

Brown endorses Blair's plans for more nuclear power stations

By Andrew Grice, Political Editor

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Gordon Brown is to throw his weight behind Tony Blair's controversial plans to build a new generation of nuclear power stations in a setback to opponents of the move. The Chancellor believes that giving nuclear power a new lease of life is part of the solution to Britain's energy problems.

But he admits privately that the public, parliament and environmental groups will need to be convinced about the cost and benefits of the nuclear option. Allies of Mr Brown said yesterday there was "no real difference" between him and the Prime Minister on the issue, and that he is personally convinced a new nuclear programme is the right way forward.

His backing is a boost for Mr Blair and, following their agreement on pensions, will be seen as a sign that they can still work together on difficult policy issues despite tension between them over when the Prime Minister should stand down.

Opponents of nuclear power had hoped Mr Brown, the overwhelming front-runner to succeed Mr Blair, would block the Prime Minister's plans, to be formally recommended in the Government's energy review in July.

Public opinion is sharply divided. A Populus survey for the Stockholm Network group of think tanks found that 46 per cent of people agreed that "if Britain is to lessen its dependence on foreign energy imports and meet its target for reducing carbon emissions, we may have to build new nuclear power stations in this country." However, 42% would rather Britain failed to meet its carbon emissions targets and continued to import energy from abroad.

Mr Blair faced further criticism yesterday for pre-empting the review by saying in a speech on Tuesday that its first draft had put the nuclear option back on the agenda "with a vengeance."

Friends of the Earth will file a request under the Freedom of Information Act for the draft to be published in full so that there can be a public debate about the "stark facts" on which Mr Blair said he based his judgement.

Tony Juniper, the group's director, said: "He must publish details of the briefing he received from the Department of Trade and Industry, which he has now made so public, so that we can have a transparent and open debate on this issue."

Mr Blair may not need legislation to authorise more nuclear power stations but more than 50 MPs have signed a Commons motion calling for a debate and vote in parliament.

It was tabled by Liberal Democrat MP Jenny Willott, who accused Mr Blair of showing "blatant disregard for the views of the people". She added: "The future of our energy supply is one of the biggest decisions we face in Britain today, and the Prime Minister is trying to force it through without proper parliamentary debate."

Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London, said a new generation of nuclear power stations would be an expensive and dangerous mistake. "It will be the great misjudgement of our generation to go back down the nuclear road, which would saddle our children and grandchildren with the consequences," he said.

The Prime Minister's official spokesman denied the review had been pre-empted. "This is now a situation in which Mr Micawber is going to work. You cannot just hope something turns up, you have to make decisions and you have to make decisions now because in this field there is a long lead time," he said.

Reviewing the evidence

* When Tony Blair announced the Government's energy review last November, he signalled his intent by putting the pro-nuclear Department of Trade and Industry in the driving seat. It is chaired by the Energy Minister, Malcolm Wicks, rather than by a neutral referee such as John Prescott or an independent figure from outside government.

Mr Wicks has insisted he is "nuclear neutral", but it came as no surprise when Mr Blair said on Tuesday that the review's first draft showed the nuclear option was needed to prevent Britain becoming dependent on foreign gas imports, and to hit its targets for cutting carbon dioxide emissions.

Other inquiries have not reached the same conclusion. The Sustainable Development Commission, chaired by Jonathon Porritt, which advises the Government, said nuclear power was not the answer to climate change and there was "no justification" for a new nuclear programme.

The all-party Commons Environmental Audit Committee said in a report last month the nuclear option would not plug Britain's energy gap. With almost a quarter of the country's electricity-generating capacity to be decommissioned by 2016, the committee said there was not time to wait for a new generation of nuclear reactors. It said Britain could face electricity blackouts within a decade unless there was urgent investment in new gas-fired power stations.

However, a study by the International Energy Agency is expected to conclude nuclear power offers the best hope of tackling global energy insecurity and meeting emissions targets.

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