

## **KEEPING THE LIGHTS ON:**

WHEN the authorities make contingency plans against predictable disasters, we all applaud their foresight. Which catastrophes they are thinking about, however, can be revealing and give cause for concern; and right now the government is working on the possibility of a five-day nationwide power blackout – putting all its breezy denials of the lights going out into perspective.

As frequently noted here, energy policy since the dreadful Energy Act 2008 has resulted in the safety margin between reliable electricity generating capacity and peak demand becoming progressively and dangerously tighter. A 20 percent margin would be considered comfortable; but this winter it will only be 1.2 percent – down from 4.1 percent last year – before the National Grid takes special short-term measures.

### **Homes and hospitals**

The grid has recently been bolstering its emergency resources with banks of diesel generators and the right to switch off industrial customers. Publicly the government always insists “the lights will stay on” – in homes and hospitals, that is. But it’s a costly, third-world way to run a grid in a supposedly advanced economy: and now we know they obviously don’t think it is guaranteed to work.

Papers seen by Private Eye indicate that the Cabinet Office and Treasury combined are planning for a scenario in which there is a five-day nationwide blackout with only small stand-by generators working. The detailed consequences they envisage include:

- No landline telephones available to businesses or homes
- Mobile phones with voice-only service (not data)
- No street lights, traffic lights or public transport
- Two-thirds of petrol stations closed
- Shops open only sporadically and unreliably
- ATMs unavailable, with cash running out fast

This would most probably happen in winter. It goes without saying that such a situation would also bring about ghastly accidents and loss of life, with the emergency services much constrained in their ability to cope. The implications for industry, commerce and public order are grim, too. If it’s any comfort, the German authorities – based on their own crazy energy policy – are looking at very similar scenarios.

With all this at stake, as prudent as it may be to plan for potential calamities, it would surely have been better to render the blackout scenario redundant by properly ensuring security of electricity supply. The current combination of intermittent windfarms, ageing nukes, fast-closing coal-fired power stations and mothballed gas-fired plants doesn’t do that: and privately the government knows it.