



Energy policy and climate change

European energy update

Commentary

Since 2006 when the films on this album were made, there have been changes in national energy policies within Europe. Some of these have been significant, others less so. France remains committed to nuclear power and it seems unlikely that this will change in the near future.

Godfrey Boyle:

Because of France being fairly poorly endowed with fossil fuels it has, and also because I suppose France was very keen to achieve nuclear weapons independence, the nuclear energy industry grew up alongside the nuclear weapons industry and France has now developed the world's biggest nuclear industry of all.- There's been a small change in that France, like all EU countries, has accepted the new EU directive and is going to increase its renewable power contribution quite a bit, and President Sarkozy, who's come to power since the video was made, has put in place measures to increase the renewables and wind power contribution, biofuel, and solar, so France is going for renewables in quite a big way, as well as continuing with nuclear. They're building one new nuclear power station at Flamanville, called the European Pressurised Water Reactor, the EPR, and there's another one being built in Finland.

The French are keen to build these new nuclear sort of third generation of nuclear power plant all over the place, and Finland and France are the first two and they're hoping Germany will be next

Commentary

In 2006 Germany was one of the most progressive countries in Europe but recent political events may slow down the pace of change.

Godfrey Boyle:

Just since the new, the recent elections in Germany the Social Democrats have fallen out of power and there's a new coalition it looks likely that they will change the phase out of nuclear to extend the life of the existing nuclear power stations and also that they will make the Feed-In Tariff a little bit less attractive for renewables, although again because of the, the now the fact that renewable energy industry in Germany has got a lot of industrial clout they don't want to offend the renewable energy industry too much so, in fact, the word seems to be that although they may reduce the Feed-In Tariff a bit, they won't do it so much as to hurt the industry which is now a very big player, the renewable energy bandwagon in Germany has been, is rolling with such big momentum that it would be mad to stop it, basically.

Commentary

Denmark too has a new coalition government but it has maintained its commitment to alternative energy.

Godfrey Boyle:

Denmark is a small but very sort of progressive and enlightened country and which--It has been a strongly environmental conscious country for a long time. they had a sort of tradition of kind of rural craftsmanship in Denmark and they built very early wind turbines way back in the sixties, and then as the oil crisis hit in the seventies they decided to develop the wind industry a bit more actively, together with also, they've also had a very keenness, a great keenness for combined heat and power and that's a very much more efficient way of generating both heat and power because you don't waste the heat from the electricity generation the way we do in Britain. the energy efficiency of buildings. They, there was the joke that in Denmark you wouldn't be allowed to build a barn to British building regulation standards, in other words that even their barns for the cattle were better insulated than our, than our, than our houses are.

Whether that's true or not, I don't know, but it was a joke that was cracked way back in the seventies.

Commentary

In 2006, Britain was facing some tough choices about the future of its energy industry. There had been several major but inconclusive government reviews. The issues remain complex, with nuclear and coal-fired power stations still under consideration, but renewable energy is now being taken much more seriously.

Godfrey Boyle:

I think the things that have changed are that there's been a stronger commitment to carbon reduction in Britain, the committee on climate change recently produced a report, which has been accepted by the government, which increased Britain's target for carbon reduction from 60%, which is the figure mentioned in the film, to 80% so it's now official policy that Britain will have an 80% carbon reduction by 2050, so we have committed ourselves to really quite rigorous targets for the future in Britain,

Wind energy is now the fastest growing energy source of all worldwide. Britain has been lagging behind in wind power, and still is lagging behind, but it's now finally making strenuous attempts to catch up by installing offshore wind, and now Britain actually has taken lead in offshore wind. North Sea oil transformed the British economy in the seventies and now offshore wind induces a very similar transformation, it's an absolutely enormous resource which we could not only use ourselves, but export via high voltage DC connections to the rest of Europe.

Commentary

In theory, carbon capture is another possible approach to reducing CO2 emissions. The technology continues to develop, but it remains largely untried.

Godfrey Boyle:

There have been a number of pilot plants which show it's perfectly feasible to capture carbon from the fossil fuel, power production, But it hasn't been demonstrated on a large scale anywhere, even the Kingsnorth power plant which the government I think originally wanted all of the carbon to be captured from it before we could get permission, it finally had to adopt the fallback position that I think in that there'd be two phases and only in the second phase would the carbon be captured because of the sheer impracticality of doing such a big project so quickly. Whether that's special pleading on behalf of the energy industries that, you know, they really could do it, it'd just mean that either they'd need to get more government support or whether that's really factually correct I can't really say. I mean there's an awful lot of posturing goes on in these sorts of negotiations, you know, that the utilities will sell, we couldn't possibly do this without a big government subsidy whereas in fact, you know, they probably could really if they put their own money into it.

And then another aspect of it is that it's one thing to capture the carbon, it's another thing to where are you going to store it. Luckily Britain has got quite a few potential storage sites in disused oil wells and gas ones, they're all around the North Sea, but even that involves capturing it on a very large scale and piping it through big long pipelines into holes in the ground. there are some residual problems. One is that the, there's some energies required to capture the carbon. Also capturing the carbon from power plants does decrease the efficiency of them a bit so therefore you need to burn a bit more coal to get the same amount of electricity out, so that's an offsetting counter effect. But nevertheless I suppose it would be an awful lot better if we have to have more coal-fired power plants, but they'd be fitted with carbon capturing storage then that they should not be.

Commentary

As always, in Britain and indeed in the rest of the world, energy policy remains a complex mixture of scientific, technological and ultimately political considerations. When in 2008, London elected Boris Johnson, a new mayor with a very different agenda than his predecessor, Ken Livingstone, some thought that everything would change.

Godfrey Boyle:

We chose to put the London segment in the course because it showed what you might do in admittedly a very large municipality, and also because Ken Livingstone and his crew, who were running London until recently, had some quite ambitious climate change goals. They acknowledged that climate change was a major problem, and that London ought to set an example since Boris Johnson came to power a lot of people feel that he would not accept Ken's approach but he seems to have undergone a sort of Damascene conversion, because he was, you know, a great climate change sceptic and he was very scathing about climate change and his columns in the Telegraph or whatever it was, Spectator, and he's recounted all his previous beliefs and he now claims to be believing in climate change, and has adopted most of Ken's targets for alleviating and reducing carbon emissions in London, which is quite a good thing really.