Yet More Nails in the Nuclear Coffin

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Were it not for blanket Brexit, smothering every other news item, I suspect there would have been a lot more coverage of the recent collapse of Hitachi's nuclear pretensions here in the UK. And a lot more questioning about what the hell happens next – in terms of UK energy and climate policy.

On Thursday last week, Hitachi announced that it was 'freezing' (something of a euphemism for abandoning) its £16bn plan to build a new nuclear power station at Wylfa on Anglesey. It would also be axing its involvement in the Oldbury plant on the River Severn. In so doing, Hitachi acknowledged that it would have to take a £2bn hit on its balance sheet. Despite which, its share price improved significantly.

Following hot on the heels of last year's decision by Toshiba to axe its involvement in the Moorside nuclear plant near Sellafield, this moment marked the definitive collapse of dreams of a nuclear renaissance first conjured up by Tony Blair back in 2004, pre-Fukushima, and subsequently endorsed (with even greater and more naïve enthusiasm, post-Fukushima) by the Tory/Lib Dem Coalition Government in 2013.

As it happens, I've had significant skin in this game throughout that time. First, as Chair of the Sustainable Development Commission, which invested significant resource in

seeking to persuade Tony Blair that his 2005 change of heart on nuclear (Labour's position before then was to keep the nuclear option 'in the long grass'), was profoundly ill-judged. And then, together with three other former Directors of Friends of the Earth, in 2012 and 2013, warning David Cameron and his and his pro-nuclear Lib Dem groupies that his plans for six new plants by 2030 had zero prospect of ever being delivered.

(I really do try to avoid 'told you so' grandstanding here, but you might be amused to read the text of the actual letters the four of us sent Cameron at that time – accurate in almost every single particular!)

Predictably, despite Hitachi's withdrawal being recognised as a massive blow to the Government's energy strategy, the nuclear establishment was instantly out there with the next wave of patently dishonest bullshit promising yet more nuclear jam tomorrow – apparently to be made possible with a different financing model and, beyond that, yet again, through revolutionary new reactor designs. (I can't keep Monty Python's 'parrot sketch' out of my mind every time I'm exposed to this nonsense!)

We must expect a lot more of this over the rest of the year. Its sole purpose is to obscure the fact that nuclear is now impossibly expensive, as recognised even by *The Economist* back in 2016: 'Britain should cancel its nuclear white elephant, and spend the billions on making renewables work.' The deal that Greg Clark, Secretary of State at BEIS, had put together for Hitachi's Wylfa plans was almost inconceivably generous – a generosity born of a mixture of embarrassment and desperation – including a u-turning promise of direct Government investment to the tune of $5bn, and an extremely generous strike price of £75/MWh for 35 years. Cautious investors still didn't want to know. Nor will they in the future, whatever financial sleight of hand Clark comes forward with next time round.

Nor can he assume that China will keep stepping into the UK's yawning nuclear breach. For a long time now, China has seen the UK as a bridgehead into the rest of Europe, with a one-third share in Hinkley Point, a 20% share in plans for a new power station at Sizewell C (with EdF controlling the rest), and a two-thirds share in any future development at Bradwell, where it intends to build its own reactors. The UK remains crucial to its nuclear ambitions; apart from Pakistan, it's never built anything outside its own borders.

Yet as the ever more authoritative World Nuclear Industry Status Report (2018) explores in great detail, even China's enthusiasm would appear to be on the wane. Even though it still has a theoretical capacity to build up to ten reactors a year, the last new development on the ground was back in 2016, and there's no guarantee about its future plans. Especially with levels of public support falling year on year.

Beyond which, there's another question: would the Ministry of Defence and our security services permit any further involvement on the part of China anyway? The UK is the only OECD country to have opened up investment in such 'critical strategic assets' to an increasingly powerful nation which has already demonstrated its burgeoning cyber-capabilities on countless occasions. The risks involved her are enormous, revealing yet again the desperation at the very heart of this Government's determination to get more reactors built – whatever the long-term consequences may be.

The contradictions here beggar belief. On the one hand, the Government is prepared to risk all by opening up the security of our future energy supply system to a potentially hostile nation; on the other hand, it's increasingly clear that the principal reason for persisting with a civil nuclear programme in the UK is to provide indirect support (in terms of skills, industrial capability, supply chain, and hidden subsidies) for our own nuclear weapons programme.

It wasn't so long ago that anyone making any such assertion would have been instantly dismissed – especially by the nuclear industry itself. How dare anyone suggest such abhorrent linkage! But how different it is today. As the indefatigable sleuthing of Andy Stirling and Phil Johnstone so powerfully demonstrates, the interdependencies between nuclear power and nuclear weapons are now openly acknowledged by the military, and even by the nuclear industry – if somewhat less readily.

What a web they weave. National security demands that we maintain a nuclear weapons capability. We can no longer do that, apparently, without simultaneously maintaining what's left of our own civil nuclear industry. And we can't do that without Chinese money and Chinese software – thereby incurring a massive threat to our national security!

One has to hope that these surreal absurdities will soon be exposed to far more intensive scrutiny than has been the case to date. Perhaps the Labour Party will finally free itself of Blair's pro-nuclear legacy – as they seem so keen to do so in so many areas? Perhaps the trade unions will understand how their continuing pro-nuclear stance represents an increasingly astonishing betrayal of the hundreds of thousands of working people who would benefit so much from a full-on commitment to energy efficiency, renewables, storage, smart grids and so on – creating far more jobs in the process than the nuclear industry ever could?

Perhaps the BBC itself will be forced to confront its own unaccountable pro-nuclear bias (demonstrated time after time in coverage of nuclear issues) in the same kind of way that it was recently forced to acknowledge its deplorable and deeply biased coverage of climate change?

Maybe even Greg Clark will be forced to recognise that his much-loved nuclear parrot really is a definitively dead parrot. After all, he's a smart guy, and reassuringly free of

the kind of ideological blinkers that make so many of his Cabinet colleagues unfit to lead anything other than an endangered cult. His statement to Parliament on the collapse of the Hitachi deal was appropriately measured, and he acknowledged unhesitatingly that nuclear power ‘is being out-competed’.

However, he was still peddling outrageous porkies when he said that he was ‘not prepared to make taxpayers pay for the project’. When it comes down to it, there’s not much difference between hard-pressed UK citizens paying up as taxpayers or paying up as bill-payers – one way or another, we’ll already be paying for the wildly expensive Hinkley Point project, would certainly have ended up paying for Wylfa, Moorside and Oldbury, and will assuredly be paying through the nose for Sizewell C and Bradwell if they still proceed.

A final ‘perhaps’: perhaps even the Committee on Climate Change (chaired as it is by the mildly pro-nuclear Lord Deben) will now realise that its unwise confidence in the nuclear projections of governments since the time of Tony Blair, before the passage of the Climate Change Act must now be unambiguously set aside. Between them, Wylfa, Moorside and Oldbury would have supplied about 15% of UK electricity.

The unquestioned credibility of the Committee on Climate Change is a precious asset, and one which has served us well over the last ten years. But it cannot possibly go on pretending that nuclear power will be making much of a contribution to the low-carbon generation we need by 2030. If ever.

Too many instances of perhaps? Perhaps. But for how much longer can we possibly persist with this collective insanity?