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When it comes to renewable energy, we're behind the curve

By CHRIS BLACKHURST

We have another chance to prove ourselves in energy and to make up lost ground. It's there, waiting to be grasped – it's hydrogen, writes Chris Blackhurst. Time was when Britain led the world in innovation that turned to world-beating manufacturing that created jobs and prosperity.

It was that simple. Tragically, down the decades our ability to move and stay ahead has been lost. If we can see an opportunity – and we possess some of the smartest scientists and innovators in the world – it can too soon become mired for lack of drive from the top, stuck in Whitehall inertia and red tape.

Take energy. We're all agreed: we're not producing enough of it to fulfil our national needs. At the same time, if we're to tackle climate change and reach the net zero carbon emissions target, we must move away from dependence on fossil fuels. Alternative sources – nuclear and other renewables – is the answer.

Yet we're behind the curve when once we were in front. At Calder Hall in Cumbria, we opened the world's first nuclear power station to produce domestic electricity. Recently, our nuclear programme has languished. Today, we're short of nuclear power stations.

Same with wind. In 2020, Boris Johnson boasted Britain would become the “Saudi Arabia of wind power”. But we're already lagging in wind turbine technology and manufacturing – Denmark has forged ahead and is the global leader.

We have another chance in energy to prove ourselves and to make up lost ground. It's there, waiting to be grasped.

It's hydrogen. The UK government is aware and has proclaimed the intention to become a “world-leading hydrogen economy”. But, Liam Condon, chief executive of the industrial group Johnson Matthey, says the UK is stalling. “The UK was a frontrunner [in supporting hydrogen power],” says Condon. But in terms of government policies to encourage hydrogen development, the US has taken the lead. He points to a “bureaucratic layer” in the UK that kills any chance of rapid advancement. It's not just the US that is stealing a march: the EU is devoting large amounts of money to hydrogen, setting up a €3bn hydrogen investment bank.

Condon adds that in the UK, “it's unlikely that any single private company can afford to build the infrastructure... there needs to be governmental support”.

Even the government's own followers are complaining. Ben Houchen, mayor of Tees Valley, is the poster child for modern Tory, business-friendly, local government leadership. He is an advocate for hydrogen, believing the current gas network can be adapted to use it and that hydrogen affords the potential to enable the UK to hit net zero quicker and more cheaply than

is currently predicted. But Houchen complained to this year's Conservative Party conference of a "fundamental problem" of a lack of understanding by civil servants (and therefore, ministers and a blockage). Houchen continued: "I'm not convinced that at the moment, [the thinking is] where it needs to be."

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The government appears to get the financial case for hydrogen, predicting the creation of more than 9,000 high-quality jobs by 2030, rising to 100,000 jobs and worth up to £13bn by 2050. At the same time, government analysis estimates that 20 per cent of the UK's energy consumption by 2050 could come from the gas.

It's clear though, there's a logjam identified by Condon and Houchen, and of the sort that previously blocked Britain's progress in other areas, not just in energy.

Projects are on the starting block, ready to go. Take the Portland Port energy hub project in Dorset. Owned by UKEn, it's got huge potential. A giant, onshore gas storage facility could easily be developed, using existing salt caves which are ideal and natural. It would be the biggest hydrogen storage site in the UK. Offshore, in the English Channel, a new wind farm would produce the hydrogen to be stored. Perfect.

But UKEn (UK Energy Storage) is looking, like others in the sector, to the government for an energy lead, for an infrastructure plan that will underpin and guarantee its investment and operation. So far, there is nothing.

It appears that the Cop27 climate change talks will soon end with plenty of hot air (pardon the pun) from the UK government, but no firm initiative, not where hydrogen is concerned. Typically, we're talking a good game but that's all. Urgent leadership to ensure delivery of the necessary infrastructure to encourage hydrogen production, storage, distribution and use is required. Given all our futures depend on achieving net zero, this should be set as a national priority by Rishi Sunak and his colleagues.

We need to attract long-term private sector investment (along with wind and hydrogen, methane storage is another area, ripe for exploitation).

We must persuade our existing stars to remain here and to continue to grow and mature in the UK, and new ones to set up. It's a scandal that something so obvious as the Portland Port hub, for example, is not, right now, being developed and realised.

We must take on the US and EU. We must break this pattern of starting something and letting others steal a march.

Where energy and hydrogen are concerned, again apologies, we desperately seek government energy.