

British electricity producers want to replace old coal-fired power stations with new, more efficient ones. Environmental activists want to have none of it. The government is deeply divided.

UK government put on spot

| by Chris Cragg

Coal has rarely been out of the news in the UK recently. In 2008 alone, there have already been six major demonstrations against the use of coal in power stations, with protesters using ever more ingenious methods of disruption. They have invaded plants, blockaded new coal mine sites, halted coal trains and even super-glued themselves to the revolving door of the mining giant BHP-Billiton's headquarters.

It is not difficult to see why the environmentalist lobby does not want to see any new coal-fired power stations built in Britain. In the 1950s, Prime Minister MacMillan once remarked that there were three institutions that no sensible politician would ever take on: the Roman Catholic Church, the Brigade of Guards and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). At the time, UK electricity production was almost entirely dependent on home-produced coal.

Mrs Thatcher changed all that and did indeed 'take on' the NUM, resulting in a strike that lasted nearly a year in 1984-85. As a result, the country's coal production fell from over 120 million tonnes in the 1970s to under 10 million last year. A convenient 'gas-bubble' in the North Sea led to the construction of many gas-fired plants, and the use of gas in the power sector grew rapidly to 40% as coal's share fell to 33%. This shift alone was largely

responsible for the Blair Government's misleading boast that Britain was well on the way to achieving its CO₂ target cuts.

For the Greens, a retreat back into coal as an electricity producer, let alone an increase in indigenous coal production, is totemic. But for the electricity industry, matters are not so simple. Increasingly aware that the UK grid lacks baseload power for the future and that natural gas looks increasingly expensive, not to mention risky in terms of supply, the industry has been dusting off old plans to replace the existing list of 20 coal-fired plants amounting to 25 GW.



These plants, as Eon UK has explained, are, to say the least, 'sub-critical in design', with efficiencies of 35-38%. Given that they are all over 30 years old, this is hardly surprising; they are not easy to maintain. When attacked over widespread power cuts in May, National Grid pointed

out that although the main problem was at a nuclear plant, the other tripped plant - the 2,300 MW Longannet coal-burner - had had two of its turbines under maintenance for over a year and only had 350 MW on line at the time. There have been plenty of rumours about over-long maintenance periods all summer.

Consequently, the industry now has plans for 10 new coal-fired plants amounting to 13.6 GW, possibly by 2014. To allay the Greens' fears, the industry has been keen to point out that all of these will use supercritical steam and achieve efficiencies as high as 50%. Not only will the plans reduce the coal-sector's role as the old plants retire, but they will also reduce the coal-burn per MWh.

But their claims have fallen on deaf ears. In the eye of the storm is Kingsnorth, Eon's proposal for a 1,600 MW plant to replace 2,000 MW on the same site. Local planning permission has been granted. The unpopular decision now rests with Gordon Brown's government. This decision has not been made easier by a court decision allowing a defence of 'lawful excuse' for six Greenpeace activists who painted 'GORDON' on Kingsnorth's existing chimney. The defendants pointed out that they had planned to paint 'GORDON BIN IT!' but didn't have the time. Police delivered a High Court injunction by helicopter to stop them. ■