

Nuclear reaction

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The debate over the potential of nuclear new-build

Jamie Reed, MP for Copeland

THE REASONS for new nuclear power developments from both a national and a local perspective are compelling.

Nationally, we need to ensure that our energy supplies are more secure and that they are less susceptible to the whims of the governments of other oil- and gas-rich countries not necessarily disposed towards the development of the British economy. Even more importantly, as the largest and most reliable provider of CO² free electricity, nuclear has a unique role in helping us to meet our climate change obligations nationally, and in helping to avoid catastrophic climate change internationally.

I have seen for myself the nature of the challenge in the Arctic Circle and I know that we have no time to delay if we are to secure the future of our planet for our children and grandchildren. When assessing nuclear's role in this task, there is also an inescapable moral aspect to consider; the world's poorest will suffer first from the effects of climate change, and they will also suffer the worst. This is undeniable.

Locally, new nuclear developments will transform West Cumbria, and Copeland in particular. As one of the authors of Britain's Energy Coast, I know just how dependent we are on the nuclear industry – our hospitals, schools, shops, roads, housing market, even down to crime levels, all depend on the prosperity which Sellafield provides. Without this, West Cumbria as we know it would cease to exist and the economic and social transition would be brutal – mass unemployment, collapsed public services, an exodus of people; effectively a repeat of the Highland clearances for the 21st century.

Critics – none of whom are accountable to the people of West Cumbria – will call for the cessation of operations at Sellafield and for no new nuclear developments to be brought forward without ever addressing these issues. This isn't good enough. The economy of Copeland cannot thrive on wishful thinking. I have repeatedly challenged those against the nuclear industry to produce an alternative economic plan for West Cumbria – time and again, no plan has been produced. The truth is there is no 'plan B' (or at least not one they dare reveal) and new nuclear developments are now much more than 'a last resort'. As a West Cumbrian, irrespective of holding elected office, I will always stand up against those who seek to harm our best interests and blight the futures of our children, our economy and our environment.

At the same time as changing policy, the nuclear new-build team and I have worked hard to attract investors to Copeland who want to invest in new nuclear. Only a few years ago, it was unthinkable that the Sellafield area would be a candidate site for new nuclear build. Now, we have a major multinational nuclear consortium which has bought the land adjacent to Sellafield and plans to build three nuclear reactors there, beginning in 2015. In addition, we have the National Nuclear Laboratory, we have the National Nuclear Skills Academy, and soon the University of Manchester's Dalton Facility will be constructed at Westlakes Science Park. All are committed to further developing the nuclear industry locally. These are internationally significant developments and we can now work towards becoming the international centre of excellence for the nuclear industry. With this now in train, there is no need to develop either Kirksanton or Braystones as nuclear sites – this would not make economic or environmental sense given that the land adjacent to Sellafield could potentially house up to nine reactors and the infrastructure to cater for such developments would already be in place in the Sellafield area by 2025. The economic arguments are so compelling that I do not believe that either Kirksanton or Braystones will ever be developed and I will continue to make these points throughout the consultation over these proposed sites. It is far more sensible and cost-effective to pursue a reactor park on the land adjacent to Sellafield, should future reactors be required.

Ultimately, I want to see the new reactors powered by Mox fuel produced at Sellafield. This would also be supported by continued international reprocessing at Thorp. Such a development would provide over six per cent of our country's electricity needs over 50-60 years, whilst avoiding the emission of over half a billion tonnes of CO² into the environment. By utilising the plutonium and uranium stockpiles at Sellafield, this would also help to solve proliferation concerns by putting these valuable materials safely beyond use and so helping to rid the world of nuclear weapons. This is our aim.

This can only happen here. The Windscale pioneers cannot have known that their work would have led to a lasting post-war peace and the development of a new international industry; but today's generation of new nuclear pioneers – from Kells, Mirehouse, Egremont, Millom, Cleator Moor – will know that their work will make a lasting contribution to safeguarding our country, our economy, our environment and our planet. This December, as the governments of every country meet to create a successor treaty to the Kyoto protocol, Britain now goes with the ability to lead the developed world in reducing its CO² emissions thanks to our nuclear renaissance.

In the process, West Cumbria will be transformed, for the better, beyond all recognition. This is the future we have fought for, the future our children deserve. We are building a new West Cumbria and our best days are now ahead of us.

Jill Perry Green Party general election candidate for Copeland

THE Government has just announced that 10 sites around the UK can be fast-tracked through the planning system for nuclear new build. Three of them are along the Cumbrian coast, two of them on greenfield sites.

This is bad news for the fight against climate change. Even with changes in the planning system it will still take far too long to deliver a new nuclear power station. Promised building timescales slip badly. At Olkiuoto, Finland, the plant promised to be built in four years will now take at least twice that. There can be no new nuclear power stations operating in the UK before 2015, and probably much later than that.

Because carbon dioxide stays in the atmosphere for about 100 years, cutting emissions quickly is important. Delay means that much deeper cuts will have to be made later.

The Sustainable Development Commission calculated the effect of replacing existing nuclear generation with new nuclear capacity. This might reduce overall emissions in 2020 by 2.4 per cent. They also considered doubling the contribution of nuclear power, which might cut overall emissions by 6.5 per cent in 2030. Either of these options is miniscule compared with what is needed, and too late.

It is bad news for the economy. The cost of this programme will be huge and unpredictable. At the most recent British nuclear power plant, Sizewell B, capital costs more than doubled. In Finland the promised price has already more than doubled to 5.5 billion euros.

Our Government insisted that any new build is privately financed and companies were apparently content with this, but we always suspected this would change. Nowhere has a nuclear power station been built on these terms, and independent analysts think it impossible for the UK unless help is given with the construction, power price and operational risks. In fact EDF has asked the Government for financial help to build the new reactors.

It's bad news for jobs. A new-build programme would create employment, although whether the large figures being bandied about are realistic is debatable. Nor are there guarantees that the jobs would come to Cumbrians. Only about one third of the jobs at Olkiluoto went to Finnish people.

No assessment has been made of the jobs that will be lost in other industries – farming and tourism locally – as West Cumbria regains its nuclear status, but also in the wider public sector as nuclear subsidies result in a drain on public funds. Nor of the jobs that could come, if we went a different route.

It's bad news for the environment. From the cradle to the grave nuclear is bad news. Uranium mining is often an exploitative affair. Campaigners from Tuareg, Niger, describe vividly the environmental degradation and human rights abuses caused by uranium mining.

Currently the Ranua people of Lapland, Finland, are fighting proposals for uranium prospecting and to mining which threatens traditional livelihoods and would destroy this vast northern wilderness area.

There are considerable risks in operating the reactors. Neither of the types under consideration is licensed or operating yet, although EPRs are being built in Finland and France. The EPR was supposed to set a new standard for nuclear safety but Finnish nuclear safety authorities have detected about 3,000 minor and critical safety problems. Contractors have attempted to hide their mistakes by fabricating measurements and covering up defective structures. The Finnish, UK and French nuclear safety authorities have found the design of the control system of the reactor to be at odds with basic principles of nuclear safety.

As yet there is no solution for existing radioactive waste. A Geological Disposal Facility (underground waste dump) is hugely controversial, and although the industry and politicians tell us that there are no technical problems to burial, this is simply not the case. Geological and gas-related problems (amongst others) still remain to be solved. Much of West Cumbria is unhappy about volunteering to host a waste dump.

The waste from a new generation of reactors would be even more problematic and dangerous. The industry tells us it is high-efficiency, high burn-up fuel which sounds good, but means that the waste fuel is more radioactive and less stable, and is even more difficult to store underground.

A Missed Opportunity

THERE is a far better way to reduce our climate change emissions, which is more effective, cheaper, provides more jobs and does not result in a contaminated environment.

We propose a low-carbon energy system that includes making "every building a power station". The energy efficiency of existing buildings will be maximised, as will the use of renewables to generate electricity.

A "carbon army" of workers will be trained. Country-wide we will have hundreds of thousands of jobs created. The housing stock of West Cumbria is, in general, older and less energy efficient than that of other parts of the country so many jobs would be created locally, improving insulation and heating systems and installing domestic sized renewable energy systems.

For a nuclear power station to be built at Kirksanton, the Haverigg windfarm would have to be demolished. What more potent symbol of this Government's abject policy failure is there?

Frank Hollowell, Liberal Democrat Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Copeland

A CORRESPONDENT asked in The Whitehaven News (letters, November 5) where I stand on the issue of nuclear power. It is clearly a critical issue in our constituency and I am happy to answer her.

The question of a new generation of nuclear power stations is a difficult one for me as I have major concerns about the unresolved issues of storage of intermediate and high-level waste and also the cost, particularly when decommissioning is included in the equation. However, we also need to take radical action to tackle climate change and global warming, and we have a uniquely skilled and committed working community at Sellafield.

Nationally my party remains opposed to further development of nuclear power, and the majority judge that we still have time to develop the scale of renewables needed, and to implement the energy-saving measures necessary to allow a low-carbon and non-nuclear future. But an increasing number, including Chris Davies our North West MEP, feel that after years of underfunding, lack of motivation and the poor strategic vision of both Labour and Conservative governments in promoting renewables and energy saving, we have now passed the point where we can avoid following the nuclear path. I myself am now amongst this latter group.

As a pragmatist, I now believe we will have to build one further generation of safe, low-carbon nuclear power stations to fight climate change and global warming. and if we are to have such facilities, then Copeland is probably the most suitable place in the UK to site one or more of them, given its long experience of nuclear technologies.

However, there continue to be legitimate concerns about nuclear power, and we require an MP here who will also emphasise the importance of energy-saving, and drive forward the future development of clean renewables, for which there are great opportunities here in Cumbria, in the context of the admirable Energy Coast vision, which I support.

I am committed to becoming that MP because I believe in the Lib Dems' long-standing vision of a safe and sustainable environment. In the future, in my view, it is vital that we move the West Cumbrian economy away from an unhealthy over-dependence on the nuclear industry.

Chris Whiteside, Conservative Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Copeland

BRITAIN needs new nuclear build as part of a balanced energy policy. And West Cumbria has a huge amount to offer as one of the best places to site a new nuclear power facility. If new nuclear power stations are built at Sellafield it will be good for Britain and good for Copeland.

Of course, we should negotiate hard to ensure that this area gets the best possible deal. Considering what a huge contribution to Britain's energy needs West Cumbria has made over the centuries, most recently through our support of nuclear power, the benefits to the area have not always matched what should have been expected.

This area provided the first working nuclear power plant in Britain. We look after the vast majority of Britain's nuclear waste. Corresponding improvements in local infrastructure – for health and education as well as roads and transport – have been real but should have been even greater.

We must not sell this area too cheaply, either in negotiations on new nuclear power, or if there is a new repository to provide a long-term solution for nuclear waste.

I believe terms can be obtained from future governments, both Conservative and Labour, to ensure Copeland gets a fair share of benefits which new nuclear can bring to Britain. This needs a consensus involving both main parties, because of the timescales involved. It is almost certain that there will be more than one change in government during the lifetime of any new nuclear power station, indeed, before construction even starts on any new repository. The framework for new nuclear build must have a broad basis of support.

The first reason why the contribution of nuclear power as part of a balanced energy policy is so important is energy security. The more sources of power a country has, the more secure: the best advocate of new nuclear build in Britain is Russian premier Vladimir Putin. If we don't want to have to worry about our lights going out every time the Ukrainians and Russians have an argument about the gas bill, we can't afford to be too dependent on Russian gas.

The second is climate change. Arguments about climate change are complex, and we do not understand how our planet functions as well as some would have you believe. But there is considerable evidence that releasing too much carbon into the atmosphere could have grave consequences for our children and grandchildren – not just through changing the temperature but through turning the oceans acid.

We need a major shift towards low-carbon energy. There is just one form of low-carbon electricity generation which is proven, cheaper than other forms of low-carbon power even with decommissioning costs, and works all the time including when the sun is covered by cloud or the wind isn't blowing. That is nuclear power.

About 20 per cent of Britain's electricity has come from nuclear power in recent years, which is the vast majority of our low-carbon energy. Existing nuclear plants are reaching the end of their lives, and if they are replaced with high-carbon power, our chances of hitting Britain's climate change targets are zero.

The third is safety. Nuclear power in this country is rarely given credit for the fact that its safety record is better than many other industries including other sources of power. The ward I represent on Copeland Borough Council contains the former William Pit: shortly after my election to the council I was one of several thousand people who marched through Whitehaven to commemorate a terrible disaster in that mine 60 years before – just one of many disasters in the life of one mine which claimed more than 300 lives between them.

No industry is totally risk-free or has a perfect safety record, but nuclear power in this country has claimed fewer lives than any realistic alternative.

There will be challenges in developing nuclear power. One is grid capacity. Conservative policy is to mandate the national grid to provide offshore power cables down both West and East coasts. This challenge can be met.

Another is infrastructure. Committing to new-build first and letting the infrastructure follow will not do, not least because we will need the infrastructure to support the construction of new facilities. A clear plan for infrastructure, building on and improving the Energy Coast masterplan, must be put in place as part of the agreement for any new reactors. Which is why the third challenge – local democratic input – is so important. The government was right to change the planning process to reduce the ability of external pressure groups to delay agreement for years by going over the same ground again and again.

If they are allowed to delay approval of new power plants for the best part of a decade, the way they did over Sizewell, we will have power cuts on a massive scale in the second half of the coming decade. Vote Green (or Lib Dem) if you want the lights to go out.

But the government threw the baby out with the bathwater when they took local democratic input out of the decision making process by handing it over to an unelected national Infrastructure Planning Commission. A Conservative government would balance the need to take decisions in a realistic timescale with proper local democratic consultation on genuinely local issues. This would probably take the form of having type approvals for nuclear power designs and keeping the National Policy Statements from the recent act, subject to parliamentary scrutiny, but scrapping the national infrastructure commission.

So there would be a role for genuinely local input, which is important to us if we are to have an opportunity to negotiate a fair deal for Copeland, but no repeat of the misuse of local inquiries to fight out general issues of principle which are not local and have already been settled by parliament.

Nuclear power has been an important part of our past – and can help secure our future.

Martin Forwood, Cumbrians Opposed to a Radioactive Environment

MP JAMIE Reed pontificates in his inimitable and patronising way that new reactors at Sellafield ‘will have an incredibly positive impact on us all’ (The Whitehaven News, October 29), and that the development has ‘the support of the entire community’ (November 12). How so, Jamie? Who have you asked, what have you asked, when have you asked, what consultations have you had and with which community, and where are the opinion polls and documented evidence to back up your claims?

Such evidence showing such fulsome support is of course non-existent for the simple reason that it was never his intention to let anything prevent the imposition of his own cherished preference of unbridled nuclear expansion. Under the wafer-thin disguise of Britain’s Energy Coast masterplan, he and his cohort of blinkered and self-serving development quangos, agencies and pro-nuclear local authorities have shown scant concern for the many negative impacts that will inevitably result from such a development and even less thought as to whether West Cumbrians and the county as a whole actually want to be guinea pigs in this over-hyped nuclear expansion.

While he and his minions pay lip-service to the development of renewable energies under the Energy Coast plan, it will be obvious to most that nuclear expansion will always take preference and be pushed to the forefront. Whether in the form of a reactor park alongside Sellafield hosting up to nine reactors, an underground nuclear waste dump, a new MOX plant or even more reprocessing, such a one-sided business base is guaranteed to act as the major deterrent to non-nuclear investment and jobs being attracted to an area that will inevitably be labelled as a place to avoid – Britain’s nuclear leper colony.

With the slickest sales patter, we are relentlessly served up the usual mish-mash of skewed facts and figures, including those on new reactor jobs which bear no resemblance to the numbers forecast by the prospective French or German developers themselves. Whilst this skewing of the facts to make a wretched proposition more palatable to a questioning public has been the hallmark of the nuclear industry over the decades, it is not however the sole preserve of Copeland’s MP and his co-conspirators.

The Government’s latest report on its assessment of various criteria – such as flooding, coastal erosion and landscape value etc – for reactor build at Kirksanton is a prime example. For despite acknowledging a significant number of what it terms as risks, negative impacts and adverse effects posed by new-build on the site, the Government shows an equally devious sleight of hand in then concluding that ‘the site is potentially suitable’.

Once again we are witnessing the promotion of an industry that, lacking any economic or environmental merit, must rely for its survival on the peddling of misinformation by its proponents. A damning indictment.

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