

Nuclear friction among Liberal Democrats gathering energy

They cannot all be dummies ... Scots are usually quite prosaic.

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Liberal Democrats have carved out a clear image for themselves as the anti-nuclear champions in the debate over future energy supplies.

Indeed, the prospect of Scotland being forced to accept new nuclear power stations is one of the few issues which all sides believe could break the coalition between the Lib Dems and Labour.

But this weekend, the Lib Dems' stance will be challenged from within when the party's Scottish spring conference in Aviemore is presented with an amendment from Edinburgh activists to the leadership's motion about managing radioactive waste.

Former parliamentary candidate Keith Smith from Edinburgh Pentlands and seven others want to reaffirm the party's opposition to new nuclear power stations "at the present time".

They argue that global warming and the time it takes to develop renewable energy mean there might be a need for some new nuclear power stations in the future, as "the lesser of evils".

And they say the life of existing nuclear power stations should be extended where there is no deterioration in safety or efficiency levels. Mr Smith, an environmental scientist, claims society does not pay enough attention to the threat of climate change.

"The dangers of nuclear power are quite minor compared with global warming," he says. "We are not saying we should abandon our existing policy, just flagging up the fact there are other problems which are potentially worse than nuclear power."

The questioning of the anti-nuclear stance by conference delegates comes just a few weeks after leaked correspondence revealed tensions over the issue among Lib Dem MPs at Westminster.

Former Scottish affairs spokesman John Thurso wrote in a letter to trade unions at the Dounreay nuclear plant in his Caithness constituency: "I have been engaged in promoting a reassessment of the party's policy both in shadow cabinet and in the wider party. I believe that steady pressure is beginning to bear fruit within parliament and wider public opinion."

He also wrote of the possibility that he might feel obliged to resign as spokesman so he could pursue the matter more fully, but added he felt for the moment he was better using his influence from within the shadow cabinet. But new Lib Dem leader Sir Menzies Campbell settled that one for him by appointing the party's youngest MP, Jo Swinson, to replace him as Scottish spokesperson.

But possibly more damaging than the behind-the-scenes arguments is a claim by city councillor Sue Tritton that the leadership has tried to stifle open debate on the issue.

The Lib Dems pride themselves on free speech and tolerance of dissent, but Councillor Tritton claims her attempts to get a conference debate on the party's outright opposition to new nuclear power stations have been blocked three times.

"There has been an effort in the party conference committee not to have this issue discussed," she says. "You could argue they were frightened it might get too much support."

Cllr Tritton says she submitted motions on nuclear power for last year's spring conference, last year's autumn conference and again for this weekend's conference, but none made it on to the agenda.

The amendment is almost certain to be defeated. But Cllr Tritton insists: "There is definitely a substantial minority in the party that thinks the issue needs to be looked at.

"I would like a message sent to the MPs and MSPs that there is a significant body of opinion in the party that says doors should not be closed."

The Scottish Executive's official line – agreed in the last coalition deal – is to oppose new nuclear power stations until the problem of radioactive waste is resolved.

But Labour's Scottish conference voted last month in favour of building new nuclear plants, setting the scene for a direct clash with the Lib Dems after the UK energy review is published in June.

This weekend's debate in Aviemore will serve as a prelude to the much bigger national debate which will have to take place then.