

We need more electricity

When I woke up yesterday two thirds of the electrical power we needed was coming from fossil fuels. The wind was light so windfarms were producing little, and photovoltaic was also well down. In common with recent days some electricity was being generated from coal power stations, brought back into use to keep the lights on. The gas stations were much in demand. As I was penning this I learned that our foolish dependence on imports has been adversely affected by damage to the French interconnector leaving us even more short of power.

Over the last week as a whole fossil fuels provided more than half our electrical power, and over the last month 47%. Renewables have been down to 13-14% and coal has had to contribute. Low winds are very disruptive to our current and planned mix of energy. Gas continued to keep most of us warm at home when we needed heating.

We now have the official figures for the first quarter of 2021 compared to the same quarter the previous year. This shows a similar pattern to more recent events. We came to rely more on gas when as the official document states "due to colder weather and poor renewable output" demand for gas driven power surged. Electricity generation needed 17% more gas than in the prior year. We came to rely more on imports as a result, with Norway accounting for around half and LNG around one quarter. Lower wind speeds led to a 16% reduction in renewable generation in the first quarter of the year.

It is a good thing that a unit at Drax, at West Burton and Ratcliffe on Soar are still available to supply electricity from coal in emergencies, though it would be better to make provision to avoid this. Unfortunately this entails importing coal, much of it from Russia, which is neither environmentally good nor strategically sound. It is a better thing that we still have good combined cycle gas stations with decent capacity as we rely crucially on them. It is a pity we rely more and more on imported gas, when maybe we should prospect for more in our own territory to cut down transport costs and reduce the strain on our balance of payments. It would also be the greener option. It is a pity the industry has got rid of the Rough Field which was an important gas store. We now operate with very low levels of stocks, so our security of supply is poor.

The truth is we do not have enough domestic energy for our needs and are becoming far too dependent on imports. If we want an electric revolution the first task must be to put in a large increase in electrical capacity so the power will be there as and when the electric cars and heating systems take off as consumer items. If we want to be sure we can keep the lights on and the boilers keeping us warm it would also be a good idea to put in some additional generating capacity anyway, and to look at increasing domestic output of gas. It would also help to put in more gas storage against more cold winter days when the wind does not blow. The government needs to review all this, as the energy market is now a complex mixture of subsidies, arranged prices and managed contracts where the regulator and government have a major

role.

The first duty of government energy policy is to keep the lights on.