

HOW A GREEN DREAM TURNED INTO A RURAL NIGHTMARE

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One year ago, the WMN ran a series of articles questioning the accepted wisdom that windfarms were the answer to the nation's environmental ills. Since then, the arguments have intensified with each new application for wind turbines. Here, **Neil Young** looks at why they have proved so controversial and provoked such widespread opposition

Who could have foreseen that something held up to be a visionary source of "green" energy would only one year later be the focus of intense national controversy? Who could have forecast that a few articles in the Western Morning News would open up a debate that would escalate into a conflict between government power and the democratic rights of small communities?

Or that the prospect of wind turbines in the countryside, promoted in the idealised imagery of graceful Dutch windmills, would prove so divisive or be a touchstone for so many issues affecting us all?

It began with a missionary statement from the then Energy Minister, Stephen Timms, who signalled the Government's intent by telling windfarm companies to "go out and build".

The message was simple, but he had overlooked some untidy facts - not least that the opinions of those local communities where the windfarms might be located.

And it was not long before those facts began to surface.

The broadcaster and businessman Noel Edmonds fired off the opening salvos in these pages when he questioned the environmental credentials of wind technology.

The fervour and volume of the responses were a sure indicator that Mr Edmonds had struck a nerve end.

Why else would he almost overnight find himself the target of wild and stereotypical denunciation?

The gentle image of those who promoted wind power revealed itself to be a sham.

Mr Edmonds had done no more than to raise concerns about the first proposed windfarm for Devon at Bradworthy.

To his critics, that was tantamount to heresy.

How dare he, or this newspaper, question the accepted wisdom of wind technology as the benign and bountiful source of future energy? Didn't we care about global warming? Besides - what could we know?

The public took a different view. The overwhelming response was to seize on these articles as echoing many of their own concerns. Anxieties and suspicions that had not before been closely examined were for once being given the oxygen of publicity.

Nor was it long before we uncovered some disturbing facts which belied the harmonious vision of wind turbines.

First there were the findings by a Plymouth GP, Dr Amanda Harry, that people living close to the Bears Down windfarm near Padstow, suffered headaches, nausea, and sleeplessness which they blamed on the noise from the turbines.

How come this had been given such scant consideration before?

Weren't planners aware?

Did the Government know?

And more to the point - did the Government care or even want to know?

Why did it fall to one devoted GP to conduct research that should have been exhaustively investigated at a national level before the first blade on a wind turbine was spinning?

When we put Dr Harry's findings to Matthew Spencer, the chief executive of the Government's renewable energy agency for the South West (Regen), he responded in a way that spoke volumes.

He said that they should be taken with "a pinch of salt".

A pinch of salt?

Not so for Colin and Kathy Bird who told us in detail how their health had been blighted by the wind turbines.

Not so for the others affected who responded to the survey in the hope that someone in authority might listen.

Was that same "pinch" to be applied to the many others from around the UK who contacted Dr Harry in the ensuing months to report similar ill-effects.

There was prima facie case on the basis of this survey alone - and this was just one sample - to cast serious doubts over onshore wind turbines.

So much so that Professor Ralph Katz, the chair of epidemiology at New York University, called for a moratorium on windfarms until the possible health effects had been investigated by a multi-disciplinary team of scientists.

The professor, who has a home in Devon, told us: "No one know the prevalence of health syndromes where there are pockets of people living next to turbines, so what would be the effects where there were clusters? If the research evolves as it is doing at present then in 15 or 20 years' time it will be too late, people will be stuck with these things and suffering the effects."

So many other concerns were emerging as well that had hitherto been ignored or neglected.

And as they did and the number of windfarms applications proliferated across the UK, so the issues surrounding not just this technology but the Government's strategy for dealing with global warming was coming under serious critical scrutiny.

What if this technology, which had been singled out as the main driver behind the Government's target of achieving ten per cent of electricity from renewables by 2010, did not work as claimed?

What if other renewables were being neglected for the sake of a myopic vision? Under the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, the UK committed itself to producing ten per cent of electricity from renewables by 2010. The Government had decided that onshore and offshore wind would account for around two thirds of that.

But the question of whether wind power had the capacity or efficiency to achieve that remains even now hotly disputed among scientists, engineers and environmentalists. And if it couldn't, then what would be the point of pursuing a wind policy that diverted attention and resources from other renewables, or a concerted national policy on conservation to mitigate against rising energy demands? What defence could there be for chewing up beautiful areas of the

countryside for the turbine sites, places that have for centuries been a treasured part of our natural environment, and are intrinsic to the fabric of the UK's countryside.

What democratic defence in the process could there be for usurping the rights of local people and councils over local decision-making?

The Government has shown itself time and again to have skewed the planning process all the while that it insists there is a "balance" to be struck that respects the views of the community.

But how did that square with the ham-fisted Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, assuming yet more control over planning decisions as he instructed local councils that their own designations of landscapes with "special" status were of trifling concern when it came to erecting turbines 100 metres high?

This once more amplified the gulf between Government rhetoric and reality. Yet again it had the effect of alienating rural communities, and confirming the impression of a Government so steeped in cynicism that it would deploy whatever tactics it felt necessary to enforce its will. Those tactics, of course, included dismissing just about anyone who opposed windfarms as "NIMBYs", self-centred wreckers of the environment, or stooges of the nuclear industry.

The trouble was that the evidence pointed in the opposite direction. Noel Edmonds championed the cause of renewables by urging a strategy that could turn the South West into a "green peninsula" that would be a beacon to the rest of the UK. He went further with the founding of the Renewable Energy Foundation, which has already achieved remarkable results in compiling independent data on energy sources and supplies.

This newspaper too has thrown its weight behind the cause of environmentalism. We have explored in depth the needs to advance the sources of alternative energies, such as wave, tidal, solar, biomass.

We have looked in depth at the experiences of other countries, such as Germany and Denmark where onshore wind power was most advanced - and what we might learn from them before it is too late.

We have investigated and reported the unpalatable facts behind an impending energy crisis that could bring blackouts to Britain and the dramatic consequences if global warming were not arrested.

Does that still make us "NIMBYs" then, when we have put under the microscope the interdependence of the local and the global environment?

Would those critics level the same accusation at Professor James Lovelock, the internationally renowned scientist and environmentalist, who has likened windfarms to William Blake's "Dark Satanic Mills".

Prof Lovelock's warnings this year on the accelerating rate of global warming were a shock to the system of governments internationally.

They inevitably point to the complacency and double-standards of a Government that can lecture the public on their individual responsibilities while indulging its own reckless wastefulness.

What better illustration could there be than the sermonising of the Trade and Industry minister Patricia Hewitt that we should all turn off our houselights while the bulbs at her own department's building were burning in every window at night?

Or the hypocrisy of the Prime Minister Tony Blair who said in September: "What is now plain is that the emission of greenhouse gases, associated with industrialisation and strong economic growth from a world population that has increased six-fold in 200 years, is causing global warming at a rate that began as significant, has become alarming and is simply

unsustainable in the long term. To acquire global leadership on this issue Britain must demonstrate it first at home." One month later, his Government raised the level at which British industry could pump out CO₂ emissions by 7.5 per cent over the next three years.

In a stroke, every effort to curb emissions by promoting renewables was severely undermined. Why then had the Government pursued its bullying campaign for wind turbines in the countryside?

The argument that this was necessary in the overwhelming national interest was exposed as a fantasy.

Yet you would not think so, given the reception enjoyed by the Energy Minister, Mike O'Brien, at the South West Green Energy Conference in Plymouth this month.

An audience drawing heavily on windfarm companies welcomed Mr O'Brien as if he were one of their own - his speech read like an extended statement from the British Wind Energy Association.

He, in turn, delivered a speech that was as notable for its absence of any knowledgeable detail as for its congratulatory cosiness.

There was no criticism and no questioning of the stark contradiction between Mr O'Brien's faith in our "green future" and his Government's craven support for the polluters of British industry.

Instead, there was every indication that Mr O'Brien was not even familiar with his subject.

Here was as sharp an illustration as could be gained of the bankruptcy of the Government's energy policy.

It went some way to explaining its blind faith in onshore wind technology as a panacea for the national environmental ills. Mr O'Brien described as "ridiculous" a report by the WMN listing the members of the Government's own Renewables Advisory Board who work for private companies with heavy financial investments in wind power.

His attitude would have been comical if it were not so alarming.

What truly is "ridiculous" is that this is the depth of thinking behind an issue that could not be of more urgent relevance to every man, woman and child in Britain.

No issue could be more important than the national energy strategy for dealing with climate change.

A great number of those people now campaigning against windfarms in the countryside recognise this as well as the most informed of our scientists and environmentalists.

It is one of the reasons why they oppose this technology being imposed on them.

They do so because they understand this is not just about their local fields and hills being torn up to make way for overbearing industrial machinery.

It will be happening for no justifiable reason. As Noel Edmonds has cuttingly put it: "They are weapons of mass distraction."

A distraction from other technologies. A distraction from the real and compelling issues that need to be confronted.

It did not seem so one year ago.

It did not seem so when the WMN opened up these columns for a debate about onshore wind

power.

No-one could have anticipated that this technology would become such a source of conflict and deepening controversy.

But it has proved to be about much more than wind turbines.

For many people, this is not just about preserving the best of the UK's countryside.

It is that this is indivisible from the informed and reasoned energy policies on which all our "green" futures depend.

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