

# OPINION

## POWER WHERE IT'S NEEDED

The latest twist in the troubled saga of Britain's 'nuclear renaissance' is that Moorside, a proposed new power station adjacent to the Sellafield complex, has been cancelled. Some west Cumbrian residents, hoping for jobs in an area whose eggs are all firmly in the nuclear basket, are understandably dismayed. Others though are celebrating. Their determined resistance has no doubt played a part in making this a commercially unviable project.

The writing had been on the wall for Moorside ever since the 2017 bankruptcy of Westinghouse, a US subsidiary of Japanese consortium leaders Toshiba. Still reeling from the financial consequences of Fukushima, Toshiba have now finally pulled out of all new projects outside their home market.

### Three, Two ... One?

The demise of Moorside cuts the list of proposed sites from six to five, and the consortia involved from three to two: Horizon, headed by Japanese firm Hitachi, and a group headed by Electricité de France (EDF). Increasingly desperate to keep the show on the road, the Government has agreed to demands from Horizon not only to invest £5 billion of public money into their proposed plant at Wylfa in Anglesey, but also to underwrite the inevitable 'cost overruns', which could reach £20 billion. The stage is set for future showdowns when these bills come in. After Wylfa, Hitachi intend to build a similar plant at Oldbury in Gloucestershire.

Hinkley Point C may yet end up the only plant to get built. Given the track record of EDF's EPR reactor design though, even that is uncertain. EDF are keen to exercise their option on Sizewell C, and construction there is optimistically scheduled to start in 2021. But financially EDF are in serious trouble, and in reality Sizewell may need to wait until Hinkley is up and running.

### A Chinese Puzzle

EDF are also majority owners of the UK's eight existing nuclear power stations, but are rumoured to be seeking to reduce their stake in these, to help fund the black hole of Hinkley. The only likely buyer is their existing consortium partner, the China General Nuclear Power Corporation (CGN). Likewise, if EDF ever did withdraw entirely from Hinkley, the likely outcome would be a full CGN takeover.

Financed by the deep pockets of the Chinese state, CGN are potentially the most significant part of this global jigsaw puzzle. They make huge investments where others fear to tread, in uranium mines as well as in power stations. As part of their deal to underwrite the EPRs at Hinkley and Sizewell, they have also



obtained the right to build their own Hualong One reactor at Bradwell in Essex. Technology approvals for this are ongoing.

A west Cumbrian Tory MP recently visited China, asking CGN to 'rescue' Moorside. But the politics of Chinese state involvement in UK infrastructure are already explosive, and approval for a Chinese nuclear power station right next to Sellafield seems unlikely.

### Reasons to be Wary

The Government shamelessly describes nuclear as 'clean energy', even though it is manifestly dirty and risky at every stage, from uranium mining, to plant operation, to the massive unsolved issue of waste disposal – which as reported in our last issue, seems set also to end up in lucky Cumbria.

Jim Kay

Military links explain both why the UK has a civil nuclear programme in the first place, and why Sellafield hosts the world's biggest plutonium stockpile. The latest attempt at covert subsidy of weapons programmes is the industry's demand for funding to develop 'Small Modular Reactors' for civil use, oddly similar to those used in submarines. But post-Brexit, such subsidy is likely to be in very short supply.

### The Big Picture

In all this drama, one key 'big picture' argument is often neglected. Power is best generated as close as possible to where it's to be used. Making this work requires the right technologies, including renewable microgeneration, localised grid design, and storage. In rural locations, autonomous off-grid solutions are often best. It also relies critically on demand reduction. Just properly insulating all UK housing could save more electricity than Hinkley C will produce.

Nuclear power concentrates 'dirty' in one place and 'clean' in another. At the point of use, the impacts are safely out of sight and out of mind. All large scale grid technologies do this, but nuclear is the most extreme of all. This same binary thinking underpins the promotion of rewilding, as the flipside of ruthless further intensification of hi-tech agriculture, by 'ecomodernists' like our old friend Mark Lynas. Ecomodernists, of course, love nuclear power.

As often noted in these pages, such trends entail not only the ever-increasing concentration of land ownership, but also the loss of long-honed technologies and practices which enable humans to live in the world without destroying it. It is not just preferable to aim at sensitive integration of human presence with nature. In the end, there is no other option.

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