

Electricity Transmission (North Somerset)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn. -(Mr. Watts.)

10.26 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): For those who are unfamiliar with this issue, let me briefly explain the background. In preparation for the Hinkley Point C nuclear power station coming on stream later this decade, National Grid plc intends to introduce new 400 kV overhead cables to connect Hinkley C with Avonmouth. The intent is to link two coastal points by a land-based pylon system. The new pylons will be about 46 metres tall—each the height of Nelson's column—and will cut through the countryside of north Somerset.

This debate is about the villages and towns, such as Nailsea, Yatton, Backwell, Wraxall and my own village of Tickenham, the Gordano valley and other places that will be affected. It is about a consultation that is not really a consultation at all and about a definition of cost that includes only short-term financial measurements and not wider measurements of public interest such as the environment, safety, the green belt or the impact on property values. It is also about a decision-making process that has at its core a democratic deficit where decisions are made by unelected quango chiefs who are unaccountable to ordinary citizens.

We all understand the need for more electricity, and that it has to have a transmission network. The public meeting that we held with National Grid in my constituency, in Nailsea, was an object lesson in reason and good manners despite the anger felt by so many in our area. I am deeply proud of local pressure groups and local residents for the dignity and self-restraint with which they have handled themselves. The consultation process that we have been given has offered the choice between two different land corridors with overhead cables. It is not much of a consultation—the choice between being hanged and being beheaded does not boil down to much of a choice at all.

Furthermore, there is a strong suspicion that the second option—corridor two—clearly represents environmental vandalism of such a degree that it was bound to be objected to violently. That always had the potential to allow the false conclusion to be drawn that corridor one was supported, and to leave local residents split. We want to see a genuine consultation that compares the wider costs and benefits of overhead cables with undersea and underground cables.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that option two is not just environmental vandalism, leaving option one as a false choice? Option one would cause environmental damage and vandalism, too, particularly as it goes through the area of outstanding natural beauty in my constituency, where there is no provision, as the option stands, to put the cables underground—a possibility that he has just mentioned.

Dr. Fox: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why there is no real choice between one type of environmental vandalism and another. It does not boil down to any meaningful choice.

The optioneering report shows that National Grid discarded a number of undersea options before the public consultation started. Despite asking for further information about the technical, environmental and cost considerations of placing the cables undersea, we still have not been given answers that explain clearly why two coastal points should be linked by overland power lines.

We understand that there are technical issues, but if these can be overcome elsewhere, why not here too? National Grid's depreciation policy states that assets such as cables and pylons are depreciated over a period of up to 50 years, so investment needs to be assessed not simply as initial cost, but spread over all consumers who benefit, and over 50 years.

One overground option that has been trailed is to follow the M5 route. That, to me, is no solution at all and simply moves the problem on to the residents of the Gordano valley and Portishead, who would have their local environment permanently damaged. Likewise, I cannot support the addition of a 400 kV line parallel to the two existing 132 kV lines.

For a decision of such importance and magnitude, we do not believe that National Grid has carried out as thorough and adequate a consultation with the public as it should have done. If an inappropriate decision is reached as a result, we believe that National Grid's approach would be challengeable. I would like the Minister to set out the Government's views on the matter tonight. What would be the process of judicial review, at what point could it be triggered, how and by whom?

We expect Government to ensure that the rights of small communities are not steamrollered by the short-term interests of large utilities. No one questions the right or even the duty of National Grid to find the best deal for its shareholders, but the short-term benefit of shareholders cannot be bought at the long-term cost to individuals, communities and the environment that the proposal brings. A Severn estuary route or a route underground cannot be ruled out purely on cost grounds. Those options need to be properly explored and communicated.

Another issue is the unknown quantity of safety. The height of the proposed pylons is 46 metres. We all recognise that the issues concerning the impact of electric and magnetic fields are complicated and potentially open to a range of interpretations. Given the confused nature of the advice currently available, we believe that it would be sensible for National Grid to approach the matter with caution-to adopt the precautionary principle. This would avoid the positioning of pylons and power lines in close proximity to homes, public rights of way, community routes, schools and colleges where land-based lines are in use. We welcome National Grid's assurances on this, but that should not be interpreted in any way as an acceptance in principle of the proposed routes.

Finally, we come to the democratic deficit. I am extremely grateful to Mr. Speaker for granting time for the debate tonight. Under current legislation, no Minister is responsible for these decisions. It is left to the unelected chairman of a quango to take the environmental, safety and economic decisions that will affect the well-being of our constituents. What sort of democracy do we live in? If there is a change of Government at the election, a future Conservative Government will restore the

democratic link and ensure that such decisions are taken by a Secretary of State accountable to the people through Parliament.

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Before resorting to above-ground routes, the company should be obliged to investigate other options, including undersea and underground corridors, fully and properly.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful case, which applies just as much to other parts of the route, such as the Somerset levels. He referred to the need for further studies. Should there not be an attempt to find a monetary value to attribute to the preservation of the environment and the avoidance of the health effects that he described? If that were done, the submarine option might well be found to be not the most expensive, but the cheapest option.

Dr. Fox: My right hon. Friend makes a valid point, because much of the argument boils down to cost, and I am afraid that the values and the units of cost that are being used simply do not take account of the cost in other terms—in environmental terms, in safety and in terms of the impact upon the area in which we live. It will be changed beyond recognition for many years to come, and that very important issue lies at the heart of the matter.

We need a better explanation, because we simply do not understand the logic of a project that seeks automatically to connect two coastal points by a land-based route, especially when National Grid's own chief executive has described the proposed western undersea grid, linking Merseyside and Scotland, as a "no-brainer". The feasibility of an undersea route along the Severn channel has to be properly explored. Money should not be the critical factor in determining this matter, particularly when costs can ultimately be shared among the consumers who will benefit from the grid connection over a longer period.

Those of us who are in the Chamber tonight simply cannot and will not stand by and watch our countryside ravaged by the 46-metre-high graffiti of that pylon scheme, or the property values of our constituents threatened. All Members should take note of this debate. Today, North Somerset is in the firing line. Other areas will follow.

John Penrose *rose-*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. I am sorry, but does the hon. Gentleman wish to speak? Has he checked with the Minister that it is all right to contribute?

John Penrose: I have not.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Mr. David Kidney): I have not been asked at all, but I certainly would not object if the hon. Gentleman wanted a minute or two to speak.

10.36 pm

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I thank the Minister, and promise to keep my contribution short.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox)-my constituency neighbour-on securing this debate and making the case so powerfully, and I add one small but important point that a number of local residents in my constituency have made to me. They are deeply concerned that National Grid's initial costings for the undersea and underground routes-the two that, as my hon. Friend has made clear, have not been properly canvassed-are inadequate and far too shallow.

In particular, my constituents are concerned that over the lifetime of the assets that would be created-as my hon. Friend has said, that is a long time, and could add up to 50 years or more-one factor has been left out. With an undersea or underground cable, which is a much higher voltage direct-current cable, the transmission-power-losses are much lower than those on an overhead power line. The savings on the power that would not be lost should therefore be factored into the costings, but they have not been.

My constituents are concerned, therefore, because the costings are unfairly slanted against those two options. For the sake of democracy, it is vital to have high-calibre, reliable underpinnings for the debate, and high-quality facts on which to base it. Otherwise, there will not be democratic trust in any final decision. I again thank the Minister for allowing me to speak for a few minutes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before the Minister begins, I apologise for my hesitation a few moments ago, but it is customary for an hon. Member who wishes to take part in an Adjournment debate not only to get the permission of the hon. Member who has charge of the debate, as the hon. Gentleman clearly did, but to let the Minister know.

10.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Mr. David Kidney): I congratulate the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) on securing the debate, and I certainly take to heart the strength of feeling that he represents among his constituents. I am delighted to hear about the dignity with which they are making their very strong points of view known-without descending to misbehaviour. Clearly, the hon. Gentleman is proud of his constituents, and it sounds as though he should be.

I had some prior knowledge of the subject because of the activities of the hon. Gentleman's right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), who is sat beside him. I have heard the right hon. Gentleman raise similar points about the project on previous occasions in the House, and he has written to my Department. He has not yet had his reply, and I appreciate that one is due to him. He asked about the additional grid requirements that might be needed for a Severn tidal power scheme.

I shall say a little bit about that scheme and the stage that it has reached in order to provide Members with some information about it. Grid issues, such as connection and enforcement, are being considered as part of the ongoing Severn tidal power feasibility study, which is considering whether the Government could support a tidal power project in the Severn. The scale of grid reinforcement work required there, and the cost of it, would very much depend on the size of the proposed scheme and the generating background at the time. We expect to publish the results of these studies at the time of the second public consultation, which is expected to be held later this year. Severn tidal power is genuinely an open question at the present time. Only once we have completed the work looking into the costs, benefits, impacts and risks of the viable options, and sought public views on our conclusions, can we decide whether we will support a scheme in the Severn.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that from 1 March this year, all applications for development consent for electric lines of 132 kV and above will be considered by the new Infrastructure Planning Commission—the IPC—under the Planning Act 2008. Currently, these decisions are taken by my Department. The IPC will not be taking over decisions on electric lines from local authorities, as local authorities are not the decision makers now. This involves transmission electric lines that affect long-distance transfer of electricity through 275 kV and 400 kV lines, and their distribution lines of 132 kV, which are lower-voltage lines carrying power from transmission substations to the end user. The IPC's decisions on these applications will be taken on the basis of national policy statements designated by Government following public consultation and public scrutiny. Decisions on electric lines below the IPC's threshold will remain with my Department for consideration under section 37 of the Electricity Act 1989, and will be determined by the Secretary of State.

A well-functioning planning system is one of the key factors underpinning our quality of life. The 2008 Act reflects the Government's commitment to sustainable development and to tackling climate change. The current system for providing nationally significant infrastructure—electric lines of 132 kV and above have been defined as such in the 2008 Act—is still too complex and bureaucratic. There are overlapping multiple consent regimes, long and variable inquiry times, and two-stage decisions, and there can be several decision makers for a single project. The 2008 Act addresses these problems and creates a fairer and faster system. The IPC works at arm's length from Government and will consider applications for development consent for all major infrastructure projects, such as this proposal from National Grid. In addition to all the other benefits that a fairer and faster system brings, the Government estimate that the economic benefit of improving the system could be up to £5 billion by 2030.

Mr. Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater) (Con): If National Grid says, "We want this to go across country", can the IPC change that decision and say, "No, we want it to go underwater", and force it to put in an undersea route? Is there then an appeal process, and if so, how long will this all take?

Mr. Kidney: At the present time, the Secretary of State makes a decision on the application before him or her; similarly, the IPC would make a decision on the

application before it. The point is that one of the decisions could be to refuse an application, just as another could be to grant it.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con) *rose-*

Mr. Kidney: I need time to answer the hon. Gentleman who secured the debate, but if there is one last point I will give way.

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Dr. Lewis: I had not intended to intervene; I was here only to support my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox). However, the Minister mentions the IPC and the new regime. In my constituency, a year-long planning inquiry found against the development of a huge container port. We are terribly worried that had the IPC regime existed then, instead of arriving at a quicker decision it would have rammed through this infrastructure project. That is why the Conservative party says that this system should be abolished because the danger is that it will not give communities sufficient protection against massive projects such as this.

Mr. Kidney: I reject that description of what the IPC will do. It will make decisions on applications based on the evidence, the law and the national planning policy statements that I have described.

I should like to say a little about accountability. I want to reassure the hon. Member for Woodspring that the 2008 Act will improve accountability in several ways. First, because national policy statements will be, and currently are, subject to public consultation and public and parliamentary scrutiny, Ministers responsible for the policy decisions set out in them will be held accountable to Parliament and the electorate. I should mention that the consultation on the draft national policy statements for energy infrastructure is still open and will be until Monday 22 February.

The hon. Gentleman might wish to consider the draft overarching energy national policy statement, EN1, and the draft electricity network statement, EN5, as they explain the role of the national policy statements in the new planning system and set out clearly various influencing factors and impacts on local communities that the IPC will need to consider before determining any application for development consent.

After consultation, we are still at the point of settling the policy statements that will determine how the IPC makes decisions. In the overarching policy, for example, there will be statements of principle on the environment, alternatives to a proposed development, good design, health and safety, biodiversity, landscape, land use and noise—all issues in which the hon. Members who have spoken have expressed an interest. In document EN5, such issues as site selection, undergrounding and electric and magnetic fields are discussed. I suggest to the hon. Member for Woodspring, the other hon. Members present and all their constituents that time spent studying the documents and responding to them now might repay them later when the policies are finalised and are guiding the IPC on determining applications such as the one that we are discussing.

Dr. Fox: I wonder whether the Minister understands how Orwellian that description sounds to ordinary voters. At the moment, Members of Parliament can question an elected Secretary of State about particular decisions that affect their constituents' well-being and environment. The Minister tries to get us to believe that an unelected quango, which we cannot hold to account in this elected House, is suddenly more accountable. It is a bizarre explanation.

Mr. Kidney: Again, I do not accept that. Currently, when the Secretary of State is asked about a particular decision, he has a quasi-judicial responsibility and I cannot answer any questions about it. The IPC will be accountable to Parliament, because it will have to implement the national policy statements that will be determined by Government after public consultation and parliamentary scrutiny. It will be accountable to Select Committees and could be called before them to account for the decisions that it makes and its behaviour. I do not accept that there will be less accountability—I say that there will be more.

The second improvement in the new system is that there has to be pre-application consultation. The Planning Act gives local authorities a key role in advising developers as to how to conduct a consultation and the IPC as to whether the developer has carried out such consultation properly. That referee role for local authorities is an important element of the consultation process. There is no question of the developer, in this case National Grid, simply being able to run a consultation to obtain the best result for themselves. The local authority will submit a local impact report to the IPC.

The third improvement is the right to be heard by the IPC, including in person. The IPC will have to set out clearly the reasons for its decisions, and it will be accountable to the public and Parliament. The hon. Gentleman asked me about court action, and ultimately it will be responsible to the courts if it is alleged that its decisions are not in accordance with the legal framework.

There is a long way to go with the development that we are debating. I understand that National Grid has said that it plans to ask the IPC in the summer of 2011 for development consent for a new 400 kV overhead electric line connection to link its Bridgwater and Seabank substations and connect to the proposed new nuclear power station at Hinkley Point. Of course, as we have heard, National Grid is currently consulting local communities and people living in the vicinity of the proposed works to appraise broad route corridor options. Such consultation is a clear duty placed on applicants under the Act, but it needs to be carried out in accordance with guidance given by both the IPC and the Secretary of State. I understand that the current consultation has been extended until 22 July because of the bad weather.

We have heard from the hon. Gentleman that constituents have raised with him concerns about the consultation process conducted by National Grid. The flavour of some of the letters that my Department is receiving, either lodging objections to the proposal or copying responses to us for information, tends to support what he outlined. There is a sense that the consultation period over Christmas and the new year was inadequate; that local people have not received sufficient information; that there has been a failure to put forward the range of options for public comment; and that National Grid has dismissed underground and submarine options as too

expensive. There are also concerns about health risks. My understanding, however, is that there must be a second-stage consultation, which will run from February 2010 to March 2011, for which National Grid will be seeking views on its preferred route corridor, and on the preliminary environmental information as part of its environmental impact assessment for the project. National Grid is therefore at the very beginning of the process for the proposal.

As was mentioned, if the IPC considers that there has not been a proper consultation with the public and local communities, it can refuse to accept an application from a developer. All developers must report to the IPC—in a consultation report that accompanies the application—how public consultations have influenced their proposals. I hope that gives the hon. Gentleman some reassurance about the way that is still to go.

The hon. Gentleman indicated that there is a large groundswell of support for alternative routes for the electric line. The hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. Liddell-Grainger) mentioned placing it underground, and the hon. Member for Woodspring mentioned going subsea under the Severn estuary. I understand that National Grid has said it discounts the latter proposal on the grounds of cost and technical challenges. It has therefore not been offered as a consultation option for public scrutiny.

I appreciate the frustration of the hon. Gentleman's constituents that that happened, but it is for National Grid, which has a duty as a statutory undertaker, to develop any proposals for new infrastructure in an efficient, co-ordinated and economical way, under the Electricity Act 1989. It must consider the alternatives and put forward the best options it has available to meet its customers' requirements. That is National Grid's duty, but then comes the planning system.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: That may indeed be the view of National Grid, but does the Minister think it has a duty to demonstrate what it says, and to include the submarine route option in the consultation system, so that others can challenge and test its assertion that it is too expensive? Otherwise, the consultation process is deeply flawed, and may well be illegal.

Mr. Kidney: The irony of that question is that currently, the national policy statements have not been designated, and the Secretary of State is still the decision maker, so I cannot answer it because of the quasi-judicial role that he might have to play in future. However, as I said, whoever makes the final decision on a planning application is currently guided by the guidance that the Secretary of State follows, but later they will be guided by the national policy statements, which will have things to say about what to take into account, including the costs of different options.

It is not for the Government to require all electric lines to be underground, but for National Grid, or indeed any network operator or developer, to identify and consider the routing of, and methods of facilitating, any connection before it submits an application for consent. Although it is understandable that people do not welcome the presence of overhead lines, the fact remains that they provide a cost-effective way of transferring power to consumers, and each case is judged on its merits and against the impact and cost of alternatives.

The new system for processing applications for nationally significant infrastructure projects will enable our nation to put the right infrastructure in place, in a timely manner, to meet our energy needs nationally. It is critical that the UK continues to have secure and reliable supplies of electricity as we make the transition to a low-carbon economy, while protecting the most vulnerable from the risk of black-outs and disruptions to supply.

Question put and agreed to.

10.53 pm

House adjourned.