

An Immoral Climate



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Britain's shiny new nuclear policy is less than a week old. Already, it is mired in failure. The Government's thinly-disguised justification for a decision already made rides rough-shod over the concerns of the public and patently ignores the warnings of its own advisors.

Two years ago, the Sustainable Development Commission – reporting directly to the Prime Minister – published eight volumes of scientific analysis and its own carefully-argued position paper on *The Role of Nuclear Power in a Low Carbon Economy*. The report accepted that replacing all the existing nuclear capacity with new nuclear plant (instead of gas-fired combined cycle turbines, say) might save 7 million tonnes of carbon by the late 2020s – equivalent to around 4% of total UK emissions. It's a measurable, though not decisive contribution.

Just because you *can* do something, doesn't mean you *should*. The SDC identified a range of concerns. Foremost was the problem of high-level radioactive wastes and the role of the private sector in managing these. Nuclear power is particularly prone to the problem of 'moral hazard': the routine under-insurance of public risk. In the long run, society simply cannot allow such costs to go unpaid. Commercial failure to cover nuclear liabilities inevitably falls on the public purse.

The report also discussed uncertain economics, threats from nuclear proliferation and the danger of distracting attention from the essential task of reducing energy demand and implementing renewable energy. It concluded that 'there is no justification for a new nuclear programme, at this time, and that any such proposal would be incompatible with the Government's own Sustainable Development Strategy'.

Two years is an eternity in politics. But what exactly has changed to justify John Hutton's complete disregard for this advice? Do we see a safer nuclear world? Are the economics of nuclear power now more favourable? Have we made substantive progress towards demand reduction? No, no and no again. Nuclear Iran remains a frightening prospect. The new Finnish European Pressurised Water Reactor – a flagship of the industry in 2006 – is today haunted by construction delays and cost-overruns. Electricity demand has gone in the wrong direction, prompting Government to admit failure in reaching its 2010 carbon target. (Nuclear won't help there!)

In fact, last week's announcement smacks of failure: the failure of Government to implement its own environmental policies during more than a decade in power. Take Labour's innovative 'Statement of Intent' on environmental taxation. Ten years ago it set forth a bold commitment to shift the basis of taxation from economic 'goods' (like labour) to environmental 'bads' (like carbon emissions). Strange then that environmental taxes have declined in the UK since Labour came to power, as a proportion both of GDP and of the tax base. Ironic that it is the nuclear industry which has finally persuaded this Government to underwrite a secure carbon price. What difference might that have made, five years ago, to

the implementation of the 2003 Energy White Paper's targets on energy efficiency and renewables?

Just because you fail to implement good policy, doesn't justify making a bad one. Last week's decision is still, clearly, a bad one. To understand why returns us inevitably to the question of nuclear waste. Figuring out what to do with highly fissile materials that will remain radioactive for tens of thousands of years is an ethical nightmare. One thing is clear: before compounding our uncurbed demand for 4x4s, patio heaters and plasma screen TVs by expanding the nuclear legacy, we have an over-riding moral obligation to due process in mitigating the risk to future generations.

But due process is an abiding casualty of undue haste. In his High Court judgement last year, Justice Sullivan described Government's information on radioactive waste as 'seriously misleading'. His ruling precipitated last week's White Paper and the consultation that preceded it; a consultation notable for the convergence of public concerns with those raised by SDC two years ago. 'Many people felt that we had made insufficient progress towards a permanent solution for existing waste,' admits the White Paper. How can this possibly have been read as a mandate for building yet more nuclear plant?

Critical here is the role of the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM). Charged with identifying a strategy for existing wastes, CoRWM's July 2006 report recommended long-term geological disposal coupled with a robust programme of safe and secure interim storage – possibly for as long as 100 years. That certainly gets this Government off the hook. In reality, it means little more than business as usual for some considerable time to come. If only CoRWM's decision could be taken to apply to new-build wastes. The thrust of last week's White Paper is to argue that it can.

But here once again, the Government is flouting expert advice. CoRWM made absolutely clear that its recommendations did not suggest a green light for new nuclear build. 'The political and ethical issues raised by the creation of more wastes are quite different from those relating to committed – and therefore unavoidable – wastes,' the Committee argued – a position reiterated many times since by CoRWM chair, Professor Gordon MackKerron. Just because you agreed to a dangerous technology once, doesn't justify doing so again.

Oh dear. Of course, it's always an option to ignore your advisors when they tell you things you don't want to hear. Better still is a little light ridicule. There are only three references to the SDC's work in last week's 192-page document. One is a borrowed carbon calculation; the second is a fatuous one-line reversal of the Commission's recent (favourable) conclusion on tidal power; and the third is a claim that Government and SDC see eye-to-eye on the question of nuclear proliferation. Like so much else in the document, this is disingenuous nonsense.

The one place where Hutton has heeded the Commission is in acknowledging the propensity for moral hazard. But far from re-thinking the role of the private sector in nuclear development, the White Paper responds with a clear assurance to commercial developers that nuclear liabilities will be capped. This is obviously a Government with no intention of addressing legitimate public concerns, no time at all for expert guidance and a fickle disregard for ethical niceties.

Let's make no mistake, the challenge of climate change confronts us with some difficult decisions. It requires 'bold politics'. It demands commitment to fiscal reform, support for renewable energy, reductions in energy demand, changes in the way we live, and some basic understanding of our obligations to the future. Sweeping aside these commitments

with an ill-thought-out gesture towards nuclear power is, above all, a blatant failure of moral vision.

For The Guardian piece, 'A blatant failure of moral vision' please visit:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/jan/16/nuclearpower.energy>