

Speech: “We must all come together to help more women shape a bright future for British nuclear energy”, says Commercial Secretary

Good afternoon.

Let me start by thanking Jack [Gritt] the President of Women in Nuclear for inviting me to speak to you today. I’m pleased to be here because I shall be taking a deep professional interest in the work of Women in Nuclear in my [new job](#).

Because recently I was made a Minister of State at the Treasury – and I’m proud to say, its first ever female Commercial Secretary and its first ever female peer.

I have always wanted to work at the Treasury.

Ever since I studied politics, philosophy and economics, I have been clear that our national success depends on us spending our resources in the right way.

That’s something I grew up caring about – when you are brought up on a family farm, you learn the importance of looking after the pennies from a young age!

Raising eyebrows in the Civil Service

In my present post I shall continue to take a deep personal interest in the work of Women in Nuclear. Because I’ve long held a strong conviction in the moral, practical and economic necessity of women getting the opportunities we deserve.

In fact, it’s been something I’ve cared about since I first started out in my career.

After graduating from university, I found myself in the fortunate position of having 3 options to choose from – the Civil Service, Unilever, and the Bank of England.

One of the factors that really swung it for me, was the relatively positive attitude towards women that the Civil Service was already taking even then.

Of course it was still dominated by men at the top.

As I climbed up the ranks at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, it was mainly the men doing the hiring – and the higher up the ladder I rose, the more that was the case.

And I remember when I was helping to get the Food Safety Bill through Parliament back in 1989, all three of us leading the team were women – and even more shocking, all three of the Ministers in the Lords, where the Bill started, were women too.

This attracted widespread comment.

It's a sign of how far we've come that nowadays a team composed entirely of men would be just as likely to raise eyebrows.

A daily, a weekly, a monthly process

Because women's increasing role in the workplace is now something that's on the agenda of every single organisation, every single business, and every single industry.

I saw this first-hand when I was working as an executive director on the board at Tesco. It was one of my functions to head up its diversity council. And the attitude I took was always pragmatic. I don't believe in paying lip service to diversity. I believe in taking action. Which is why we tried a whole range of things to support our female staff – such as job sharing for store managers. Opportunities to work with mentors. Or making sure women were paid the same as their male counterparts – because I knew women could be slower to ask for pay rises.

It's initiatives like these that really start to make a difference.

Every little helps, as my old firm said.

Moving forward

Then as a minister in the Business department I worked closely with British companies to look at how we could get more women on boards.

Because I've had my own experience of being the only woman on a board – and it's tough!

Just having two or three more women alongside you changes the whole experience.

So I think it's great that in just the last 5 years, we've made real headway – the percentage of women on the FTSE 100 for example doubled from 13 to 26%.

And I'm pleased to see Sir Philip Hampton and Dame Helen Alexander leading this work forward.

I'm now excited to look at what more I can do in the Treasury.

Working, for example, with Jayne-Anne Gadhia, the CEO of Virgin Money, to [support women in the financial sector](#).

And encouraging more women to apply for our public appointments – something I'd recommend to anyone here too, by the way.

It is an excellent way to pick up new skills and set yourselves apart – and I'll tweet a link out to the website afterwards for you to investigate!

Our nuclear past...

But I want to talk about why we need more women in the UK's nuclear industry in 2017.

And to do so, let's rewind a few decades, to the 17th October, 1956. That was a milestone date in the history of British nuclear power. That was the day our present Queen made her way to the coast of the Irish Sea in Cumbria, to open the very first full-scale nuclear power plant in the world, welcoming, what she pronounced, "this new power...harnessed for the common good of our community."

That was a moment built on the work of many scientists, a good proportion of them British, who had pioneered the way forward.

Frederick Soddy's proof of atomic transmutation.

James Chadwick's discovery of the neutron.

John Douglas Cockroft splitting the atomic nucleus with Ernest Walton.

Our nuclear present...

But, sadly, we haven't kept pace in the 21st century.

Sizewell B in Suffolk was the last nuclear power station to be built in this country – I actually visited it during construction when I was a Non-Executive Director at John Laing. It was nearly a quarter of a century ago when it opened in 1995.

But that is something this government has resolved to change. We came to the conclusion that nuclear energy must play an important part in the diversity of this country's energy mix.

For security of supply.

For cost-effectiveness.

And for the contribution it can make to meeting our carbon reduction commitments. That's why we gave the green light to Hinkley Point C.

And that's why there are industry proposals to develop new nuclear power capacity across a total of five UK sites, such as Moorside and Wylfa. If these projects went ahead, they could generate thousands of new jobs. And it's not just in the UK that we're seeing a nuclear resurgence. Because as Dr Fatih Birol, the Director of the International Energy Agency says, if we are to meet the climate change commitments, we need nuclear to be a bigger part of the world energy mix. So there is a strong global movement towards nuclear, and British expertise should play its part in that.

And our nuclear future

Because this is an industry that clearly has an exciting future.

This is something Anne Lauvergeon – the former CEO at Areva, more often known in the industry as Atomic Anne – was speaking about at the Atlantic Council discussion on the future of nuclear just a few weeks ago.

And consider, too, the future of nuclear fusion – I've enjoyed many a fascinating conversation about this with my step daughter, who I'm proud to say is now a senior engineer at ITER.

This project is a fantastic example of international cooperation. 35 countries have joined together to build the world's largest tokamak fusion device, in the idyllic setting of rural Provence – indeed my step daughter tells me you can even hear the wild boar piglets squeaking outside the windows. This technology is clearly something with enormous long term potential – as anyone working at the Culham Centre for Fusion Energy near Oxford will be keen to tell you.

Pioneers of the past and future

So what does our proud nuclear past, our present nuclear renaissance, and our exciting nuclear future mean? Well, for those of you in the industry, it means great career prospects!

Because there is a huge demand for skills and knowledge – and on a global scale.

As Steven Cowley, the world fusion expert, and former CEO of the UK Atomic Energy Authority, said:

The way we will make energy in the future is not through resources, but through knowledge.

So we have to look at how we can build that knowledge, right here in the UK. Not only so we can forge a future of British nuclear, as bright as our past. But so we can make the most of the UK's incredible research base to make a pioneering contribution to the future of global energy too.

Fresh talent

But how can we develop the British talent that will lead us forward into the future?

Well, we've made a good start.

Top universities are beginning to adapt their engineering degrees to the new nuclear opportunity. And Government has also joined forces with the industry to set up a new National College for Nuclear, with two campuses in the South West and in our nuclear heartland in Cumbria.

Cumbria already employs thousands in this industry – the Sellafield site alone gives high quality jobs to over 10,000 people.

The College with its 2 campuses will play a big part by training the next generation of nuclear specialists. It will open its doors to students this coming September – aiming to train 7,000 people by 2020 alone.

The National Skills Academy for Nuclear (NSAN) is also running its flagship programme of training for people to work on nuclear sites – and has already had around 14,000 enrolments.

More widely, we also have bold ambitions to educate the British scientists of the future. Both through apprenticeships, and our work to boost the study of STEM subjects, especially maths where we lag behind internationally.

Because this kind of background can unlock all kinds of doors – whether you want to work in nuclear, in data, in cyber or in an investment bank.

Female talent

But another way I think we can really make a difference is to make the most of the full potential of British women in this industry.

And that's not just about filling the skills gap we face. It's also about building the strength of the industry itself.

There is much evidence that a diverse range of opinions, a diverse range of ideas, and a diverse range of backgrounds all mean greater success for any type of business or organisation.

And that's the reason why diversity is not just something women care about – but men too.

And it's noteworthy that Women in Nuclear is not an organisation confined to the UK, it's a chapter in an international story – with over 30 such organisations across the globe – from Brazil to Bulgaria, the UAE to the Ukraine and Egypt to Indonesia.

And I know governments across continents will welcome their efforts with open arms.

I had the privilege to speak at the International Atomic Energy Agency Conference in Vienna last year, and my vision for women taking a major role in global nuclear and security was shared with over 130 countries. So the work of Women in Nuclear – and indeed similar organisations, such as the Women's Engineering Society, or Women in STEM – is immensely important. You combine a positive attitude to change, with a pragmatic one. And the many activities you undertake – whether events like this, or mentoring, or your industry charter – all of these are important contributions to change.

They help to break stereotypes, and bring down barriers.

To raise awareness, and encourage aspirations.

In short, to instil a sense that change is not only possible, but happening.

We should also take pride in how far we have come. If you think back to a 150 years ago, women were excluded from large parts of economic life.

The transformation we have seen since then has been incredible.

In this country alone, we've got almost 15 million women in work.

We've got a second female prime minister leading the country.

And we've got organisations like Women in Nuclear, holding events like this, to take us even further, in our positive pursuit of progress.

So let me end, by wishing all of you a fantastic conference, as well as every success in your careers in this industry.

Thank you.