

Black to Basics

Greenwashing advertisements have now become commonplace in which slick campaigns are centered on being 'green' and more importantly, 'taking responsibility for our carbon footprints'. Perhaps it is time that the bigger electricity suppliers and the government took some of their own advice?

Numerous articles in the press have recently pointed the finger at these offenders for their conflicting private and public agenda – publicly we are all set for a heavy green agenda taking centre stage, from the political platform, right down selecting the most efficient type of lightbulb in your airing cupboard.

Whilst privately four of the big 6, notably E.On, RWE npower, Scottish Power and Scottish and Southern Energy are all planning development of new coal-burning generators, which produce double the amount of carbon emissions than using gas burning technology. This seems an odd investment to make as coal is the original mass polluter, the dirtiest fossil fuel which “let global warming out of its cage” in the first place.

Since the big contenders are focussing their multi-million pound campaigns around utilising precisely the opposite type of fuel to generate their energy, it forces one to ask the reasons which lie behind this massive public contradiction?

The government have as much of a role to play in promoting greener renewables to alleviate the looming energy gap, but they seriously underplay their intentions to publicise the fact that they have made a commitment to “securing a long-term future of coal-fired power generation”, which was buried on page 112 of a government report.

Additionally, according to another government paper, “£20 billion of new coal-fired power stations planned to be built in the UK before 2020” it seems that there will be little remaining to invest be that from the government or the big suppliers to put into desperately demanded research and development into carbon capture and storage (CSS): the other trick the government claims to have up its sleeve – the ability to capture carbon emissions and bury them safely within the earth. So, carbon emissions from coal for example, would be made more environmentally safe.

This would bring the UK ever-closer to its important CO2 reduction targets, with some deadlines in just 3 years, its last minute decision time for the government. As Paul Golby, UK chief executive of E.ON has noted, “it's five minutes to midnight and the clock is still ticking” little time is remaining for the government to even make a dent in the UK's climate change targets.

Shockingly, hidden in a number of low-key government documents are the facts: “CSS would not be commercially viable unless costs fell substantially...or unless the carbon price rose sufficiently to provide a larger financial incentive”. This enforces that CSS is not the easy answer to the prayers of the government and large suppliers to give the green light to using resources for energy which have a heavy carbon output such as coal, using CSS technology to counter this.

Therefore, the only remaining light of hope for the government is that by the time 'safer' UCG - Underground Coal Gasification (an alternative to old-fashioned less safe open-cast mining, where coal is drilled instead of mined) is developed enough for widespread use and when used in future with the more developed CSS, minimal greenhouse gasses are produced, it could have the ideal mass market to flourish within for the price to be competitive. The government could then freely publicise its firm commitment to using coal as its main source of energy and with an estimated five billion tonnes of previously unreachable coal under the Firth of Fourth alone, the energy gap crisis could be over for the foreseeable future.

The commitment of a black future has been enforced with recent pit openings in South Wales which will excavate 1,000 acres of land to a depth of 600 feet, it illustrates that solving the energy gap is no small feat. Ten out of twelve planning applications for new open-cast coal mines were approved in 2006 alone.

And yet, fingers from the UK are always the first to be pointed at nations which rely on coal-fired energy generation like China and India – but as the UK seem re-focussed upon utilising the unhealthier conventions of energy generation such as coal, it does seem somewhat hypocritical.

With a general election within our sights, green energy has been manipulated to playing something of a smoke and mirrors tactic as a means to strengthen the government's election campaign by seemingly taking the upper hand in performing a miracle to solve the energy gap crisis, by providing a reliable and environmentally friendly energy supply solution, whilst reducing emissions: all ahead of schedule.

Taking this into account, the future looks black, Alistair Darling in May 2007 reported that the mass planned development of coal-burning power stations could “commit [us] to massive emissions for 40 years”. This of course, indicates that the potentially election-winning means of cleaner energy provision using greener renewable resource is simply off the agenda (especially with rumours of the UK abandoning its climate change targets) – its

just no one's told the millions of voters that yet.

About the Author

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