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Tim Bonner: Government seeks balance in solar farm debate

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I know from my inbox exactly how concerned people across the countryside are about solar farms. Most people are reasonable and understand that we must all play a part in the transition to renewable energy, but there is a very strong feeling that the countryside is being asked to carry most of the burden for solar and other renewable generation. There is also concern that there seems to be little consideration of the impact of taking agricultural land out of production, and frustration about the clustering of solar farms around substations.

Subsidies and developer incentives have created a situation where the conversion of agricultural land to solar can be lucrative, but there are wider social and economic implications beyond the ability of single farms to generate revenue. Apart from the visual and landscape issues, some tenant farmers have been threatened with eviction and solar development is also increasing land values in some areas. These trends risk making it harder for new entrants to join the sector, threatening both the agricultural skill base and the sustainability of some communities.

Our position is that the burden of this transition must be shared across society and that it is neither efficient nor sustainable to build solar farms almost solely on agricultural land whilst solar panels are largely absent from existing and new industrial units and domestic housing.

We were, therefore, pleased to see that a written ministerial statement was laid before parliament yesterday (15 May) making clear that solar farms on agricultural land should only be given the go-ahead when necessary. Councils will also be told to take into account whether other solar farms are nearby when considering an application for a new one, thereby reducing the cumulative impact of solar developments.

Claire Coutinho, the Energy Security Secretary, has said that she wants to see more solar on rooftops and, where that is not possible, for agricultural land to be protected and for the cumulative impact on local villages to be considered where they are facing a high number of solar farm applications. She says she wants to reach solar targets in a sensible way that delivers clean, cheaper energy, but does not compromise our food security.

That ambition chimes with the Alliance's desire that energy infrastructure should be sited sensitively and that food production should remain the primary use of productive agricultural land. We welcome this statement as an important supplement to the recent revised planning framework. Like the government, we think there is much greater scope for encouraging solar panels to be placed on existing and new industrial and housing sites to help ensure rural areas are not asked to bear a disproportionate burden in the move to a net-zero energy system.

We are, however, very aware that previous statements by the government have not led to action. For instance, the new planning framework unveiled six months ago - which was meant to deal with this issue - had not resolved the problems. This ministerial statement needs to generate real change, not just column inches and sound bites.

As all political parties know, the transition to renewable energy cannot happen without continued public support. The approach all political parties take to solar and other renewable energy generation will be crucial election issues in many constituencies.

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