Hinkley Point C – A Tale of Nuclear Dreams!

Chapter 1 – Mrs Thatcher.

Some dreams come true; others turn to disaster and turn into nightmares. Hinkley Point C nuclear power station has been a dream to many politicians, is it about to come true?

Mrs. Thatcher was one of the first to dream of building Hinkley C. It was to be, the second, of 10 nuclear power stations she would build, to rescue the country from the menace of those socialist, coal dependent generators, providing most of the UK's electricity and too often holding the country to blackout ransom.

Her dream started well! At the yearlong public inquiry, I was there, at Cannington in 1988/89, despite the hundreds of people and organisations arguing against the build, including the Labour and Liberal parties, finally Mr Barnes, the Inquiry Inspector gave her permission to build Hinkley C!

But her dream turned sour, as she realised that her privatisation of the nation's nuclear electricity production just led to bankruptcy of British Nuclear Energy, and the government having to bail out the privatised company. Even worse, the world's largest nuclear accident at Chernobyl occurred, and the radioactive pollution spread over many countries in Europe.

After these events Mrs Thatcher gave up on her nuclear dream and all political parties put nuclear electricity to sleep, at the end of their electricity production lists. Nuclear was too risky and dangerous and too expensive!

Chapter 2 – The French Dream.

The nuclear dream then passed on to the French National government; after all they had been building a strong nuclear industry with 58 nuclear reactors. The dream was to market, mass produce and sell all around the world, hundreds of a new generation nuclear reactor, of French design, the EPR, (the European Pressurised Water Reactor). This EPR model would be the safest reactor in the world, and would produce more energy from the uranium and less (volume) of the nasty long term radioactive waste at the end of its life, than old style reactors.

Areva, a mainly nationalised French nuclear company, designed the reactor (originally with the German Siemens company) and confidently offered the first one to a group of energy hungry companies in Finland, STK. It would be built in 4 years, cost 3 billion euros, and be a modern improvement on the old style Russian reactors already at Olkiluoto.

The dream continued well, the French government were going to build another 2 EPR's in France, China said they would build two, and many other countries in the world showed interest, from the USA, Italy, and India, along with African and Middle Eastern countries, even the UK!

Chapter 3 – The Blair and Brown dream.

The French government then sold the dream to Labour's prime minister, Tony Blair and his chancellor, Gordon Brown, convincing them that building the new French designed EPR nuclear reactors would solve all the UK's energy problems of energy security, and contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions at a cheap price! Vincent de Rivaz was a very convincing P.R. salesman for the French nuclear industry, (though, I think some initial influence, originally, may have come from Gordon's brother who worked in the EDF's public relation's department!). Well, the British government cannot afford to build to build nuclear, so why not let the French finance and build the reactors for us, and we will buy the electricity!

So Tony and Gordon set about working hard to produce a new nuclear renaissance dream, though this time, there would be no long public inquiries! New national energy policy papers would make sure there would be no planning holdups to the national government's dream of a new nuclear energy future. Even when the Conservatives took power, with the Liberal Democrats, the new government continued Labour's (French) nuclear dream, to let EDF build two EPR reactors at Hinkley Point C in Somerset.

Chapter 4 - The Somerset Dream

Locally in Somerset the mainly Conservative County and District Councils, were sold on the dream promises of thousands of jobs and the huge amounts of investment money that was going to be spent in the local economy.

Any dissenters against building Hinkley C, the largest building project in the UK, on the rural land next to the old British reactors, were quickly dismissed by the government and the nuclear industry officials. Westminster civil servants and the EDF corporate bodies ploughed on with their planned dream goals as quickly as they could, delays would increase costs! Local residents would not be allowed to question about the dangers of nuclear power, nuclear emergency evacuation procedures the threat of terrorism, or how safe it would be to store the high level nuclear waste here, for hundreds of years, on the fragile Somerset coastline, vulnerable to erosion, rising sea levels and the second highest tidal range in the world. No problem: the government energy policy white papers said they were confident they could deal with these problems in the future.

Though, as time went on, during the restricted consultations, the councillors started to notice the local growing environmental problems of such a gigantic building project on the local transport system, housing, policing, tourism, noise and other pollution problems. They made feeble protests, but realised that they did not have the power, or the money, to fight the imposition of the government's national dream of Hinkley C being the first of a series of new reactors to be built around the country.

The local councillors mainly Conservative, (but also, some Labour), accepted the miserly sums of money offered (as a bribe?), to mitigate any future damaging effects the project would be imposing on the local communities during at least 10 years of building.

Instead of challenging the project, they started to promote it as a dream for the local economy, encouraging local firms to prepare for the good economic future for their businesses if they got involved in this dream opportunity, and promising young people a dream future in apprenticeships learning skills in nuclear construction.

Chapter 5 - Disappointing Dreams!

Problems then started to occur with the building of this new, untried and untested new design of reactor. First at Olkiluoto in Finland and then at Flamanville in France, construction problems multiplied, causing long delays in the expected generation dates, which were continually being pushed into the future and causing the initial planned financial costs to double, and then treble. The EPR dream was starting to turn bad!

Seeing the problems, energy companies in Italy, America and the UK pulled out from investing in this disastrous reactor. Further still, Western banks and investment funds all started to realise that the nuclear industry is a poor investment and advised their clients not to invest in Hinkley C. They realised that the way that the world is producing and distributing energy is going through a revolution. Large centralised power stations, nuclear or fossil fuelled, will be redundant in the next ten to fifteen years as decentralised, local, renewable energy production, with energy storage, energy efficiency, along with local and transnational grids are more flexible in coping with changing fluctuations in energy demands. The costs of renewables are falling rapidly; the costs of nuclear are rising fast!

Chapter 6 - The Growing Nightmare.

The nightmare of problems for the funding of the most expensive power station on earth at Hinkley C continued. The UK government, realising that western private companies and banks will not fund nuclear power stations, reluctantly accepts that Hinkley has to be subsidised by government guarantees, and the fixing of the price paid for its electricity, at double the present cost for 35 years, to be paid by British consumers and businesses.

Whether, this financing arrangement is legal under European free market rules is being strongly challenged in the European Courts by Austria, Luxemburg and German renewable energy companies, this will cause years more delay and uncertainty even if it is found to be acceptable.

EDF cannot fund its two thirds share of the building cost of Hinkley C, even though the Chinese government is providing a third of the investment building costs, and it is seeking further partners or more funding from the French government. The energy company has large financial debts along with huge cost commitments of its own, including funding the upgrading of its aging reactors to post Fukushima standards. The French government is telling EDF to absorb its fellow French nationalised company Areva which is effectively bankrupt from trying to build this reactor in Finland. Not only this, but reports show rapidly increasing costs for the final disposal of its nuclear waste, and, it is being expected to increase its spending on new renewable energy technologies in France.

EDF also has to borrow money to pay its shareholders dividends, no wonder its share prices on the French stock market have declined massively the last two years. Standard and Poor are threatening to downgrade EDF's borrowing status if it decides to make a final decision to invest in Hinkley C.

All these financial problems are worrying EDF's own employee shareholders and unions who are telling the management board not to invest in Hinkley C or at least postpone investment, as the EPR has not been successfully built and generating anywhere in the world, as it could spell financial doom to the company. No wonder the EDF chief financial director has resigned!

The growing nightmare continues as the French national nuclear safety inspectorate, the ASN, is concerned about the strength and quality of the steel that has been forged to make the reactor pressure vessel casks, which are meant to keep the huge amounts of atomic energy away from us all! Further testing is required before approval to start generating is needed, oh dear, yet more delays, we have already installed the suspect steel pressure vessel at Flamanville, and in the Chinese reactors!

Chapter 7 - Final Dream Decisions.

Will EDF finally agree to finance the building of Hinkley C?

Increasingly, the growing number of problems: constructional, technical, legal, environmental and financial, of building Hinkley C is beginning to change the dream into a nightmare.

The nuclear dreams of many people are going to turn to turn to disaster whatever EDF decide on the final investment decision.

If the decision is, YES, let's go ahead, France could lose its national electricity generator and the French taxpayers will economically rue the day when they tried to follow the nuclear dream.

If EDF say NO, to the investment the UK's energy policy is in tatters! Leaving the hopes and dreams of Conservative politicians, local councillors, aspiring businesses and some British trade unions regretting the day they put all their eggs into one nuclear basket, following the MIRAGE of the Hinkley C nuclear dream.

By the way, my dreams are coming true!

All around the world I see rapidly growing investment into a decentralised, renewable energy future, backed up with energy storage, micro and trans- national grids, and increasing energy efficiency, allowing people, farms, businesses, communities, towns, cities and countries to join the energy revolution that is truly a sustainable future for our children!

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