

## UK energy policy plagued by "sense of drift"

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Britain's energy policies are in increasing danger of being paralysed by a growing "sense of drift", the chairman of an influential commission has warned. [Lord Hunt \(/staff/profiles/policy-commissions/nuclear/lord-hunt.aspx\)](#) of Kings Heath said the UK might risk being unable to deal with "formidable challenges" if it fails to decide upon a clear direction in the near future. He was speaking at a debate organised by the [University's Policy Commission on Nuclear Energy \(/research/impact/policy-commissions/nuclear/index.aspx\)](#), which is due to publish its findings later this year.



The Commission aims to evaluate nuclear power's likely role in Britain by exploring technical, environmental, political, sociological and economic factors. Addressing an audience of policymakers, industry figures and academics, Lord Hunt noted George Osborne's failure to mention nuclear power in his Budget speech.

He said: "The Chancellor emphasised renewables. He talked about the cheapness of gas and getting the greatest possible amount of gas and oil from the North Sea. He talked about the carbon price floor. But there was no explicit reference to nuclear power. Does that mean the case for nuclear power isn't quite as strong as it was?"

Leading anti-nuclear campaigners, including Jonathon Porritt, co-founder of Forum for the Future, took part in the debate, held at Westminster's Institution of Civil Engineers.

Lord Hunt, a former Minister of State in the Department of Energy and Climate Change, said: "One thing we all agree on is a sense of drift on energy policy in the UK. The key message is that we have to engage the public. A massive change is coming in our society. One way or another, we've got to start a realistic debate with the public."

Commission member [Professor Martin Freer \(/staff/profiles/physics/freer-martin.aspx\)](#), Director of the [Birmingham Centre for Nuclear Education and Research \(/research/activity/nuclear/index.aspx\)](#), urged those on both sides of the debate to "take a step back".

He said: "It's fine having a discussion in this room, but what's required is a broader public debate. We need some sort of scale and a sense of perspective. People find the issues around nuclear power very complex, and what we can do is make those issues more accessible so that people can make informed judgments."

The UK remains committed to targets for cutting emissions and increasing the use of renewable energy sources by 2020, but Porritt cast doubt on these being met.

He told the debate: "The reality is that not enough will be done quickly enough, and at some point politicians will wake up and say: 'Oh, god, we've got to do something about this.' Either we'll end up in an overcooked world or we'll end up with governments belatedly trying to pull the plug on hydrocarbons, which will mean absolute economic chaos."

Ron Bailey, author of *A Corruption of Governance?*, a report that claims to reveal how MPs were misled over nuclear power, described current policy as "astonishing".

He said: "Let's do the thing no-one has yet done – assess the full potential for cost-effective energy efficiency – and then we'll know how much energy we need to generate. At the moment we have a policy without knowing that. To me that's astonishing. Whether you're pro-nuclear or anti-nuclear, we should be worried about that."

Sue Ion, Vice-President of the Royal Academy of Engineering, and Keith Parker, Chief Executive of the Nuclear Industry Association, also took part in the debate.

Speaking afterwards, Professor Freer said: "Opinions on nuclear power and our other energy options remain polarised, and it's no wonder the public is confused or suspicious. The Commission's belief is that it's still not too late to begin couching the wider discussion about these vital issues in language that will inform rather than alarm. Above all, we have to involve the public in a way that encourages balanced judgments and allows everyone to contribute to the enormously important decisions that lie ahead."