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The Problem With UK Nuclear Plans

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I spent decades in energy. Here are the problems with UK nuclear plans

[The following article by John Proctor, Convenor of Energy Scotland was published in The National Newspaper on 31st January, 2026.]

It is clear that the issue of Scotland's moratorium on new nuclear power will be a key battleline in the May election. Anas Sarwar has joined the Michael Shanks MP in the call for more building more nuclear power in Scotland and the electricity cables to take the generated electricity to energy hungry England. Michael Shanks MP continues to declare that he would be relaxed about having a Small Modularised Reactor (SMR) erected in his constituency. I am not sure how the good people of Rutherglen feel about this.

What I find mystifying is the lack of proper scrutiny being applied to the claims made by those members of the Nuclear Energy All-Party Parliamentary Group and their well-funded nuclear lobbyists. It does not surprise me that they are unable to set out what configuration they favour, as the reactors which they claim will produce 400 MWs do not exist. They have not been manufactured, tested or installed – anywhere!

As an Engineer, I would be keen to ask the politicians if they have thought about some of the basic elements of a power plant. Do they have any ideas what the thermal capacity of the proposed reactors are? Have they understood what the cooling requirements might be? How about the status of design of the 'core catcher' (the system designed to prevent a Chernobyl type event)?

Be under no illusion Mr Shanks and Mr Sarwar and the Nuclear lobby are building a Potemkin village.

They of course don't want to talk about the European Power Reactor (EPR) configuration being installed at astronomical cost at Hinkley C. This project is forecast to cost £45,000,000,000 when it finally comes on line sometime next decade. It is not easy to get a proper sense of this sum – but it might surprise people to realise that this is the equivalent of paying £1 million every single day for 110 years – and this is just the construction cost. We have not even started talking about operational costs, asset management and asset decommissioning.

When Julia Pyke (Managing Director of Sizewell C) was asked by BBC how the project was going, she answered airily that it is 'on schedule and within budget'. I waited eagerly for the obvious follow up question – 'What is the budget and schedule?' but that question never came.

If the Sizewell C construction Consortium defy recent construction trends and achieve a 10% saving relative to Hinkley C, that would still indicate a £40 Billion project cost – which is enough to build 130 hospitals similar to the Forth Valley Hospital.

The supporters of nuclear energy tell us that we need these plants for baseload capacity. They fail to acknowledge that in Scotland, we already generate more capacity from renewables than we consume – and this surplus is only going to grow as we continue to see more investment in wind, solar, tidal and energy storage.

'What about intermittency and the lack system inertia?' is the nuclear advocates stock question when discussing the growth of renewables.

This is a legitimate question; however, the answer is beautifully simple – we will continue to do what we do now - rely on gas fired CCGTs. Which is reassuring - as there will be no nuclear plant coming on stream anytime soon.

'But what about Net Zero?' might be the next question. Thankfully there are a raft of solutions to this currently available and more coming on stream every week. For example, gas turbine manufacturers are again building on 50 years of experience of burning hydrogen in gas turbines, and they will be ready to burn hydrogen or blended hydrogen/ methane as quickly as the hydrogen market can come on stream.

My prediction is that the hydrogen market will come on stream faster than any SMRs can be built – and if UK politicians had a strategic bone in their body, they would be trying to beat our friends in Europe to win the hydrogen race. However, as we have seen with HS2 and the third runway at Heathrow, they will carry on with their blundering plans to build new nuclear.

This comes to the final question that is not asked of nuclear supporting friends in the Labour and Tory parties. How will they reduce the cost of energy when they are committed to this ruinously expensive nuclear build program?

The UK Government have no answer to this – and this is why the Scottish Government must keep in place the moratorium on new nuclear in Scotland and continue their support of renewables such as tidal power and also fully commit to their Hydrogen Action Plan.

Small Modular Reactors are merely a concept. Renewables and CCGTs are real. Any claims from Labour and the Tories on the cost and schedule are based on a myth – and the SNP must hit this point at every possible turn.