

The battles over gas

Russia plans to play China and Europe off together over the supply of gas. They are in discussion over selling more of their gas to China via a new pipe still to be built at the same time as they are seeking to close the deal on further supply of gas to Germany via the new Nord Stream 2 pipe now completed. Hungary has signed up to fifteen more years of Russian gas with supply via a southern pipeline that avoids Ukraine, the source of transit capacity under the prior agreement.

Now the EU has confirmed the important role of gas today and going forward in the EU energy mix this strengthens Russia's bargaining position as a big supplier of a crucial source of energy for much of the continent. Hydrogen is some way off as an alternative gas to meet emissions targets next decade and beyond. The USA can only complain that her European allies have weakened the western position. The current US/Russia disagreements about Ukraine are complicated by the gas route to western Europe across that country, with Russia clearly keen to cut off Ukraine's revenues from this source.

The UK currently is not reliant on Russian gas. We depend on Norway and Qatar primarily. It makes producing more of our own gas even more important to our national security and reliability of supply. We should reduce our import dependence on the continent for both electricity and gas, as the two are interlinked with gas still an important fuel for power generation as well as for the direct heating of factories and homes. With Germany closing all her nuclear power stations and pledging to run down her large coal generation sector, and with Poland also under pressure to cut out the coal, the continent will have an even tougher energy position to negotiate. That is why the UK needs to concentrate on self sufficiency, and on ensuring a margin of capacity over demand even when the wind does not blow. The EU has ambitions over Ukraine which are no longer partly our responsibility.

Those who want to fell the Prime Minister

The conventional media, the Labour opposition and a handful of Conservative MPs are out to topple the Prime Minister. The method is well known, as it was used extensively against Mrs May and took a long time to get rid of her. That was animated by a major battle over policy, where those who wished to see her replaced were shocked by her close working with the civil service establishment and opposition parties to dilute or thwart Brexit. We felt this was against the clear wish of the public in the referendum and against the spirit of the Conservative Manifesto. The way the civil service negotiated,

surrendering our position with the approval of the PM, was in conflict with the strategy the Brexit Secretary was trying to pursue and was unacceptable.

The current rebels do not seem to be united in fundamental criticism of policy or in defence of the Manifesto. They are trying to get to 54 Conservative MPs who want a vote of No Confidence based on the strong feeling shared by many that senior officials in Downing Street who devised elaborate rules for the rest of should have led by example. The PM has apologised and claims most of this happened without his presence or initiation. The facts and gloss placed on this by Sue Gray who is investigating will shape how many more Conservative MPs seek a change at the top as a result.

It is difficult to buy into the idea that whips could credibly threaten to remove grants from constituencies of MPs who were disloyal. Money is distributed on the decision of Ministers, not whips. Ministers are guided and supervised by officials when allocating money to ensure the law and budget rules are followed. A Minister cannot make a decision based on favouritism or spite.

The rebels need to recall that they need 180 Conservative MPs to get rid of the PM. They have to win the confidence vote as well as securing it. They may be holding back some letters pending the Gray Report or because they judge they are a long way off having a majority. They may simply have failed to persuade more than a handful that now is a good time to change Prime Ministers.

For me what matters most is how the PM now develops a post lockdown agenda. There needs to be an early move to take control of GB/ NI trade. There needs to be a change of energy policy. We need tax cuts. If the PM can complete Brexit and tackle the cost of living crisis he can ride out party gate. If he does not use the majority to help people be better off then partygate and the poor organisation of Downing Street will weigh ever more heavily on the minds of MPs already cross about recent news coverage.

[My intervention in New Clause 20 of Building Safety Bill debate](#)

Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): Is there any right of redress to the regulatory authorities in local government, such as building inspectors and others, who were responsible for signing off on these schemes?

Christopher Pincher (Minister of State) (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities): We certainly want to ensure through the Bill, that the building control mechanism and the industry are improved. I think that a suite of measures, including the introduction of better building control

measures, the retrospection of the Defective Premises Act and further work that we may choose to do, working across parties, will help ensure that a very complicated and detailed set of challenges, which have emerged recently but have been developing over many years, are properly addressed.

We need more Conservative values

Yesterday was a good day. At last we got the announcement that most of the covid 19 restrictions are being lifted. The advice to work at home is being withdrawn. The threat of covid passports recedes. Mask wearing will become a matter for individual judgement.

One of the reasons why I am a Conservative is I believe wherever possible people should be free to make their own decisions about how they spend their lives and how much risk they run. Of course I agree we need a criminal law which provides deterrence and punishment for those who wish to harm others by violence or theft, but not a criminal law that extends into payment of your tv licence or how many people you invited into your home.

The government has done well to lead work on developing a vaccine and making it available so that most people have accepted it. This allows a return to more normal social contact and provides a reason for the government to roll back its extensive regulation of our daily lives. There will be considerable debate and study in the years ahead as we look back on the response to the pandemic. The world figures do not show any easy correlation between length and duration of lockdowns and less infection, intensifying the need for more study and discussion of what responses worked best to contain and overcome the virus.

Anyone worried about the continued presence of the virus can limit their own social contacts and can wear a mask. They can rely more on on line shopping and may be able to negotiate more homeworking with their employer. They can certainly keep their vaccination up to date, which seems to lessen the risks of catching a serious version of the disease. All this points to lifting all special restrictions, whilst the NHS continues to provide advice and guidance especially to the vulnerable. Those of us who voted for less restriction last time are pleased that numbers of serious cases and hospital admissions did not shoot up dramatically as some predicted.

The politics of gas

Continental Europe is very short of gas. It now needs to secure more of it. It has decided that gas is after all a green fuel. Natural gas is for the transition to net zero, and hydrogen gas is to follow down the pipes in due course.

The UK relies heavily on natural gas for heating homes and buildings, for powering heat processes in factories and for electricity generation. Successive UK governments this century have accelerated the decline of the North Sea and declined to find ways to extract onshore gas, preferring to make us import dependent on Norway and Qatar. It is good they have not committed us to too much continental gas. The overriding priority now must be to increase domestic gas production and to steer clear of links to a gas starved continent becoming increasingly dependent on Mr Putin.

The instability of the continental position has just got worse. Hungary has signed a new contract with Russia to import large quantities of Russian gas which will now be delivered through a pipeline that does not cross Ukraine. This replaces use of the Ukraine pipe system. Mr Putin is keen to reduce his dependence on the Ukraine pipe for export to the EU, as he wants no hostage to his policy freedom over Ukraine. He is keen to sign a deal with Germany to use Nord Stream 2, a new pipe from Russia to Germany across the Baltic, to replace the current flows through the Ukraine pipe. If he could eliminate Russian exports via Ukraine he would weaken Ukraine which has been enjoying substantial transit revenues from the gas.

The USA under Mr Trump warned Germany not to sign up to more Russian gas and not sign up to NordStream2, seeing it as a substantial strategic weakness. Mr Biden cancelled the Trump proposals for sanctions were the piped gas to go ahead, but has now had second thoughts and is unhappy about the impact NordStream 2 gas will have on the strategic balance with Russia.

Yesterday we read that the UK as part of the NATO effort was flying defensive anti tank weapons to Ukraine but deviated away from Germany territory to do so. The UK needs to strengthen our home position and not get drawn into disputes on the far side of the EU's territory. The EU has to get smarter at handling Putin's gas based diplomacy. It needs a workable plan for Ukraine. 7 years after Russia took Crimea the EU still rules out a military solution, given the consequences of such an action. It needs a workable solution for the rest of Ukraine which also avoids a war.