COP 26’s Nuclear Sidebar

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The fact that COP26 was crawling with huge numbers of delegates from Big Oil and Gas got a lot of attention from the media. Less attention was paid to the large number of pro-nuclear delegates parasitically inserting themselves into as many events as they could engineer access to – facilitated at every turn by BEIS Secretary of State Kwasi Kwarteng and Booster Boris himself.

The nuclear industry had its own short-lived moment in the sun, on 9th November. For what is now reckoned to be the fourth time, Kwasi Kwarteng went over the top to re-re-re-confirm the Government’s enthusiasm for Small Modular Reactors, re-re-re-promising (a rather miserly) £210m of Government money for Rolls-Royce, described by Kwasi Kwarteng as ‘a once in a lifetime opportunity’.

Rolls-Royce duly obliged, conjuring up another £250m of private sector investment to deliver a new fleet of at least five SMRs (and possibly as many as 16) at around £2.2bn a pop. The company’s share price duly went up by around 4%. Job done.

It doesn’t matter how many times Ministers bang this particular drum, or how many times deplorably gullible journalists in the BBC, FT, Times and the Telegraph suck it all up, moonshine is still moonshine.

In and of itself, that £460m buys practically nothing. It will

allow Rolls-Royce to take whatever design they finally settle on through the Generic Design Assessment process. This will take no less than four years, and probably more than five. Even if (and it's a big IF) regulatory approval is secured, private sector investors will still have to be found, sites identified and planning permission for each site secured – a process which can take years.

Rolls-Royce talks of the first plant 'coming online by 2031' – do please do the maths yourself. So let's say 2035, to be generous, at the earliest. And therefore of zero benefit in terms of meeting the Government's own target of a 78% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2035. It's all such a pathetic waste of time – and of taxpayers' money. Whatever the timescale, SMRs will never compete with renewables plus storage.

To be fair, it would be wrong to underestimate the importance here of energy security – meeting our energy needs from home-based, 'indigenous' capacity. Boris Johnson keeps banging on about 'British wind and sunshine' – mindful perhaps of a recent poll of Daily Express readers, of whom 97.5% said that Boris 'should pledge to make Britain self-sufficient in energy production by 2050′.

On that basis, British nuclear electrons are therefore much more desirable than those unreliable French electrons, regardless of the fact that we wouldn't have any new nuclear electrons coming on-stream were it not for Electricité de France.

COP26 was of course a global gathering. UK energy security was therefore less of an issue. But it got a bit of an airing on 12th November, when the two big tidal stream companies here in

the UK (Nova Innovation and Atlantis Energy) made a big splash about the huge potential for tidal stream technology in Scotland – with a potential capacity of more than 500 MW. This is a proven technology (with turbines anchored to the sea floor to capture the power of tidal currents) – already delivering suitably 'indigenous' electrons – with no moonshine to be seen anywhere.

The potential for tidal stream is indeed significant – not just in the UK, but internationally.

However, for me personally, it's still relatively small beer in comparison to tidal range – harnessing the power of the tides to generate huge amounts of electricity from either tidal lagoons or barrages, predictably, cost-effectively, over many decades.

If our Government was genuinely serious about energy security (instead of finding ways of propping up Rolls-Royce to support our nuclear weapons programme), tidal power would be top of its list.

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