

Wind power is not driving the UK towards blackouts

Contrary to what Matt Ridley and the Tory commentariat would have us believe, last week's grid problems were caused not by a lack of wind but an over-reliance on a small number of fossil fuel suppliers

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Our green obsession with windmills is bringing Britain's electricity system to its knees, if Tory press commentators writing about last week's grid problems are to be believed. In the Times, Matt Ridley demanded an electricity policy "rethink", blaming the "emergency" on investment in renewables and the fact that "the wind was not blowing on a mild autumn day".

Over at the Telegraph, in a column headlined "The obsession with global warming will put the lights out all over Britain", Charles Moore observed that "there was almost no wind" during the day in question.

Not to be outdone, Peter Hitchens thundered in the Mail on Sunday that the "pseudo-scientific dogma" of climate science is turning the UK into the Soviet Union (...), and that because of "warmists armed with windmills, (...) we came within inches of major power blackouts".

(...) It all sounds very worrying, and no doubt the rising tide of elite Tory opposition to Britain's decarbonisation policies will be noted in both Downing Street and by ministers at the Department of Energy and Climate Change. There's only one problem: it isn't true.

The reality is that last Wednesday's brief "notification of inadequate system margin" (NISM) had nothing to do with wind power, as any of the writers quoted above could have discovered had they taken the trouble to call the National Grid and ask.

We did so, and with the grid's help pieced together the following sequence of events. During Wednesday morning last week, the National Grid experienced what it told us were "multiple failures" of coal and gas-fired power stations. Though the grid won't reveal which plants were affected, other sources report that there were at least three major power plants out of action, including the Fiddlers Ferry coal plant in Cheshire.

At 1.30pm, the National Grid, anticipating a shortfall for later that day.... Don't panic said the grid, the NISM "is part of our standard toolkit for balancing supply and demand and is not an indication there is an immediate risk of disruption to supply or blackouts".

What happened next was equally non-dramatic. The electricity market responded to the request and more plant was brought online.

Satisfied that sufficient margin had been restored, National Grid cancelled its NISM at 5.45pm, stating once again that the "issuing of a NISM does not mean we were at risk of blackouts".

Note that none of this is about wind. As the National Grid spokesperson told us, "our weather forecasts are very accurate". Grid managers therefore had a day or more's warning that Wednesday was likely to see very little wind generation, and planned accordingly. Yes, wind is intermittent - but that does not mean it is unpredictable.

This saga showed not that wind is driving the UK towards blackouts, but that reliance on a small number of large generators - coal, gas or nuclear - carries the risk of inadequate margin if more than one of these big plants fails at the same time. Wind, being composed of lots of smaller generators, cannot by definition all fail unexpectedly together, so could be argued to be more resilient, not less.

This is pretty much the opposite of the conclusion reached by the Tory commentariat, which hates wind turbines spoiling views in the Shires and takes any opportunity to criticise renewables and oppose climate change action. Let's at least hope that the government listens to National Grid's version of the story, not the misinformation peddled by Ridley, Moore and Hitchens.

(633 words)