

Wind power is a technological fix for a political problem.

By George Monbiot. Published in the Guardian 26th April 2005

The people fighting the new wind farm in Cumbria have cheated and exaggerated. They appear to possess little understanding of the dangers of global warming. They are supported by an unsavoury coalition of nuclear power lobbyists and climate change deniers. But it would still be wrong to dismiss them.

The Whinash project, on the edge of the Lake District National Park, will, if it goes ahead, be the biggest onshore wind farm in Europe, producing, according to the developers, enough electricity for 47,000 homes.(1) Without schemes like this, there is no chance of meeting the government's target of a 20% cut in carbon emissions by 2010. Onshore wind turbines are currently the cheapest means of producing new power without fossil fuels, but at the moment they account for just 0.32% of our electricity.(2) Faced with the global emergency of climate change, it would be criminally irresponsible not to build more. The public inquiry which will decide whether or not the Whinash farm should go ahead, and which will help determine the future course of our national energy policy, began last week.

Last year the Advertising Standards Authority ruled that the No Whinash Windfarm campaign had exaggerated the size and number of the turbines, and the impact they would have on tourism and house prices.(3) Among those who have been supporting the exaggerators are the organisation Country Guardians and the former environmentalist David Bellamy. Country Guardians was co-founded by Sir Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher's press secretary and a consultant to the nuclear industry. David Bellamy is now the country's foremost climate change denier. (He was at it again last week, claiming, in a letter to New Scientist, that the World Glacier Monitoring Service says 89% of the world's glaciers are growing. (4) Its most recent report shows that 82 of the 88 surveyed in 2003 are shrinking(5)).

But we should try not to judge a cause by its supporters. There are several things which make me uncomfortable about wind energy, and the way in which it is being promoted.

Wind farms, while necessary, are a classic example of what environmentalists call an "end of the pipe solution." Instead of tackling the problem – our massive demand for energy – at source, they provide less damaging means of accommodating it. Or part of it. The Whinash project, by replacing energy generation from power stations burning fossil fuel, will reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 178,000 tonnes per year.(6) This is impressive, until you discover that a single jumbo jet, flying from London to Miami and back every day, releases the climate change equivalent of 520,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year.(7) One daily connection between Britain and Florida costs three giant wind farms.

Alternative technology permits us to imagine that we can build our way out of trouble. By responding to one form of over-development with another, we can, we believe,

continue to expand our total energy demands without destroying the planetary systems required to sustain human life. This might, for a while, be true. But it would soon require the use of the entire land surface of the United Kingdom.

Consider, for example, the claims being made for hydrogen fuel cells. Their proponents believe that this country's vehicles could all one day be run on hydrogen produced by electricity from wind power. I am not sure that they have any idea what this involves. I haven't been able to find figures for the UK, but a rough estimate for the United States suggests that the same transformation would require a doubling of the capacity of the national grid.(8) If the ratio were the same over here, that would mean a 600-fold increase in wind generation, just to keep our wheels turning. If we were to seek to compensate for the emissions produced elsewhere, there is no end to it. The government envisages a rise in British aircraft passengers from 180 million to 476 million over the next 25 years.(9) That means a contribution to global warming equivalent to the carbon savings of 1094 Whinash's.(10)

There is, in other words, no sustainable way of meeting the current projections for energy demand. The only strategy in any way compatible with environmentalism is one led by a vast reduction in total use. Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, who support the new wind farm, make this point repeatedly, but it falls on deaf ears. What is acceptable to the market, and therefore to the government, is an enhanced set of opportunities for capital, in the form of new kinds of energy generation. What is not acceptable is a reduced set of opportunities for capital, in the form of a massively curtailed total energy production. It is not their fault, but however clearly the green groups articulate their priorities, what the government hears is "more windfarms", rather than "fewer flights".

I would like to see the green NGOs publish a statement about where this kind of development should stop. At what point will they say that too many windfarms are being built, and ask the government to call a halt? At what point does the switch to the decentralised, micro-generation projects they envisage take place?

I would also feel happier if environmentalists dropped the pretence that wind farms are beautiful. They are not. They are merely less ugly and less destructive than most of the alternatives. They are a lot less ugly than climate change, which threatens to wreck the habitats the anti-wind campaigners are so keen to preserve. We have to build them, but I think it would be more honest to recognise that they are a necessary evil.

But these are not the only ways in which environmentalists' support for windfarms makes me squirm. The joint statement about the Whinash project published by Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth complains that "opponents of the scheme, which would be sited beside the M6 motorway, have claimed that the wind turbines will spoil the views, failing to acknowledge that the presence of a motorway has degraded the landscape".(11) It quotes Friends of the Earth's energy campaigner Jill Perry, who says, "I'm amazed that people are claiming that the area should be designated a National Park. What kind of National Park has a motorway running through it?" Well the New Forest and South

Downs national parks, for a start.(12) Their creation was supported by Friends of the Earth.

Elsewhere, these groups oppose the “infill” around new roads. Elsewhere, they argue that landscapes and ecosystems should be viewed holistically: that they do not stop, in other words, at an arbitrary line on the map, like the boundary of a national park. I understand that green campaigners are placed in an uncomfortable position when arguing for development rather than against it. But I do not understand why they have to sound like WalMart as soon as the boot is on the other foot.

I believe the Whinash windfarm should be built. But I also believe that those who defend it should be a good deal more sensitive towards the concerns of local objectors. Why? Because in any other circumstances they would find themselves fighting on the same side.