

End of the road for petrol cars

Leader: Wind farms will end up as expensive follies

Charles Clover: Britain's stain in a green world

What will future generations think when they look at decisions made early in the 21st century to guarantee future energy supplies and cut carbon emissions? Will they regard us as rational and far-sighted? Or will they wonder at our reckless folly in erecting tens of thousands of wind turbines that will soon become obsolete?

Chris Huhne, the energy secretary, is struggling to keep the government green. In the long run he thinks he has plenty of cards up his sleeve. His Department of Energy and Climate Change is calling for a huge expansion of wind farms to meet Britain's greenhouse targets. Up to 32,000 new onshore and offshore wind turbines could be erected during the coming decades as part of a plan for an 80% cut to our greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, compared with 1990. The government's carbon plan aims to halve emissions from new cars by 2030, with most vehicles being electric, as wind and nuclear radically reduce the emissions from power generation. These are laudable aims. In the case of nuclear, Mr Huhne has been right to reject a knee-jerk response to the Fukushima disaster in Japan. The programme of replacing and eventually expanding Britain's nuclear power capability must go on.

The scores of wind farms are more worrying. Renewable energy technology is in its infancy. Huge breakthroughs in solar, wave and other renewables will be made in the coming years. Mr Huhne envisages a "technology race" in the 2020s with the cheapest winning. It is important that the race is not fixed before it starts. The current generation of wind farms may quickly become outdated and remain as expensive reminders of a rush to invest. New, more effective and less intrusive energy technologies are on the way. The risk is that the door is closed to them if the government throws in its lot with wind farms. For reasons of cost as well as aesthetics, we must avoid falling into that trap.