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The winds of change

MATT RIDLEY SATURDAY, 3RD MARCH 2012

The government has finally seen through the wind-farm scam – but why did it take them so long?

To the nearest whole number, the percentage of the world's energy that comes from wind turbines today is: zero. Despite the regressive subsidy (pushing pensioners into fuel poverty while improving the wine cellars of grand estates), despite tearing rural communities apart, killing jobs, despoiling views, erecting pylons, felling forests, killing bats and eagles, causing industrial accidents, clogging motorways, polluting lakes in Inner Mongolia with the toxic and radioactive tailings from refining neodymium, a ton of which is in the average turbine — despite all this, the total energy generated each day by wind has yet to reach half a per cent worldwide.

If wind power was going to work, it would have done so by now. The people of Britain see this quite clearly, though politicians are often wilfully deaf. The good news though is that if you look closely, you can see David Cameron's government coming to its senses about the whole fiasco. The biggest investors in offshore wind — Mitsubishi, Gamesa and Siemens — are starting to worry that the government's heart is not in wind energy any more. Vestas, which has plans for a factory in Kent, wants reassurance from the Prime Minister that there is the political will to put up turbines before it builds its factory.

This forces a decision from Cameron — will he reassure the turbine magnates that he plans to keep subsidising wind energy, or will he retreat? The political wind has certainly changed direction. George Osborne is dead set against wind farms, because it has become all too clear to him how much they cost. The Chancellor's team quietly encouraged MPs to sign a letter to No. 10 a few weeks ago saying that 'in these financially straitened times, we think it is unwise to make consumers pay, through taxpayer subsidy, for inefficient and intermittent energy production that typifies onshore wind turbines'.

Putting the things offshore may avoid objections from the neighbours, but (Chancellor, beware!) it makes even less sense, because it costs you and me — the taxpayers — double. I have it on good authority from

a marine engineer that keeping wind turbines upright in the gravel, tides and storms of the North Sea for 25 years is a near hopeless quest, so the repair bill is going to be horrific and the output disappointing. Already the grouting in the foundations of hundreds of turbines off Kent, Denmark and the Dogger Bank has failed, necessitating costly repairs.

In Britain the percentage of total energy that comes from wind is only 0.6 per cent. According to the Renewable Energy Foundation, 'policies intended to meet the EU Renewables Directive in 2020 will impose extra consumer costs of approximately £15 billion per annum' or £670 per household. It is difficult to see what value will be got for this money. The total carbon emissions saved by the great wind rush is probably below 1 per cent, because of the need to keep fossil fuels burning as back-up when the wind does not blow. It may even be a negative number.

America is having far better luck. Carbon emissions in the United States fell by 7 per cent in 2009, according to a Harvard study. But the study concluded that this owes less to the recession that year than the falling price of natural gas — caused by the shale gas revolution. (Burning gas emits less than half as much carbon dioxide as coal for the same energy output.) The gas price has fallen even further since, making coal seem increasingly pricey by comparison. All over America, from Utah to West Virginia, coal mines are being closed and coal plants idled or cancelled. (The US Energy Information Administration calculates that every $4 spent on shale purchases the same energy as $25 spent on oil: at this rate, more and more vehicles will switch to gas.)

So even if you accept the most alarming predictions of climate change, those turbines that have ruined your favourite view are doing nothing to help. The shale gas revolution has not only shamed the wind industry by showing how to decarbonise for real, but has blown away its last feeble argument — that diminishing supplies of fossil fuels will cause their prices to rise so high that wind eventually becomes competitive even without a subsidy. Even if oil stays dear, cheap gas is now likely to last many decades.

Though they may not admit it for a while, most ministers have realised that the sums for wind power just don't add up and never will. The discovery of shale gas near Blackpool has profound implications for the future of British energy supply, which the government has seemed sheepishly reluctant to explore. It has a massive subsidy programme in place for wind farms, which now seem obsolete both as a means of energy production and decarbonisation. It is almost impossible to see what function they serve, other than making a fortune from those who profit from the subsidy scam.

Even in a boom, wind farms would have been unaffordable — with their economic and ecological rationale blown away. In an era of austerity, the policy is doomed, though so many contracts have been signed that the expansion of wind farms may continue, for a while. But the scam has ended. And as we survey the economic and environmental damage, the obvious question is how the delusion was maintained for so long. There has been no mystery about wind's futility as a source of affordable and abundant electricity — so how did the wind-farm scam fool so many policymakers?

One answer is money. There were too many people with snouts in the trough. Not just the manufacturers, operators and landlords of the wind farms, but financiers: wind-farm venture capital trusts were all the rage a few years ago — guaranteed income streams are what capitalists like best; they even get paid to switch the monsters off on very windy days so as not to overload the grid. Even the military took the money. Wind companies are paying for a new £20 million military radar at Brizlee Wood in Northumberland so as to enable the Ministry of Defence to lift its objection to the 48-turbine Fallago Rig wind farm in Berwickshire.

The big conservation organisations have been disgracefully silent on the subject, like the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which until last year took generous contributions from the wind industry through a venture called RSPB Energy. Even journalists: at a time when advertising is in short supply,

British newspapers have been crammed full of specious but lucrative ‘debates’ and supplements on renewable energy sponsored by advertising from a cohort of interest groups.

And just as the scam dies, I find I am now part of it. A family trust has signed a deal to receive £8,500 a year from a wind company, which is building a turbine on land that once belonged to my grandfather. He was canny enough not to sell the mineral rights, and the foundations of the turbine disturbs those mineral rights, so the trustees are owed compensation. I will not get the money, because I am not a beneficiary of the trust. Nonetheless, the idea of any part of my family receiving ‘wind-gelt’ is so abhorrent that I have decided to act. The real enemy is not wind farms per se, but groupthink and hysteria which allowed such a flawed idea to progress — with a minimum of intellectual opposition. So I shall be writing a cheque for £8,500, which The Spectator will give as a prize to the best article devoted to rational, fact-based environmental journalism.

It will be called the Matt Ridley prize for environmental heresy. Barring bankruptcy, I shall donate the money as long as the wind-gelt flows — so the quicker Dave cancels the subsidy altogether, the sooner he will have me and the prizewinners off his back.

Entrants are invited forthwith, and a panel of judges will reward the most brilliant and rational argument — that uses reason and evidence — to gore a sacred cow of the environmental movement. There are many to choose from: the idea that wind power is good for the climate, or that biofuels are good for the rain forest, or that organic farming is good for the planet, or that climate change is a bigger extinction threat than invasive species, or that the most sustainable thing we can do is de-industrialise.

My donation, though significant for me, is a drop in the ocean compared with the money that pours into the green movement every hour. Jeremy Grantham, a hedge-fund plutocrat, wrote a cheque for £12 million to the London School of Economics to found an institute named after him, which has since become notorious for its aggressive stance and extreme green statements. Between them, Greenpeace and Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) spend nearly a billion a year. WWF spends $68 million a year on ‘public education’ alone. All of this is judged uncontroversial: a matter of education, not propaganda.

By contrast, a storm of protest broke recently over the news that one small conservative think-tank called Heartland was proposing to spend just $200,000 in a year on influencing education against climate alarmism. A day later, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, with assets of $7.2 billion, gave a grant of $100 million to something called the ClimateWorks Foundation, a pro-wind power organisation, on top of $481 million it gave to the same recipient in 2008. The deep green Sierra Club recently admitted that it took $26 million from the gas industry to lobby against coal. But money is not the only reason that the entire political establishment came to believe in wind fairies. Psychologists have a term for the wishful thinking by which we accept any means if the end seems virtuous: ‘noble-cause corruption’. The phrase was first used by the Chief Inspector of Constabulary Sir John Woodcock in 1992 to explain miscarriages of justice. ‘It is better that some innocent men remain in jail than the integrity of the English judicial system be impugned,’ said the late Lord Denning, referring to the Birmingham Six.

Politicians are especially susceptible to this condition. In a wish to be seen as modern, they will embrace all manner of fashionable causes. When this sets in — groupthink grips political parties, and the media therefore decide there is no debate — the gravest of errors can take root. The subsidising of useless wind turbines was born of a deep intellectual error, one incubated by failure to challenge conventional wisdom.

It is precisely this consensus-worshipping, heretic-hunting environment where the greatest errors can be made. There are some 3,500 wind turbines in Britain, with hundreds more under construction. It would be a shame for them all to be dismantled. The biggest one should remain, like a crane on an abandoned quay, for future generations to marvel at. They will never be an efficient way to generate power. But there can be no better monument to the folly of mankind.