

Lord Howell on modern electricity transmission. Are pylons necessary across the countryside?- Speech to House of Lords – 22.04.26

“My Lords, I thank my colleague, my noble friend Lady McIntosh, for securing this debate, the authorities for providing room for it, and I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Nagaraju, on his maiden speech, which seemed full of common sense and aimed at the right issues. I am also glad to learn about his expertise on AI as applied to policy organisation; on a day when it is becoming increasingly clear that there is something rotten in the central machinery of government in this country, his contribution will be very welcome and very valuable indeed.

In my short time, I will ask just one question to the Minister, and I would value as many details as he can give in his answers if he has time. The Minister obviously is aware—not everybody is, but I am sure he is—that NESO has announced its plans for building an army of new electricity pylons, mostly of traditional design but some new ones, to march across the countryside as part of the great grid upgrade on which it is embarked. With 50 gigawatts being added to our existing clean electricity output by 2030—it varies, but on average it is about 45 gigawatts a year—and with the hope to build far more than that, there are plans for 3,000 to 5,000 new pylons, with in the range of 290 gigawatts to 300 gigawatts by 2050.

I do not know whether any of that can possibly be achieved—it does not look like it at present—and of course, even if it is, it is still far too small for meeting the demands of clean electricity of a modern nation by 2050 or, indeed, by 2030. There are 71 data centre applications roaming around; not all of them have been accepted by the National Grid, but about half of them have been accepted, and many will never be built. But they alone would swamp the sort of amounts of gigawatts we are talking about by far. So that would have to be revised upwards, and the chances of meeting it will have to be revised rapidly downwards.

My question is simply: have the Government looked at alternatives, as are being looked at in many other advanced industrial societies, and in particular at the hydrogen vector? For instance, Germany, is planning three new hydrogen-type networks around the whole country to reinforce the vast demands for clean electricity from expanding industry investment. If we could focus on that, much more than we have heard so far from the Government, then a lot of the countryside, to which my noble friend rightly referred, could be preserved.

The hydrogen vector can provide a system of transmitting electricity very different to the great wires of these vast 50-metre structures that are planned, and with much less

impact on the countryside. It is much easier to store, and there is no need to pay billions to switch off wind power at night, which of course is the present problem—there is a fear of unbalancing the entire system in trying to marry intermittent and regularly generated electricity, which is proving much more difficult than some people realise. There is no need to develop a pattern which has to be interrupted, as was interrupted with dramatic effect down in Iberia the other day. Japan itself has declared that the real pattern for the future is, predominantly, through the hydrogen vector.

There are, of course, problems; I do not deny that. There are difficulties about transportation, for example. One way is by road, which is now practised in four or five other advanced industrial countries. Another way is through storage and, indeed, by shipping and various other means, but all of them mean that there will be fewer pylons, a better and happier nation and a happier countryside. I hope that this one question will get an answer in the debate this afternoon”.
