

SCOTTISH WILD LAND GROUP

BEAULY-DENNY - GOODBYE TO THE WILD HIGHLANDS

- ⇒ Beauly-Denny opens the doors wide for the futile sacrifice of most of the surviving wild, remote, beautiful Highlands to mega-wind factories.
- ⇒ Beauly-Denny and wind factories are yesterday's technology - costly, inefficient, unreliable.
- ⇒ the Scottish Government is backing them because vested interests profit from them - power companies, landowners, consultants.
- ⇒ the Scottish Government sees them as a highly-visible quick-fix save-the-planet green gesture that costs it no money and only a few scattered handfuls of votes.
- ⇒ the Scottish Government lacks the courage to face down Westminster's demand that its Scottish colony feed it with the renewable energy it daren't extract from English landscapes.
- ⇒ the Scottish Government lacks the vision to protect Scotland's priceless landscape heritage in the same way as it does its cultural heritage and its natural wildlife.
- ⇒ the obvious alternative to the overhead Beauly-Denny line is subsea cables from Caithness and the Northern Isles to the major centres of Scotland and England - harvesting marine energy (wave and especially tidal), together with all the wind power a securely balanced supply can cope with - from the huge offshore projects now forging ahead.
- ⇒ this subsea - marine energy package (BLUENERGY) is seen as the way forward by experts and public agencies, and fits into an emerging European grid. Subsea cables are proven technology and lose far less energy en route. This package creates more jobs for Scotland and sacrifices none of our scenic heritage or wild places.

We opposed Beauly-Denny, but not because we believed the actual pylon line would destroy vast swathes of wild Highlands - it doesn't, except locally such as going over Corrieyairack. We have always said it is the best route, if you have to have it, and yes, it follows an existing (if smaller) line. And unlike wind factories and hydro schemes, pylon lines don't need networks of industrial-scale roadways over the moors. And unlike wind turbines, pylons don't go round and can't be seen from 40 miles away.

We opposed Beauly-Denny because it opens up much of the surviving fragments of wild Highlands for wind factory and hydro development. In fact our key argument to the Inquiry - completely ignored of course - is that contrary to the popular image, there are now few places where you can genuinely get away from main road noise, bulldozed tracks, hydro works, alien forestry, fish farms, deer fences and so forth. And to add the biggest insult to all these injuries, almost everywhere is now a free-for-all for huge wind turbines on high hills conspicuous for 30, 40, even 50 miles. Outside the limited National Scenic Areas, landscape and scenery and 'wildness' will simply count for nothing as arguments against windfarms. And by 'outside the NSAs' we mean literally just outside their boundaries. So the finest mountains and lochs will be closely ringed by wind factories, and the timeless views out across unfolding ranges to distant horizons will have birling turbines as by far the most dominant and inescapable objects in them.

Take Ben Nevis. Beaully-Denny passes only a short way to the east. A feeder line from it into Lochaber will quickly open up scope for wind factories above Glen Spean, around the Commando Monument, and all down the far side of the Great Glen from Arkaig to Locheil to Ardgour to Morvern. Even now, test rigs are in place on the hills opposite Fort William. This may not be the loveliest of towns, but its big industrial installations are at least dwarfed by the enclosing hills. Soon, the stature and dignity of Scotland's highest and most recognisable mountain will be mocked by encircling turbines reaching above half its altitude.

If you think this exaggerates, go and look at the Millennium wind factory above Fort Augustus. At one stroke it has destroyed the previously pristine outlook across the mountain heartland of Scotland from a dozen major Munro groups. And it pokes grotesquely into the journey along the Great Glen - from which it was supposed to be invisible. Every hillgoer and Highlands-lover we speak to is amazed and appalled by its huge intrusiveness - yet no national group even objected to it (apart from us). This is hardly Nimbyism - this one site spoils the backyard of most hillwalkers and tourists in the Highlands.

We opposed Beaully-Denny not because we are head-in-sand against wind farms or green energy, but because it is the wrong project - yesterday's answer, outdated technology, wrong place, wrong era. Here, sadly, we have to disagree with some of our close allies who in the public debate since the decision have been urging that Beaully should be linked to Denny by a different route, round by Aberdeen. This might be cheaper, and avoids special spots like Schiehallion, but it still plants the dagger into the wilds - Beaully is the hub for all the glens. And once B-D is upgraded, by whatever route, the door is opened for feeders and duplicates.

Here let us pause to notice that our Scottish Government - which we had dreamed might actually recognise Scotland's scenic heritage as beyond price and sacrifice - chose to announce B-D during the worst cold and snow in decades. Doubtless their spinners thought this would be a good day for massed voters huddled round their heat sources to think 'yes, we need more power'. But remarkably the feet of snow did not produce a single drift. There was no wind for weeks. In fact every winter we have spells when the whole country is windless under a blocking anticyclone - and wind factories are useless. You can't just switch on back-up generators to meet these shortfalls, you need efficient, reliable baseload power sources, which have either got to be very clean coal (costly) or nuclear (not a long-term answer but a stopgap until nuclear fusion comes on) or marine hydro (both wave and especially tidal flow).

None of these alternatives - coal, nuclear, marine hydro - exist anywhere near Beaully. Nuclear could include sites in Caithness, where the community favours it and sees long-term economic benefits. Marine hydro offers huge potential, concentrated in the Pentland Firth and Orkney-Shetland. It is very green and very long-term, with few downsides.

The obvious power network solution is to run submarine cables from Caithness and the Northern Isles to Edinburgh, Newcastle, Hull, and London - exporting Scottish energy to the UK conurbations with almost no damage to our landscape. These cables would be DC, with minimal power loss in transmission - overhead lines like Beaully-Denny are AC and lose half the precious energy on a long journey. They are proven - England has been linked subsea to France for many years - and they connect into the North Sea and European DC grid which is rapidly taking shape (led

by Norway). Studies by bodies like Highlands and Islands Enterprise strongly support the subsea option - HIE has never particularly lobbied for B-D.

So why is our Scottish Government backing yesterday's technology - overhead lines to wind factories on every skyline? Well, FOLLOW THE MONEY as the Americans say. Holyrood doesn't have to pay a penny to build them - they are funded by the taxpayer or rather electricity bill payer, via the UK Regulator which approves grid upgrades and schemes under the Renewables Obligation. The power companies profit hugely from adding major assets to their capital bases in the global stock markets, funded by - us. Many landowners in the Highlands are desperate for grid capacity to be increased, unblocking the logjam for wind factories and hydro projects - they reap huge windfall profits from currently worthless moorland. And local communities are seduced by fruit-machine largesse clattering into their piggybanks, mere showers of pennies for the promoters of course, which pay for until-then previously quite unnecessary local projects. One of the travesties and tragedies of this windfall money-go-round is that it is hideously divisive - setting neighbour against neighbour, community against community, haves against have-nots.

If follow-the-money is too cynical for you, then just FOLLOW THE VOTES. Politics today is about short-term tactics, about winning the next election - not about vision, strategic thinking, or higher values such as the sanctity of the wilds (no votes in that). Holyrood needs to be 'seen to be doing something' to stop climate change, and wants to promote Scotland as 'greenest in Europe'. Wind farms are iconic, and highly visible, and lose very few votes. They let us feel we have done our bit, effortlessly, painlessly! We don't have to pay taxes to build them, we don't have to bother insulating our homes, we don't have to change our lifestyles, we can leave all the lights on, the power's green and the wind is free, the schoolkids love them 'cos they save the polar bears. Job done, politically, sorted. And approving windfarms costs the Holyrood budget - nothing.

We are not blindly opposed to all wind projects. We have no objection to small turbines serving isolated communities and supplying them with genuinely sustainable energy. We thole the big windfarms on the moors within the Central Belt - but not Braes of Doune, which disfigures the once-sublime outlook from Stirling Castle to the Highlands like a vandal's slash across a Mona Lisa. And we strongly support offshore wind, off the east coast, which we have left till last because it is the clincher.

Offshore wind is now beginning to happen on a staggering scale - the latest UK licences could apparently meet half our power needs on a good day. It is not as reliable as nuclear or marine hydro, but it is better than onshore wind during a calm spell because it is geographically farther-flung and has more chance of catching the zephyrs somewhere. But wave energy is also less in a calm spell. So in a 'balanced portfolio' of reliable baseload/lowest carbon/most renewable energy supplies, the surging offshore industry must surely mean that no more onland eggs can possibly be put in that basket.

Here lies the rub politically, because Scotland gains very little from offshore wind investment. Seabed rights are held by the Crown (ie. the UK government). No largesse flows into local landowner or community pockets. Construction is by international contractors. Shorebase jobs in maintenance are minimal. Kudos to Scotland's green image is indirect at best. So obviously Scottish vested interests want to tap into the onshore gravy train for as long as possible, until its financial bad-value for the billpayer is rumbled in Westminster.

So what face-saving, vote-winning political spin can we offer to Holyrood ?

How about: We in Scotland value our hills, our glens, our wilds as irreplaceable. They rank among the finest in Europe. They are acclaimed, sought-after, easily seen and visited by many, and underpin much of our greatest single industry - tourism. We are no longer going to be treated as an energy colony by England - where not one wind factory yet mars the Cotswolds, Chilterns, or Downs. We are going to sacrifice no more of our fine scenery and remote places. We realise that onshore wind is now a futile and costly gesture which probably harms the planet more than saves it. We will fully support offshore wind and especially marine hydro - 'BLUENERGY' - with subsea cables to England and Europe. We will put a Saltire-blue stripe into the UK energy flag, recognising that Scotland holds a lion's share of the UK maritime energy resource. But we demand a fair share of the Crown Estate revenues from seabed licences to come directly to Scotland, for the benefit and greening of all our communities equally. For our part, we will support replacement of our existing fossil fuel and nuclear stations with the least polluting and most sustainable sources of baseload power that technology can devise - together with intensified efforts to reduce demand. We urge that our fossil-fuel power stations are phased out speedily, and if we have an ounce of courage we will upset a few voters by replacing Torness and Hunterston, which have harmed nobody and almost certainly never will, with maybe a new one at Dounreay for good measure. (*Behind-the-hand hint to our Westminster paymasters - we had to approve B-D, but we really hope you tell the Regulator not to waste any billpayers money on it*).

By the way, did you see Neil Oliver's compelling History of Scotland on TV? For backdrop to this nation's proud story, we had - the unspoiled scenery of the Highlands. Not one wind factory crept into sight. Archive that pristine aerial footage carefully, because you will have ever more trouble getting it again. Oh, one huge wind factory did take a bow, as the ominous and looming background to the last episode, set in the industrial decline and mining dereliction of Lanarkshire. That's the real association, programme makers aren't stupid. Think Ravenscraig. Think Shotts. Think wind factories.

[for the avoidance of doubt, SWLG supports no political party or programme, and the suggested 'spin' simply makes the point that this decision is largely about politics and presentation, rather than about rational energy policy. Nor is it SWLG's role to actively promote nuclear power, although certain members advocate it in the context described].

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