

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE COUNCIL OF THE RSPB

An important element of my world-view emerged from my childhood and teenage experiences of the Scottish hills and moorland, sea-shores and woodlands, glens and lochs, leading eventually to an understanding of the spiritual value of being able to wander amidst these landscapes, seascapes and skylscapes and to a recognition of the joy of having the opportunity to obtain respite from the soul-destroying mechanisation of so much of our culture.

"Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul." John Muir

Hence I regard the frequently inappropriate intrusion into our landscapes of commercial wind farms, the industrialisation of our open spaces with mechanical structures, as an attack on an important element of our humanity.

And it is here I must introduce the open letter, one of the signatories of which was the RSPB (S) published in The Scotsman to the Convener of the Scottish Parliament's Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee which made me wonder initially whether I ought to reconsider my membership of RSPB (however rather than resign I decided to attempt to challenge the Council from within, futile though that may seem). The purpose of the open letter was to "re-state our support for the growth of well-planned renewables - including wind power" and I certainly do not object to a strategy for "well-planned renewables". However apart from suggesting that there is no evidence that the current strategy is in reality being well-planned I felt that the letter contained a most revealing phrase to the effect that the purpose of the strategy is "to power our economies and lifestyles." Power our lifestyles? Did I read aright? I was not surprised at this letter being signed by representatives of the corporate sector but was astonished at the support given to this priority by FoE (S), WWF (S) and RSPB (S). It seemed to me to demonstrate that the signatories fail to appreciate that climate change is a direct consequence of a cultural determination to maintain and enhance Western lifestyles in spite of the consequences for ourselves although as always it is the really impoverished at home (see below) and overseas who bear the greatest costs.

I do not expect everyone to agree with much of the foregoing given my emphasis on spirituality, no matter how broadly defined, and my criticism of the materialist basis of our way of life but it explains why I set out to investigate all aspects of a strategy to tackle global warming which many experts claim is far too limited, inadequate and possibly even doomed to failure.

I agree that anthropogenic climate change is the greatest threat to the continuing existence of humanity and our partner species on this planet on and from which both emerged. My question is 'can we find the answers which will ensure our survival without recognising the need for a 'spiritual' input?' I believe that to suggest that the only solutions are technical fixes which relieve us of the responsibility to face up to the consequences of our lifestyle is to delude ourselves. Wind turbines are one such technical fix in relation to which I seek answers to the question whether UK wind generation has as much to contribute to solving the problem of global greenhouse gas emissions as its proponents claim and whether the continuing subsidy regime is justified.

I would assume that no-one will disagree with the assertion that the meeting of a particular set of renewables targets does not automatically result in the meeting of the ultimate targets of reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the most effective way.

Is there a more technically and cost effective solution which meets these ultimate targets without destroying our iconic landscapes which are internationally recognised as being unique? I quote the words of WH Murray the Scottish climber, world traveller and author, written in 1963,

"The Scottish Highlands have no counterpart on this planet . . . comparisons fail to survive even brief examination . . . The outstanding beauty of the Highland scene has been haphazardly expended and no account kept. Are Scots so blind that they cannot prize it for its own sake?"

While I do not intend to rehearse yet again in full the many unresolved arguments for and against wind-turbines there are a few which I wish to emphasise.

The first relates to the sharing of the costs of the current Westminster/Holyrood strategy, my submission being that these are being shared in a way which increases the inequality and hence the dysfunctionality of our society. Wind turbines are machines for making, through the subsidies regime, already prosperous communities such as Shetland**, landowners, developers and multi-national companies even richer and the less prosperous poorer. Why should the seriously disadvantaged already suffering from fuel-poverty be among the ones who have to subsidise the essential task of tackling climate change while others make vast amounts of money?

In relation to this I must point out that compared with most of Europe Denmark has high electricity prices, partly as a consequence of its strategy of shuffling its wind generated electricity to and from Norway. I wonder who is to pay the cost of the suggested undersea cable between Scotland and Norway, such a 'Danish' strategy being the proposed answer to wind intermittency. Is there any robust technical evidence produced other than by the wind lobby that proves that such schemes are optimal solutions? Or are they just grandiose projects with little technical and economic justification which appeal to the egos of the politicians who promote them?

And the costs are not solely financial, the evidence mounting of the negative health impacts on those who live close by a wind generator or two, or several hundred (waubrafoundation.com.au/). Communities in Scotland who are affected by such farms are accused of nimbyism by people who don't have wind farms in their back yards and frequently have their fears swept aside, their objections ignored and the rejection of the proposals by their local councils overturned by the Scottish Government.

Then there are the opportunity costs arising out of a failure to invest adequately in other areas as a consequence of a single-minded determination to maintain a vastly expensive and potentially ill-advised subsidy regime. For instance energy conservation measures, many of which are relatively low-tec, are claimed to be three times more cost-effective and would result in greatly increased employment levels in local firms the length and breadth of land possibly creating far more local jobs than are claimed for on-shore wind.

And are there after all costs to be borne by our bird populations? "Contrary to what we are told wind farms will cause the extinction of many bat and bird species" (www.savetheeaglesinternational.org)

My core point is that there has so far been an apparent failure on the part of RSPB (S), FoE (S) and WWF (S) to back the calls from the likes of the John Muir Trust and the professional engineering bodies for an independent National Energy Commission to resolve, as far as possible, the questions arising from the debate between the proponents and opponents of the current strategy.

But I must return to the difference between renewables targets and targets for reducing carbon emissions. Given the lack of the aforementioned independent Commission no attempt has been made to assess the contribution wind farming actually makes to the reduction of greenhouse gases and the comparative reduction which could be achieved from potentially more effective alternative renewables.

The peatlands on which many industrial scale wind farms are built can be regarded as our carbon sinks serving the same purpose as the rain forests. What is the net contribution to greenhouse gas emission reduction after taking into account the carbon emitted not only in the course of constructing turbines but by the constructing of the wind farm roads and the huge concrete platforms on our peatlands? Where are the comparative cost benefit and indeed the total systems cost analyses? Until there is an independent Energy Commission there shall be

none and the refusal of the wind lobby, their political allies and partners in the environmental etc movement to subject their preferred renewable option to in depth independent analysis arouses suspicion.

One cannot but reflect upon the economic chaos that politicians, regulators and the banks created out of the financial industry. Given our experience what faith can we have that those elected to serve the citizens' interests will develop an energy strategy the costs of which are spread fairly and which will secure our future energy security if there is no independent scrutiny? It has surely been demonstrated beyond all conceivable doubt that what our democracy lacks is a sufficiently robust system of checks and balances, in this case an independent National Energy Commission. Those bodies one of whose duties is to hold government and the corporate sector to account, and I acknowledge that the RSPB does to some extent, run the risk of losing credibility and trust by entering into partnership with them.

The gamekeepers must not become too friendly with the poachers. However I must give credit to the RSPB for opposing, unlike FoE (S) and WWF (S), the construction of the Beaulieu to Denny high voltage line now under construction at a cost of £600 million as opposed to the figure of £350 million given to the Public Inquiry.

The evidence from Sir Donald Miller and Professor Andrew Bain that this could happen was disallowed at the Inquiry.

If Scotland's contribution to global warming is indeed minuscule (a tiny fraction of 1%?) why destroy our landscapes, which are of such inestimable if unquantifiable value, with a dubious technology? Remember that because a number cannot be attached to a value does not mean it cannot be taken into account.

Of course the political and corporate response to that challenge is to claim that we are setting an example for the rest of the world for instance China to whom we can sell our technology. But are the Chinese interested in a technology whose net contribution to greenhouse gas emission reduction has not been demonstrated and which continues to require huge subsidies?

As a member of the RSPB I call on the Council to support the establishment of an independent National Energy Commission.

This is a matter with implications for our democracy which can only operate properly

- **if the citizens are supplied with information they can rely upon because it's from people they can trust (remember the cost of the Beaulieu to Denny power line)**
- **if the processes of local democracy are respected.**

And anyway what has the RSPB to lose?

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Lonely Planet named Shetland as the sixth best region in the world for tourists seeking unspoilt destinations.

National Geographic put Shetland joint third place along with the Lofoten Islands in Norway and the Chiloi archipelago in Chile in a list of the top island destinations in the world.

Once the huge Viking wind farm is constructed on Shetland these accolades will seem rather silly.