



INTERVIEW

Lobbying hard for a nuclear share

NUCLEAR POWER / Tim Yeo faces an uphill struggle in trying to persuade Europeans to think nuclear / **Gerald Butt, London**

In 2014, Tim Yeo founded New Nuclear Watch Europe (NNWE), an industry-financed and London-based lobby group. Forty-six years earlier, he had graduated in history from Cambridge University. I was curious to know how the path from the study of history had led him to a public role in the promotion of nuclear energy.

As a young graduate, Yeo worked in the financial sector in the City of London. But not for very long. He felt the lure of politics and in 1983 was elected a member of parliament for the Conservative Party. He later became a cabinet minister with responsibility for health under the premiership of John Major. Then, out of the blue, his course changed. "I set off in the morning as health minister," he says, "and

came back in the afternoon as environment minister."

The move, in 1993, turned out to be a defining moment for Yeo. His new post introduced him to climate-change issues. At that time, he said, "these issues were not at all widely discussed or understood. It was a very specialist subject. But I quickly became persuaded of the science of climate change and the need to move to a lower-carbon economic model. That's what really got me particularly interested in energy policy."

Later in his political career Yeo's focus on this subject was even more intense when he chaired the parliamentary energy and climate-change committee. "I have had a close interest for 25 years in all forms

of low-carbon energy and the policies which promote investment in low-carbon technology. Nuclear is clearly one of the most prominent of those."

Lack of understanding

Yeo adds that his support for nuclear being part of a nation's energy mix "was also strengthened by the fact that Sizewell (nuclear power station) was in the next-door constituency to mine in Suffolk, and I knew it had a high reputation as a good employer. It was seen by the local community as a clean form of energy. So, there was an economic benefit and almost a social benefit from nuclear power."

Yeo became convinced that "the more people know about nuclear power, the

more likely they are to be in favour of it. The most entrenched opponents tend to be those who don't understand much about it."

It was precisely because of this observation that Yeo, on leaving parliament, decided to set up NNWE. "I had discussions with a number of nuclear supporters in industry who felt there was room for a pro-nuclear campaign body. Not a trade association or replicating what the Nuclear Industry Association does, but to act as a lobby."

Selling the merits of nuclear power isn't easy. In the minds of many people, the mention of the word nuclear triggers memories of horrendous disasters, not least Chernobyl and, more recently, Fukushima. An innate fear among much of the public of further possible disasters might appear to be an insurmountable obstacle for a lobby group like NNWE.

"It's certainly an obstacle, no doubt about that," he says. "The industry has been grappling with that for decades and will continue to do so. But I think it's very important always to make the case for the safety record of nuclear, which is very good. In fact, in the West it's outstandingly good."

Yeo believes that safety standards have improved over the years. "In the case of Chernobyl, the Russians learned a painful lesson. They've since redrawn all the boundaries and I think now their technology is good."

"Renewables and nuclear energy complement each other"—Yeo

Double standards

At the same time, Yeo admits that "there will always be concerns because of the potentially dangerous consequences of nuclear. However, these must be analysed in a rational and statistically grown-up way. If you look at the consequences of the coal industry over the last 150 years, they have been devastating in terms of health effects and deaths directly and indirectly caused."

In other words, he argues, nuclear energy is a victim of double standards. "There seems to me," he says, "even today, in the world's attitudes to different energy sources, a mismatch between the quite-

rightly vigorous demands made on the nuclear industry and the continued tolerance of technologies which are killing people in the hundreds of thousands each year."

Yet the reality is that if countries in the West are abandoning coal, in terms of finding a replacement their thoughts turn to natural gas or renewables, ahead of nuclear power. All the talk these days is of electric vehicles, and wind and solar power.

"You're absolutely right," says Yeo. "Renewables have captured public attention and I personally am a strong supporter of the role of renewables. I think they have a critical contribution to make to solving climate change. I'm well aware that a lot of people would prefer renewables to take over. But we don't see, at NNWE, a direct competition between renewables and nuclear energy. We believe they complement each other."

The problem is that among governments in Europe, the focus of Yeo's lobby group, the trend is away from the use of nuclear, not towards it. The UK is the exception. The world's first large-scale nuclear power station was completed there in 1956, and three new projects are in the pipeline. Over Europe as a whole, 131 reactors are operating, providing more than a quarter of its electricity. But now Belgium, Germany, Spain and Switzerland have announced plans to phase out nuclear power.

French dithering

The position of France, where nuclear power supplies 75% of electricity—making it the most reliant country on nuclear—is in the balance. President Macron, as he took office, said he would honour a previous commitment to trim its nuclear dependency to 50% by 2025. He later pushed that date back to 2035—a decision that contributed to the resignation of environment minister Nicolas Hulot. His successor is to announce a revised energy plan in the coming weeks.

Aside from safety concerns, critics of nuclear power say it's too expensive to set up and subject to too many delays. According to Mycle Schneider, lead author of the World Nuclear Industry Status Report, "repeated construction delays further undermine the credibility of nuclear power as a viable option for electricity generation". It's not only "increasingly expensive, but too slow to compete with other options".

Yeo accepts such criticism as "legitimate and understandable". He admits that

75%

Nuclear's share of French power generation

"the high cost of a new nuclear plant is one of the main obstacles to its wider deployment. The industry, in cooperation with government, has got to work really hard to reduce those costs."

The crucial factor, the NNWE chief continued, "is that nuclear, even more than any other energy industry, has a huge up-front capital cost and a long construction period. And it will be seven or eight years before any revenue is generated at all. Therefore, the cost of capital has a disproportionately high effect on the ultimate cost of electricity from a nuclear plant. That's where the government has a role to play."

Yeo takes heart from the fact that Asian countries ("The world is going to be led by Asia in 50 years") appear to realise that nuclear power will be an essential component of their energy mix. "At NNWE, we're concerned about the faltering support for nuclear in the West. But it's interesting to me that the fast-growing economies in Asia are mostly backing nuclear. There's an understanding that it's going to be very hard to reach the carbon-emission reduction targets for electricity generation without a substantial contribution from nuclear."

Winnable battle

But when it comes to Europe, does Yeo wake up each morning feeling that he's fighting a winning or losing battle? He chuckled before offering the reply of a consummate politician: "Well, I think it's a winnable battle, but I'm not sure we're winning it yet. Not in Europe."

To underline the point, he said that at a recent conference organised by the European Commission on low-carbon energy the focus "was predominantly on renewables. Nuclear scarcely got a look in. The commission is really not very interested in nuclear. So, we're not winning the argument there."

Politicians are used to set-backs. They also learn to be resilient, picking themselves up for the next battle. Don't forget, **Yeo is still a politician at heart. PE**