

What's the point of nuclear power?

HOW many prime ministers does it take to build a nuclear power station? Answer: seven, so far!

In the mid-1980s, Margaret Thatcher, who was keen on nuclear power, supported British Energy's plans to build Hinkley Point C in Somerset. Despite it being given permission at the year-long public inquiry in 1989, she gave up on nuclear due to the high costs, the Chernobyl disaster and her failure to privatise nuclear generation. John Major followed when nuclear power had fallen out of favour. It was the next two prime ministers, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, who revived interest and started new legislation in nuclear power, after being persuaded that the French utility company EDF's 'miraculous' EPR reactor would solve all of Britain's energy problems.

David Cameron signed a very expensive contract with France and China that would mean British electricity consumers would pay a set amount for 35 years after Hinkley Point C started generating.

Theresa May, after a sudden hesitation about the involvement of Chinese investment in nuclear infrastructure, finally approved EDF to start building in 2016. Several years of groundwork had already been allowed to start before planning and financial



Picture: SOUTH WEST NEWS SERVICE

Giant building site: Hinkley Point C

arrangements were finalised. This was after a close decision in a controversial debate in France as to whether EDF could afford to go ahead and build Hinkley Point C.

Under Boris Johnson, this nuclear power station is way off completion and will not start to generate until 2027, if it's ever built at all.

After almost 40 years of wrangles, it would join the other two European EPR reactors at Olkiluoto in Finland and Flamanville in north-western France. There are still many problems: Chinese political involvement, growing financial costs and ever-increasing technical problems, with a reactor design flaw causing fuel safety worries. This problem has stopped the Chinese Taishan EPR reactor after 18 months. Even if they were truly very low-carbon, which they are not, nuclear power stations take decades to build and can never produce enough green electricity to seriously tackle climate change. Instead, money and resources should go to renewable technologies that can be built on time and give us low-carbon energy far faster, cheaper and quicker without future generations having to deal with thousands of years of toxic radioactive waste.

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