

My interventions during the debate on the Environment Bill, 20 October 2021

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): As there is a lot of concern about this on both sides of the House, can the Minister give us some encouragement about what pace of change we can look forward to under her proposals? I think people want some reassurance that this is going to be tackled quite soon.

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I thank my right hon. Friend for that, and honestly, people are coming up to me left, right and centre about this.

I feel as strongly about it as everybody else, so I am so pleased we have got this into the Bill. I have to say that a lot of it is thanks to working with my right hon. Friend the Member for—[Hon. Members: “Ludlow.”] I have been to Ludlow, but I have a lot of data in my head!

I think my right hon. Friend Philip Dunne would agree that we have worked unbelievably constructively to get what was going to be in his private Member’s Bill into this Bill, which is absolutely the right thing to do. I hope we are demonstrating that this is happening quickly.

For example, we are requiring water companies to put in monitors above and below every storm sewage overflow to monitor the data. They will have to start that right now, because the sewerage plans coming forward in the Bill are already under way.

...

Sir John Redwood: Is the Minister saying that if this change goes through, another HS2-type assault on ancient woodland would not be allowed, whereas the last one was?

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs: What it will mean is that, yes, there will be much more credence given to the value of ancient woodland.

At the moment, ancient woodland does not necessarily win, because one can have the infrastructure, or whatever it is, if one can demonstrate that there are wholly exceptional reasons for getting rid of the ancient woodland.

This approach will really strengthen the position: it is a really big commitment to ancient woodland, which is like our rainforest. We have to do something about it—and we are, which I hope will be welcomed.

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Sir John Redwood: Is there a possible compromise? The Minister said that the regulator could set and enforce targets and extract penalties; would that be a way forward? Could we get the Minister to come up with some tough

regulatory targets that fall short of the absolute guarantee of a legal statement?

Chair, Environmental Audit Committee, Chair, Environmental Audit Committee (Mr Philip Dunne): There will be targets—there are water-quality targets in the Bill anyway—and the Minister referred to the guidance that she is on the point of finalising for the next pricing review period for Ofwat.

My Committee, the Environmental Audit Committee, is currently conducting an inquiry into water quality, and we will make some recommendations to strengthen that guidance, so there are tools that can be used.

That does not, though, get away from the fact that in my view there should be a primary legislative duty on water companies, to persuade them to treat this issue with sufficient seriousness.

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.