SUBMISSION FROM SCOTTISH ENGINEERING

Scottish Engineering is the major support and lobbying organisation for the manufacturing engineering industry in Scotland. We have been in existence in one form or another since 1865. Present membership includes upwards of 400 member sites throughout Scotland, covering all sectors of manufacturing industry. Membership ranges from the country’s largest and best-known manufacturers, to the many successful and innovative smaller ones.

We note that the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee is very soon to take evidence against the background that there has been much controversy and dispute in recent weeks surrounding the desirability and affordability of renewable energy. Only today it has come into the public domain that Doosan Power Systems no longer intend to pursue a “Centre of Excellence” in turbine manufacture at Renfrew.

For many years, it has been our consistent policy that Scotland should pursue a very successful renewable energy sector, but as a component of a balanced, sustainable, affordable and secure energy portfolio and not as a freestanding end position.

What exactly do we mean by that?

- “Balanced” means making use of all available technologies, including onshore and offshore wind, marine, carbon capture and storage, biomass and nuclear.
- “Sustainable” means ensuring that we make the best possible contribution in minimising CO2 emissions and its effect on climate change.
- “Affordable” means exactly that. We would not want to be penalising those vulnerable sections of our community who carry a heavy enough burden, without having to contribute more for their energy needs, especially if they are thought to be carrying excessive levels of ‘additional taxation’ to cover subsidies for the renewable energy sector, and particularly at a time when GDP growth is very modest indeed and is forecast to continue in that vein.
- “Secure” means that we need to be able to keep the lights on, without having to depend on other countries for significant amounts of energy.

The public and even participant businesses must be very confused in the wake of conflicting and polarised claims about the costs and the job prospects relating to the Scottish Government’s renewable energy ambitions and about whether Scotland is or is not on course to meet its emission reduction targets.

Last November, for example, the Institution of Mechanical Engineers highlighted its concerns about the cost implications of the renewable energy targets, which of course have potential to impose both a drain on the public purse and a major cost impact on the consumer. We appreciate that those are matters that are likely to be pursued further by the Committee in its deliberations. The Committee will no doubt also be alert to the prospect that if other forms of energy generation are neglected, then Scotland faces the prospect that renewable technologies, some of which are in
their infancy and have yet to achieve commercial viability, may not meet the nation’s future energy demands. It is very well established for instance that wind energy (however desirable) requires back-up from more established sources in order to meet base-load capacity.

Similarly, it would seem very strange to pursue renewable energy ambitions in remote areas of the Highlands and Islands, without ensuring that equal attention is given to the necessary infrastructure to transmit the power to where it is needed. In that regard the time, effort and ongoing dispute surrounding the still to be initiated updating of the Beauly to Denny power line has done little to instil confidence.

Idealistically, there is no disputing that a low-carbon energy policy is not only essential but is also necessary if Scotland and the UK are to meet their wider obligations to the global community. It is entirely sensible that renewable energy should take a major lead. Concentrating our efforts on developing renewable sources to the apparent exclusion of other important forms would, however, be a mistake for the reasons outlined above.

This fundamental issue has regrettably been mired in controversy and confusion, made worse by heavy political undertones and posturing. It is for that reason that Scottish Engineering called upon the First Minister last November to commission an independent study and report by The Royal Academy of Engineering into the various strands of our energy supply needs and an evaluation of the differing long-term policies – in fact, much the same ground as the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee is investigating. The Royal Academy of Engineering is an impartial body, with a wealth of expertise in the technical issues at stake and, importantly, has no political, social or ideological position to take on the matter.

We, therefore, advocate that the Committee should itself approach The Royal Academy of Engineering to commission this work. We are confident that the outcome would be a comprehensive, well-informed and apolitical assessment that would inform the debate about the shape and content of our energy policy, and that this could be achieved in an objective manner that the present discourse is sadly lacking.

Scottish Engineering
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