Carte blanche for environmentalist vandalism

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Last week, we wrote of the reduced tolerance shown by courts to those who had deliberately trashed GM crop trials; an encouraging trend which seemed to redefine what is or is not acceptable in the name of protecting the environment. However, the opposite has now occurred in a case of climate change protestors.

Five Greenpeace activists scaled the chimney of E.ON's coal-fired power station in Kingsnorth, Kent last October to try to shut down the plant (this year also saw several days of protest against plans to build a new coal station on the site). Their original plan to paint "Gordon, bin it" was cut short, leaving a chimney apparently named Gordon. A prosecution for criminal damage was brought against them plus a sixth Greenpeace member who planned the protest.

The defense argued that the damage was justified because of the dangers caused by additional carbon dioxide emissions, an argument previously used mainly when damage has been caused to protect the property of others from immediate harm. The defence called the well-known American climate scientist, Professor Jim Hansen of NASA, as an expert witness. His testimony included the claim that emissions from the current Kingsnorth plant would lead to the extinction of up to 400 species. Millionaire Zac Goldsmith, ex-editor of The Ecologist, environmental adviser to David Cameron and prospective Tory MP, also gave evidence, and argued support for coal-fired stations would make it difficult for the UK to push for emissions reductions in other countries.

To the surprise - indeed, shock - of many, the jury accepted the defence of "lawful excuse" and acquitted all of the defendants. This is a clear signal for more such protests to be carried out with impunity. Not only will headlines be made, but the protestors will likely get off scot-free. This is a dangerously slippery slope, allowing Greenpeace and others to promote their view of the world with little fear of the consequences. Hopefully, this tolerance will not last.

The "lawful excuse" defence was successfully used also in 2000 in the case against Lord Melchett and another merry band of Greenpeace activists who decided to destroy a GM field trial. Since then, as we have seen, the legal system (in some countries, at least) has started taking a more robust view of environmental vandalism and some of the perpetrators have received fines or prison sentences. But the damage was done; the message was that society would to a large extent find acceptable what it considered to be damage done in a good cause. The green movement has always considered that the end justifies the means, and this reinforced their belief in themselves.

Politically, this was acceptable for an issue like crop biotechnology. Mollifying the green movement disadvantaged EU farmers to some extent but this was seen by governments as a relatively minor matter in the context of farming generally and the Common Agricultural Policy in particular. Not so for power generation: environmental concerns

will not be high on most people's lists of concerns if the lights start going out. The UK government has a difficult task on its hands: it has to push through the building of a range of new power stations - nuclear, gas and coal - if it is to plug the looming gap. But it can expect fierce opposition from green activists.

Future energy security and emissions reductions

This week also saw the publication of a very timely report, the lessons of which need to be viewed in the context of the growing emphasis on renewable energy. Professor Ian Fells, with co-author Candida Whitmill, has produced the eminently sensible "A Pragmatic Energy Policy for the UK". The primary arguments are that the government has moved too slowly to address the looming energy gap and that its plans to rely heavily on renewables are now unrealistic and unrealisable. The UK may face a very specific set of problems, but other EU member states have similar dilemmas to cope with.

One key aspect is, of course, the planned decommissioning of the majority of the UK's nuclear generating capacity, which at one time provided about 20% of the country's total electricity. Having for many years effectively discounted the building of new nuclear power stations, policymakers have belated come to support this option, but this comes at a time when the UK's own nuclear engineering base has been severely eroded and other countries are also planning to install new reactors. The competition for resources will compound the already long lead times.

Gas-fired stations are relatively quick to build and would seem to be the likely quick fix to provide energy security, but this of course increases dependence on imported gas, either by pipeline from Russia or liquefied from other sources. Further energy dependence on Russia does not seem politically sensible. To make matters worse, UK gas storage capacity is still inadequate, since it was deemed unnecessary when North Sea gas fields were at their most productive. There is surely a lesson to be learnt about planning for the very long term for something as vital as energy security.

Loss of nuclear generating capacity will run in parallel with the decommissioning of some of the older coal-fired stations. Proven coal deposits are still vast and could provide power worldwide for a century or two to come, but the Kingsnorth saga shows that building new coal-fired plants will require a degree of political will in the face of pressure from environmentalists. At present, it seems that the protestors may have the upper hand, but faced with a choice between power cuts and more coal burning, it is certain that environmental concerns would take second place. The as-yet-unproven carbon capture and storage option could of course keep most people happy, albeit at high cost and a significant loss of efficiency.

The intended route out of this dilemma is an enormous expansion of renewable power generation, including the installation of 7,000 off-shore wind turbines which the UK simply does not have the capacity to put in place by then. The target for all EU member states is for 15% of total energy to come from renewables by 2020. This does not sound a

completely unreasonable target until we realise that it means 40% of all UK electricity being generated from renewable sources.

Professor Fells supports the reduction in carbon emissions and the use of renewable technologies, but he is also a realist and points out clearly that the figures simply don't add up. He recommends long-term options such as the construction of a Severn barrage to tap tidal power, and a move to make electricity the primary energy source for road traffic. Both are quite feasible, but hardly quick fixes (and a Severn barrage will raise further environmental concerns). Electrification of road transport will require a large further expansion in electricity generating capacity. In the meantime, both domestic and industrial users have a right to expect an energy-secure future.

What we need from our politicians now is the focus and will to plug the short-term energy gap (with an acceptance that climate change policy must be a lower priority for the time being) together with a robust and realistic long-term strategy. Sooner or later, good intentions collide with reality, and reality always wins.

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