

Flamanville points to nuclear fiasco

Alistair Osborne,
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As French existential jokes go, little beats building a nuclear power plant at a place called Flammable. O.K., it's actually Flamanville. But who cares about that sort of nicety — not least when the project's proving so incendiary?

It was due to be up and running in 2012 at a cost of €3.3 billion. Not only that. Flaming Ville was to be the showcase for the European Pressurised Reactor, the wizzy new tech developed by the state-backed EDF. True, it's living up to the pressurised bit, at least for EDF boss Jean-Bernard Lévy. He's just been forced to announce another delay: a howitzer, even by usual standards, of "more than three years". The end of 2022 is now the earliest start date; a delay bound to jack up project costs that have already exploded to €10.9 billion

The reason? France's spoilsport nuclear safety authority has ordered EDF to repair eight bits of dodgy welding: who'd have thought nukes had to be welded together properly? And, yes, the whole thing is turning into a nice French farce. Except for one thing, of course: the joke's on us.

Flamanville is the prototype for our very own nuclear disaster: the £20 billion Hinkley Point C. It's being built by EDF and the Chinese in return for the contractual right to fleece UK consumers for 35 years: an index-linked, guaranteed £92.50 per megawatt hour that's twice the wholesale price. Even better, the 3,200MW Hinkley is the planned forerunner for a fleet of new nukes.

Indeed, so thrilling is the prospect that Greg Clark spent his dying days as business secretary agonising over whether it might actually be better to fleece consumers upfront instead, *via* his "regulated asset base" funding model, before the plant was built. His verdict? A "consultation", the sort of non-decision-making for which he was deservedly sacked.

Surely someone in government can see the big picture here. It's not just Flamanville that's proving new nuclear so radioactive; a heady mix of last-century tech, uncontrollable costs, endless delays and a dirty great clean-up bill. EDF's sister project, at Olkiluoto in Finland, has proved a similar disaster. And didn't ministers notice while their mooted plant at Moorside was imploding that the project's promoter, Japan's Toshiba, was blowing itself in the US with subsidiary Westinghouse? No bribe was big enough, either, for Hitachi at Wylfa: no big shock when the group's from Fukushima-land.

True, nuclear accounts for a fifth of Britain's energy needs. But its costs keep going up, while those of wind, solar, battery power and carbon capture are falling. And they don't require dangerous clean-ups. Yes, maybe it's too late to stop Hinkley. But someone in Boris's new team must see that new nuclear's a route to torching money. Flammable is all the evidence they need.