

Title: A conversation with Christopher Pincher MP

Standfirst: Christopher Pincher is the Conservative Member of Parliament for Tamworth. He was elected in 2010 and sits on the Energy and Climate Change Select Committee. Chris was appointed to the PGES Executive Council in October 2012.

What encouraged you to become a member of PGES?

I think we are at a crucial point in our energy story. Energy security and the renewal of our energy infrastructure has never been more pressing and the balance between meeting our decarbonising obligations and keeping the lights switched on (or more accurately the heating) has never been so fine. After too long a time as a forgotten department and then a non-department, energy is now at the heart of government policy.

It's also at the centre of consumers' and my constituents' concerns; energy prices are a big postbag issue. Action to tackle confusing tariffs, put people on to the best contracts, open up the wholesale market and deliver better household efficiency to reduce demand are top ticket items.

What do you think PGES' priorities should be?

I think PGES should focus on providing detailed, independent analysis of the energy sector, Britain's energy mix and the challenges of delivering affordable, clean and secure energy. Its priority should be to be topical, informed and challenging.

How effective do you think the energy industry is in engaging with parliamentarians?

It depends on the sector - the Big 6 suppliers are effective in lobbying for their interests while the green sector is keen to promote its importance to the decarbonisation agenda and its growth potential. Nuclear has a tendency to hide its light under a bushel. Part of the problem is that there are a wide range of All Party Groups and lobby outfits which look out for the different sectors and players so a holistic view can be difficult. Here, of course, is an opportunity for the PGES.

Where do you think nuclear sits in the UK energy mix?

Nuclear is crucial for our long term energy security. It is clean, it is consistent and it is the second cheapest electricity generator after hydro power. In terms of security, we get our uranium from some of the world's most stable countries - contrast that with the instability of the biggest oil producing regions - and we have tonnes of plutonium stored at Sellafield. We should send the investor community the clearest signal that we will deliver on our new nuclear commitments and grow the sector as a component of our energy mix.

How can we meet energy demand in the short term?

I think we should look carefully at how we can fast-track the Generic Design Assessment process without compromising safety. We should not resign ourselves to believing that it takes too long and costs too much to build new nuclear. GE Hitachi state they can build reactors in as little as four years. Admittedly that is longer than it takes to build a wind farm but it is not an aeon.

As a 'Heaton Harris 101' what role do you think renewables should play in the energy mix?

Renewables are essential to meeting our obligations and present an opportunity to become a world leader in technology and know-how. The problem is that on-shore wind specifically does not deliver on either of these. Wind turbines are intermittent so need to be backed up by conventional gas fired stations so that people can switch on their kettles when the wind is not blowing. That duplicates supply and generates more CO₂, especially as gas stations are at their most inefficient when they are being dialled up or down in response to the vagaries of the wind. Fred Udo's work – and indeed before him, that of Albert Betz - is interesting here. Nor do wind turbines add real value to British businesses as they are nearly all foreign owned. The result is that the British tax-payer pays a subsidy, through their bills, to foreign companies.

I think we would be wiser to back emerging green technologies led by British based companies in, for example, wave and tidal power or carbon capture storage.

What do you see as the key political challenges faced by Ed Davey's department?

Giving confidence to the investor community to put money behind our massive infrastructure investment needs, facing up to the downsides of wind, and doing battle with the Treasury to ensure that a regulatory and tax framework to underpin our long range energy plans is firmly fixed. Without the latter the investment taps will stay turned off.