that will require plenty of stand by power for when the wind does not blow. In due course we may find that investment in battery storage on a huge scale allows us to keep electricity from windy days to manage windless ones. We may find there is a commercial roll out for the widespread use of green hydrogen, generating more lasting power from wind electricity. Until that happens we need to rely on power stations that do work when the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine.

[My Interventions in the debate on the Remaining Stages for the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill](#)

Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): Can the Minister remind the

House how the Government will stop developers gaming a local plan and getting permissions that are not within the local plan under some silly rule?

Lucy Frazer, Minister of State: This Bill and the proposals that we are bringing forward through the revised NPPF will do exactly that. At the moment, in 60% of areas, building is through speculative development, not where communities want it. We want to streamline the local plan process, get those plans in place, where communities want it, and then we can start and continue to build.

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Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): Does the hon. Member not understand that the whole point about more local determination is that the local community ultimately has to say, "This is all we can manage and we cannot be overridden"?

Clive Betts MP (Lab): Yes, I understand that, and that should be taken into account, as it can be at the local plan stage. The problem is that, if every local community decides that it does not want house building, we end up with not enough houses being built nationally. That is the simple reality of life. What I am saying is, yes, have the argument at the local plan stage, but all too often now, local plans get bogged down not with where the houses should be built or with the quality of the housing and the infrastructure, but with arguments over housing numbers, with developers and councils employing lawyers and consultants to argue with each other. That is what happens. If we can get agreement between the council and the Government and that is then accepted as the target for the way forward, that is a suitable way to do it, rather than the current endless debate and argument about numbers and calculations.

I want to mention one other amendment, on environmental outcomes. One of the biggest arguments at local level is often on the environmental impact of development. There is great concern among local communities about the environmental impact and the fact that, when developers commission an environmental report, it is commissioned by the developer and paid for by the developer. Communities are often suspicious that the report produces what the developer wants to hear, rather than what the actual environmental impact is for those communities. My amendment 105 is simple: in future, the developer should pay, but the local authority should commission. In that way, we make it absolutely clear that environmental outcome reports on individual developments are completely independent, and that local communities can trust them. That seems to be a sensible suggestion. I hope that the Minister will accept it and move it forward.