

UK needs a National Energy Service

On 12th October 2023 at the Francis Crick Institute, London, a distinguished panel and 50 or so guests, brought together by the acumen7 Network, (www.acumen7.com) debated one of the most important issues of our generation. The title of the debate was:

This house believes that no government can be relied upon to secure an affordable and renewable energy supply for the UK, and that an alternative approach is needed.



Here is my contribution to the discussion. Do you agree, disagree, or have better ideas?

"I am Robert Osborne from acumen 7, ValueStep (www.valuestep.co.uk) and, once upon a time, I led PFI in Health and later, Partnerships for Schools.

I have an alternative approach, with three, concurrent, elements as follows:

We need a National Energy Plan - our whole way of life is at stake here

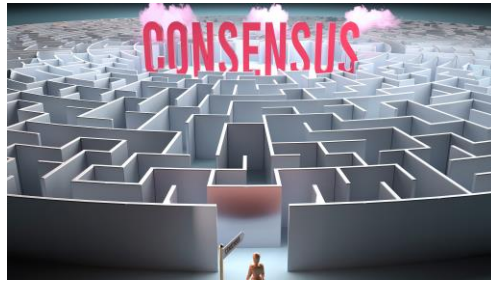
UK needs a multi-year, upwards of a trillion-pound programme to deliver a secure, decarbonised power supply. Why?

- to play our part in the world's fight against climate change,
- to be global leader in green industries and, even more important,
- to "keep our lights on" which is shorthand for maintaining our whole way of life.

So today, I am NOT contributing to the technical challenge, fearsome as it is...

Before we can resolve what, when and how, or continue with piece-meal projects, the UK needs a comprehensive, strategic, and implementable National Energy Plan, which is robust enough and flexible to survive the challenges and changes of the next 30 years.

In our post-truth, populist, and polarised country that has just witnessed the HS2 debacle and five prime ministers in seven years, how can we, citizens, young and old; voters; environmentalists; utility customers; businesses; funders: regulators; politicians and all other stakeholders, even hope for settled national consensus for such a National Energy Plan?



We build consensus for the plan using citizen's assemblies

The first challenge is how we design a conversation that can build consensus about the requirements and then win widespread, settled, stakeholder backing for the plan.

What tools do we have to work with?

- A discredited party-political system
- An embattled BBC
- Multiple echo chambers including the right-wing print media, conspiracy-driven social media, and lefty podcasts, all being ignored by Millennials consumed by intergenerational unfairness.

It doesn't look hopeful. However, we can make early and widespread use of citizens' assemblies to cut through the noise, tell the facts and face the truth, and start to find areas of agreement about the National Energy Plan.

Citizens' assemblies have been used for years, mostly in other countries and have proven to be very constructive and successful in addressing and framing societal challenges. For example, citizens' assemblies were used in France to agree the current, adopted position on climate change, and also in Ireland to frame the way forward on abortion which was put to a referendum. To address a particular issue, a group of up to 100 selected people meet over a period of weeks and months. They are briefed by experts from all sides and hold structured, moderated discussions. They are presented with detailed research and opposing viewpoints and have the time to discuss and understand the complexities that simply cannot be achieved in the short attention span, often alternative truth, and biased written, broadcast, or social media.

We need to establish the National Energy Service to own and implement the plan

To implement the National Energy Plan, the UK needs a National Energy Service, a body of the scale and societal importance of, say, the BBC and NHS to lead the response to this challenge and to oversee delivery across the generations. The National Energy Service must have a clear people's mandate as supported, and periodically renewed by the citizens' assemblies. It must have a truly independent figurehead, for example HRH the King. Most important, it must be loved-enough, big-enough, and independent-enough to sit outside Government and resist policy flip-flops.

If we can get these three elements in place, then the engineering and financial solutions will have a chance. If not, the future is dark."



What do you think?

acumen7, an apolitical network of energy, infrastructure, business, and construction experts, will be drafting a white paper to contribute to the national conversation.

To have your voice heard, please join the discussion here: enquiries@acumen7.com or contact me at r.c.osborne@valuestep.co.uk.

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