

Keeping the lights on and homes warm

Over the next few years we will face a reduction in nuclear power as older stations are closed, well before a new large nuclear power station comes on line. We will experience growing demands for electrical power as more people switch to electric cars and electric heating, and as the economy and the population continues to grow creating more need. There will be a further major increase in wind power, which will cover the days when there is the right level of wind to maximise turbine output without needing to shut them down through too high a wind speed. The question remains, what is the back up plan for days of high demand when the wind does not blow and when solar output is also low?

In the short term the government has brought three coal power plants back on stream to deal with shortages. These have to be kept, and perhaps could be converted to biomass to make them more reliable and popular contributors to our power output. The country relies heavily on its remaining combined cycle gas stations which produce less carbon dioxide than the coal stations per unit of output. It would be a good idea to bring several old retired gas stations back into a state of readiness to be available to produce power when the wind drops. These are matters which our managed system of generation can commission by offering capacity payments to the owners to make the facilities available.

The government should also look at how it can increase domestic gas output. Currently half the gas we use is imported. Some of this is dependent on paying high and wildly fluctuating spot market prices. Some of it is shipped long distance on tankers. If we produced more domestic gas this could pass to users via pipeline and could be purchased under contract at more stable and lower average prices. Immediately the government could allow Shell to progress the Jackdaw field, which can use the existing Shearwater platform and the existing gas and liquids pipes into St Fergus/Cruden Bay for onward distribution by the existing pipe network. This would be a greener method of supplying gas than the imports and provide us with more national resilience in energy provision. The government should review its other options for producing more UK gas as a transition fuel whilst it puts in place much more reliable renewable electricity and better storage for variable wind power.

My intervention during the debate on the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Review of

Temporary Provisions) (No. 3)

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): A lot of us feel that this legislation should now just lapse, because there has been a material improvement in the situation.

There are other powers should things go wrong, and this House could grant powers in the space of a few hours if there were a new and unpleasant crisis. Why do we have to have these powers hanging over our head when there does not seem to be a need to use them?

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Sajid Javid): What I can tell my right hon. Friend is that there are provisions that we hope to keep in the Act, subject to the House's will today, which are still necessary.

For example, there are provisions that protect NHS capacity with respect to temporary registration of nurses and other healthcare professionals.

There are similar provisions for the care sector; there are also provisions that provide support packages for those whose jobs may have been hit or who have to take time off work to meet the self-isolation requirements. There are provisions in the Act that I think are still necessary; I will speak about some of them in just a moment.

My question during the Statement on Net Zero Strategy and Heat and Buildings Strategy, 19 October

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): If heat pumps and electric cars are going to help, we will need to generate all our electricity from green sources, so when will the Government commission the very large amounts of new generating capacity we will need to make them work when the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine?

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Mr Gregg Hands): I thank my right hon. Friend for, as always, putting his question very directly, which I have appreciated over many years in the House. I have mentioned our commitment to nuclear and our commitment to the gas sector as a transition fuel.

Fortunately, at the moment, we are dependent largely on domestic gas production, in that 50% of our gas usage comes from the UK continental shelf

while 30% comes from Norway.

The point here is to ramp up our commitment to low and zero carbon fuels. That makes sense for the environment, for our economic security and for our diversification.

How do you get to net zero

Yesterday the government launched its strategy for cutting the carbon dioxide output caused by heating buildings. They wish to promote heat pumps, and will offer grants of £5000 to people willing to install these devices who meet their criteria. The details of the scheme will be announced prior to a launch in the spring of next year.

They also reiterated their strategy of banning all new petrol and diesel cars from sale in the UK after 2030, preferring universal adoption of new electric vehicles where people are buying new.

I pointed out that for this strategy to work the UK would need to generate all its electricity by approved green means, as otherwise we would simply burn the fossil fuel in the power stations prior to running homes and cars on electricity. As we are often still relying for 60% of our electricity on fossil fuels when the wind does not blow and there is not much sun that is going to take a major investment in new green capacity that will work when the weather is not helpful to certain renewables.

The Minister in reply did not promise a major expansion of green generation from reliable power sources. He did not comment on the possible shortfall in electrical power if the government is successful in getting widespread adoption of fuel pumps and electric cars. He did say the government sees gas as a transition fuel which clearly will do a lot of the work in generating power and heating buildings for at least this decade. Nor did the Minister answer those who asked when it was going to commission more nuclear power. This is reliable carbon free power, but we face the reduction in the amount of nuclear produced over the rest of this decade as old nuclear power stations are closed. down. This will add to the difficulties of supplying enough green power this decade.

Tomorrow I will set out again more of the ways the government can act now to ensure we have sufficient generating capacity and sufficient access to gas as transition fuel for this decade, whilst they put in place the major investments in reliable green electricity they will need for the next decade and beyond. They need to announce new nuclear, new small nuclear, more biomass more hydro and pump storage and more battery storage and hydrogen conversion for wind energy when the wind does blow well.

The state of the Union

This article is reproduced from Conservative Home where it appeared yesterday:

The Government is strongly in favour of the Union of the UK. So is the Official Opposition. Scotland held a referendum and voted to stay in the Union. At the time all parties agreed it would be a vote for a generation, though the SNP now wobble over the desirability and timing of a much earlier re-run of the vote they lost. The rest of the Union has not campaigned for a vote about their membership. So why is there such nervousness about the subject?

The biggest threat today to the Union comes from the EU. There is a strand of EU thinking that has surfaced in press briefings and the odd comment that says there must be a price to Brexit for the UK, and that price should be the detachment of Northern Ireland from the UK.

The official public line is the EU needs to insist on special governance arrangements in Northern Ireland to avoid goods coming across the border into the Republic from the UK that might not be compliant with EU rules and customs.

To make this difficult the EU chooses to interpret the peace Agreement governing the two communities of Northern Ireland as meaning there should be no border controls, though throughout the UK's time in the EU there were VAT, Excise and currency controls governing trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic. These were largely handled through electronic means, and away from the physical border.

The UK has offered several ways in which it can make sure non compliant goods do not wander from NI to the Republic without imposing new border posts. Mutual enforcement of the rules would do it, with the UK authorities ensuring there is no passage of non compliant goods.

Electronic manifests for each consignment, to be inspected before arrival by EU officials, would do it. Trusted trader schemes where most firms were trusted to enforce the EU rules and avoid non compliant deliveries would do it. There has always been smuggling across the NI/Republic border, and there has been a long history of co-operation by the authorities on both sides to avoid it becoming excessive and to punish those who still try it. That will continue after the new arrangements.

The fact that the EU has rejected all these sensible proposals implies it does not want to solve the narrow issue of trade. It may be that the immediate objective is to divert large amounts of trade from GB/NI into Republic to NI trade. That is what is happening.

Faced with the EU blockage of simple GB/NI movement of goods in the way we used to enjoy, consumers in NI are being forced to buy from the EU via the Republic instead to get their deliveries on time. The EU is assisting a large diversion of GB/NI trade. This is expressly against the Protocol which rules out such a diversion in Article 16. The UK for that reason alone can legally change things unilaterally to stop this happening.

It may be that it is part of a wider EU plan to ensure more common governance of Northern Ireland with the Republic under EU control. The wish is to impose every regulation and directive on NI that the EU regards as important to its single market.

The remit of the single market is now very large, encompassing everything from environment policy to labour policy, from transport policy to energy policy, alongside the more normal definition concentrating on product standards and trade terms. The EU wishes NI to accept large amounts of EU law with no voice and vote in its making and no right to repeal or amend.

The NI Protocol rightly expresses strong support for the peace process, which is based on the mutual consent of both parties. The EU claims to champion this, yet fails to grasp the fundamental problem with its approach.

Its demand that it can legislate for NI and control many things in NI in the name of preserving the integrity of its single market does not have the consent of the Unionist population. Indeed the EU has united Unionists against its Protocol because they see the EU seeking to split NI off from UK law and NI consumers from GB suppliers, going well beyond its legitimate needs to police its trade.

The Protocol stresses at the beginning "the importance of maintaining the integral place of Northern Ireland in the UK's internal market". The EU is doing the opposite. It says "This Protocol respects the essential state functions and territorial integration of the UK". It does not feel like that to many in NI.

When the UK challenges the EU over its wish to govern Northern Ireland in a different way to the rest of the UK, the EU asks why the UK keeps on going on about sovereignty. If it wishes to show sympathy for Northern Ireland and wish to understand the nature of the problem it needs to grasp that sovereignty as at the heart of the issues long dividing the two communities. The EU's view of it does not work for the Unionists.

The UK government needs to see off this needless threat to the Union by insisting on UK control of GB/NI trade as is required under the Protocol. People in NI have to be free to have easy access to products available elsewhere in the UK within our internal market.

The EU should take up one of the many generous schemes the UK has put forward to ensure full co-operation to avoid non compliant products passing on from NI to the Republic. Lord Frost needs to move swiftly now, as much damage is being done to the view of the EU amongst the Unionists and much trade is being diverted against the wishes of the public and against the words of the

protocol.

Meanwhile in Scotland the SNP say they want an early referendum, but not one yet. Doubtless they are watching opinion polls which still do not show a clear window for majority support to reverse the last referendum result. Many Scottish voters want to get on with their lives without further uncertainty over this issue, and many want to see the SNP make devolution work to deliver a better outcome.

The UK government should not fall for the Gordon Brown line again that a bit more devolution will solve this problem. Brown's passion for devolution gave the SNP a bigger platform and gave them the opportunity of a referendum on the Union.

Devolution did not end the matter as Brown promised. UK Ministers who are keen to buttress the Union need to show by their deeds and words why the Union is good for all its parts, and need to govern wisely so people join in with their support.

Suggesting more powers for just one part of the UK in response to the campaigns of those who wish to split the UK is a bad idea. Voters wanting Scottish independence will not be won over. They will see it as a weakness by the Union government, and propose a further push to secure full independence.

If it is right for the Scottish Parliament to have more powers, what is the stopping point in powers before you reach independence? How would you draw a stable and defensible line? The way to defend the Union is to stand up for it, and to show how the Union powers are benefitting all its parts.