

Letter from Scotland

The world-wide rise in gas prices, and the horror of importing gas from Putin's Russia, has re-ignited the debate in Scotland over our energy supplies. Compared with most other countries, we are blessed with our own oil and gas reserves, shale oil fields, and quarter of all Europe's renewable resources.

But there's a growing dispute with England, and divisions at home, over opening up new off-shore oil fields and over the future of nuclear power.

It's been highlighted this week by the UK government's [new energy strategy](#) and by yet another warning from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that the age of fossil fuels must be brought to an abrupt end.



Is the answer to the energy crisis blowing in the wind ? Whitelee wind farm, Eaglesham Moor, Renfrewshire.

The UK government agrees with the Scottish government that more wind farms are necessary, both on-shore and off-shore, and there's the usual minor funding pots for hydrogen, solar

and wave and tidal projects. But where the two governments differ is over the 10 new oil and gas developments planned for the North Sea and west of Shetland and over nuclear power. The SNP/Green administration in Scotland is opposed to both, saying that all energy investment must go into renewables.

The Scottish energy secretary, Michael Matheson, said: "It would be a very serious mistake to ramp up dependence on nuclear power." He pointed out that it costs twice as much as renewables and nuclear power stations take years to build. And he didn't even mention the problem of dealing with their radio-active waste, an issue which successive Scottish governments have raised as an objection to new nuclear.

The UK energy secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng, speaks of building eight new nuclear power stations on existing sites in England. And although energy policy is a matter reserved to Westminster, he has "no plans to impose nuclear reactors in Scotland." It does however put pressure on the Scottish government to re-consider its non-nuclear stand. We only have one nuclear power station left in Scotland, at Torness on the East Lothian coast, but it is due to close in 2028 and nuclear provides less than 15 per cent of our total energy requirements.

The more immediate problem is that oil and gas still provide most of our energy. Only 25 per cent comes from renewables, though nearly all our electricity is now generated by wind and hydro power. Indeed, when the wind blows strongly, we export electricity. At the moment, the Scottish government is sticking to its policy of no more oil and gas exploration, though it may be overruled by the UK government or it may be persuaded by the oil and gas industry that it's better to transition slowly out of fossil fuels, rather than import them from less environmentally careful countries.

These tensions have been building for some time but they have been brought to the well-head by the 54 per cent rise in gas

prices and the war in Ukraine which has made Russian gas imports such a toxic issue. (Even though only 4 per cent of the UK's gas comes from Russia.)



Fundraising tea on Saturday 9 April – click the image to find out more

The suffering in Ukraine itself has not been forgotten in Scotland. Cash collections for refugees are commonplace in churches, theatres and concerts. And this week a convoy of five vans packed with donated items is making its way from Fife to its twinned Torun area of Poland to help refugees who have fled over the border from Ukraine. One of the vans is being driven by the Provost of Fife, Jim Leishman, who once managed Dunfermline Football Club.

I have kept the better news till last. Our Covid case numbers have dropped dramatically. They are down by a third this week to 6,700 on Thursday. There is a lag in the number of patients in hospital, still at over 2,000 but many of these are over 80

and only 27 are in intensive care, often with other illnesses. We are still under a legal requirement to wear face masks in shops and on public transport. but it now looks as if this will be reduced to official guidance after Easter.

There is a feeling now that the Covid emergency is over, and more political and press attention is turning to the backlog of other cases in hospitals and the stress the pandemic has put upon NHS staff and our whole health and care system.

Certainly this is the reason given by the UK Government for this week's rise in National Insurance contributions. It's expected to raise £11bn a year for the NHS and the care system, and Scotland will get its share. But like the energy crisis, the care crisis has been building for some time, for at least a decade. There's been lack of thought, money and commitment by politicians, and by all of us.

In my view we should have been investing in our care system for the last 10 years with a National Care Service tax at retirement age. And we should have been moving away from gas, Russian or any other.

Now there is no time for an organised transition, we must stop burning gas immediately and the invasion of Ukraine is a clarion call to action.