

Will Britain Shiver?

by Theodore Dalrymple



Britain this winter might perform an interesting if discomfiting experiment to find out how deep is its people's practical commitment to the environment. My guess is that it is not terribly deep.

There is much talk of a coming energy crisis if the winter is severe. A possibility exists that the lights will go out, factories will close, and hot water and central heating will be lacking. A population unused to such hardships may express its discontent by means not wholly peaceful or constitutional.

Of course, the crisis might not come: the weather might be clement, and the country might escape the worst consequences of its governing class's customary improvidence and incompetence, in this case with regard to energy policy. But that policy, a combination of cheese-paring, corruption, and politically motivated appeasement of the green lobby, may yet result in catastrophe—economic, social, and political.

Britain generates more than a third of its electricity with natural gas but has only three days' storage of such gas. The government closed down its major storage facility to save money, relying on just-in-time supply from the Netherlands and other countries with huge storage facilities. But gas remains in short supply, and its price has risen dramatically; in the event of real penury, which Vladimir Putin will be in no mood to ease, countries that normally supply Britain will, quite rightly, supply themselves first, leaving the British to freeze. No one in the British government apparently thought of strategy, as opposed to mere tactics.

Not long ago, as its contribution to saving the planet, the

Scottish government promised not to develop further fossil-fuel reserves in the North Sea. Coal, the most polluting form of electricity generation, has been phased out completely (in 2012, it still accounted for 25 percent of power generation), and nuclear power stations have been shut down because of the ideology of the ecology lobby. Britain is the world leader in wind-power electricity generation, and so-called renewable energy has supplied half the nation's power generation on some days, but the government does not control the wind any more than Canute controlled the waves. All the politicians' hot air combined will not move a single windmill's blades.

At the same time, the government has placed a price limit on what energy-supply companies may charge customers, with the result that many of the companies will either go bankrupt or be bailed out with government money. Of course, rising bills are never popular with voters, so the government, with its infallible instinct for doing the wrong thing, has gone for the most cowardly option.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson feels called upon to preach to the rest of the world about energy. He speaks as if his responsibility were to the biosphere rather than to his country. He wants to ensure that all cars in Britain will soon be electric, though he cannot guarantee enough electricity to keep the light bulbs burning, the poor will suffer as a result, and the resultant pollution will be transferred to Africa and China. Of the fortunes that will be made it is best to remain silent. Johnson is fortunate that his opposition is so feeble.

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