

Why coal is king in the energy Cold War



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NOT that long ago it was the presence of US military bases in Yorkshire, Berkshire, Norfolk and elsewhere which attracted the peace camps and those seeking an end to all wars and peace for all mankind.

The Cold War stand-off did come to an end, but hard-nosed diplomacy, the fruits of an open, free-market economy for all to see, and the determination to demonstrate to the Soviet Union that the West would not roll over, brought this about.

The peace camp at Greenham Common, and the daily scuffles at the perimeter fence, merely provided the Berkshire police with generous overtime.

Today's protest camps are similarly modelled but their targets are not the Nato bases in Britain, but the large energy companies. Last year, a "climate camp" was erected near the Drax power station, at Selby.

Given the Georgia crisis, my initial reference to the Cold War is most relevant and timely. British officials have been looking increasingly nervously over many months at the energy power game being played out in the Caucasus. Russia is no longer a military superpower, but its vast natural resources mean that it is becoming an energy superpower.

Russia's state energy giant, Gazprom, produces 85 per cent of the

country's natural gas and controls more than 17 per cent of the world's reserves.

The EU gets 25 per cent of its gas from Russia and this is set to rise. Russia has a very clear strategy which is there for all to see in Georgia. It would prefer Europe's gas to go via Russia and not via independent neighbouring states.

Against this high game of international geopolitics is the precarious British position on energy policy. We have become over-dependent on gas – much of which will now be imported – for the generation of our electricity.

Any potential interruption in supply, which will affect the price, rightly sends shivers down the back of politicians and energy planners.

The Georgia crisis is an important lesson for Britain and it is not too late to sit up and act. The new two-gigawatt power station proposed by E.ON, at Kingsnorth, which has endured the climate protesters this month, should be supported strongly by the Government, but, perhaps more importantly, by the Conservative Party.

If the polls are accurate, they will have the responsibility for energy from 2010 and face the unpredictable results of 12 years of Labour inaction in this vital area.

After all, the record speaks for itself; seven Labour energy Ministers over 11 years, three contradictory energy White Papers, a huge increase in gas dependence for electricity, record energy prices and nearly six million families trapped in fuel poverty.

If it gets the go-ahead, Kingsnorth could be up and running by 2013. It uses what is called supercritical technology, which means that it is much more efficient and cleaner than older coal stations. Also, and perhaps more importantly, it will also be able to retro-fit carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology.

Yorkshire's ongoing large coal stations, at Drax and Ferrybridge, are also making huge leaps forward to slash emissions, increase efficiency and extend their operating lives. They are the unsung heroes in the energy challenges as they meet huge demand from the grid and help keep electricity prices stable.

At Ferrybridge, near Pontefract, plans are also advanced to fit the more efficient supercritical technology. At Drax, £100m is being spent updating the plant's turbines so that it can slash more than one million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions a year and increase efficiency.

Co-firing the coal with biomass is also helping reduce carbon emissions

from the plant. After all, Drax is singularly responsible for seven per cent of the nation's electricity.

Encouragingly, a new coal gasification power station is being built by Powerfuel at Stainforth, near Doncaster.

Also, new technology from coal-rich Australia, known as White Energy, has developed a ground-breaking concept which removes the moisture from lower-grade coal before it is burned at the power station. This makes it just as efficient as higher-grade coal.

The opposition to Kingsnorth, new-coal technologies and our ongoing coal plants, is both wrongly directed and lacking in realism and proper analysis of our energy priorities and predicament.

If we are to succeed in cutting global carbon emissions and plugging our looming energy gap, we must demonstrate to China and India, through plants like Kingsnorth, that the technology which they should be investing in exists, and we in the UK have developed it.

By supporting Kingsnorth and other cleaner-coal plants, we can balance our energy portfolio, develop a unique skills base, help get bills down and shiver a little less when Vladimir Putin decides to rattle his sabre in the future.

TOMORROW:
Tom Richmond