

# Debate & Opinion

## A necessary wind of change

### Renewables: the panel



Duncan McLaren



Professor Jane Bower



Patrick Harvie MSP



Bob Graham



Dr Sian McGrath



Lesley Riddoch (chair)

THE tone of the evening was set when the vast majority of the audience at Jedburgh Town Hall cheered as renewables sceptic Bob Graham referred to "the wind farm scam". Panelists - proponents of renewable energy and sceptics - locked heads over important issues such as: 'Is Scotland making a mess of renewable energy?' The debate was, appropriately, energetic. It was chaired by Lesley Riddoch from BBC Scotland, with panelists including: Duncan McLaren, chief executive of Friends of the Earth Scotland; Dr Martin Ford, the Lib Dem councillor from Aberdeenshire who famously took on Donald Trump; Dr Sian McGrath, head of commercial development at Aquamarine Power; Green MSP Patrick Harvie; Professor Jane Bower, a wind energy sceptic; and Bob Graham, a campaigner against wind farms. The debate ended with a vote on whether we are making a mess of renewable energy. The public overwhelmingly voted that we are.

### DOES THE FUTURE STABILITY OF SCOTLAND'S ELECTRICITY SUPPLY DEPEND ON NUCLEAR GENERATION IN ENGLAND? Asked by David Lochhead, Lammermuir Protection Group

**Duncan McLaren (DM):** No. Nuclear power provides constant non-intermittent base load. It can't be turned on and off so if we have wind on the system what backs it up is gas-coal-fired power stations. There's no reliance on nuclear power if we go down a renewable road.

It is one of the wonderful red herrings of wind development that we are told it needs an equal amount of fossil fuels. It needs a capacity on the system but then so do fossil fuels.

**Professor Jane Bower (JB):** EON UK... in their response to the House of Lords inquiry into the economics of renewable energy, found in Germany that in fact they needed 90 per cent back-up to their wind power. This is because when the weather is windy it tends to be windy across the UK and when it goes down it goes down across the UK. There are days when there is absolutely no wind power whatsoever. **Patrick Harvie MSP (PH):** Nobody, absolutely nobody, is saying that wind is all we need. We need a wide range of

### THE SCOTSMAN DEBATES



Jenny Haworth

renewable technologies. Does the future of our energy rely on nuclear? No, because it can't any more than it can depend on depletable resources, finite resources under the ground. Coal, oil and gas... the quicker you use them, the faster they are gone.

**Bob Graham (BG):** Where's our base load going to come from when Torness and Hunterston [nuclear power stations] shut down? There's a strong likelihood that we will import nuclear baseload from England, which appears to be quite acceptable in Holyrood. The Germans have about 23,000



wind turbines. They are currently building 26 coal-fired power stations and have just commissioned three gas-fired power stations. They have seen no reduction in their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

Anyone who thinks we can replace nuclear power stations with renewables is talking bollocks. Renewables came about when Margaret Thatcher tried to find alternatives for the coal miners. It certainly wasn't for climate change reasons.

**Dr Sian McGrath (SM):** I am raising my eyebrows because my understanding is that renewables didn't come about because of the coal mine strike. They came about for a number of reasons. One of the strongest drivers was the rising oil price in the 1970s. We are seeing exactly the same sort of situation now. Governments tried to find alternative sustainable sources, rather than relying on volatile resources. I think there's a lesson for us there.

**DM:** The figures I've seen from Denmark suggest they have dramatically transformed their energy system and what they have backing up their wind are decentralised combined heat and power plants with significantly reduced emissions.

**BG:** The big issue is the cost. Last year this subsidy - the renewables obligation certificate and the climate change levy exemption, those two things alone doubled the cost of a unit of electricity. The current price is about 13p per unit of wind electricity. That's double what we are paying for a normal unit of electricity.

### DO YOU THINK THERE IS NO CLIMATE CHANGE REASON TO LOOK AT WIND?

**BG:** Climate change will not be altered one iota by building giant turbines. Scotland requires at peak times six gigawatts of electricity. If you rely on renewables to generate all of that from wind, that would reduce global levels by 0.09 of 1 per cent.

**DM:** The idea that you don't do something about climate change because the little bit that you can do doesn't help is completely and utterly fallacious. If you do that everyone can do that. The whole problem of climate change is simply lots and lots of very small bits. We have to do our bit.

**BG:** I don't happen to subscribe to climate change and a lot of sensible people don't.

**DM:** A lot of people do, including the majority of the world's scientists.

**SM:** If you don't believe in climate change just suspend disbelief for a minute. If you look at this in terms of the credit crunch and the financial crisis we do need to think about security of supply. We do need to think about where the energy that's lighting this hall is coming from. Is it going to come from oil forever? Probably not. Gas? Probably not. So we need to face the hard, hard reality that we need to seek a new energy future. That will probably involve having some wind turbines on the landscape.

**Martin Ford (MF):** We need to use less energy. We need to use what energy we do use more efficiently than we have and we also need to switch the generation of the energy we do use to renewables. The scientific consensus for climate change is overwhelming and it would be a massive irresponsible risk to just go into denial.

We know we cannot possibly be running the energy system in ten to 20 years in the same way we are now.

**JB:** There is broad agreement that there's no magic bullet answer to this question. But one of the problems we are facing, and this is brought into reality by the credit crunch, is that we are all going to be poorer soon. We have spent a lot subsidising wind

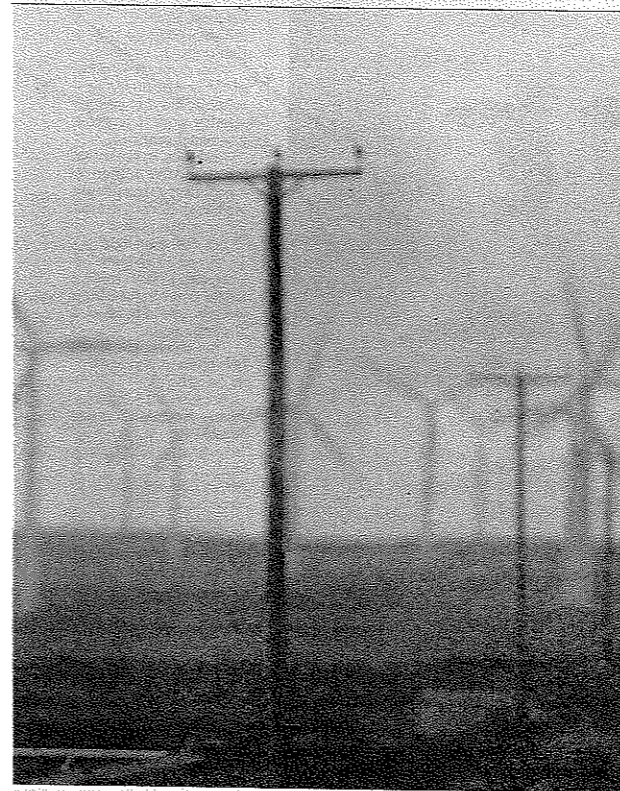
'No-one believed that "gentleman" George Younger could fight off two major predatory banks and Whitehall. We need that kind of gumption now'

George Kerevan, Page 24



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## or a storm on the horizon?



Black Law wind farm near Forth, Lanarkshire. Is this our energy future? Picture: Ian Rutherford

**MF:** I would agree with the point people are making about the need for renewables in urban settings but it is "as well". The other point is the entirely understandable situation that we are tending to compare the situation with what we have been used to.

I think we need to underline that what we have treated as the norm for the last 30 years - effectively a limitless supply of energy with no consequences for the environment - is not the norm. It's an aberration that has happened for a very brief period but that we have got used to.

We are leaving these dreadful problems that will come after us because we have depleted resources to a colossal degree. We have to get our heads around the scale and urgency of the change needed.

### SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT BE ABLE TO OVERRIDE BLOCKS ON WIND FARMS MADE BY LOCAL COUNCILS?

**PH:** The question the planning system should ask you as a community is not "here is what we are building, what do you think?". It's "where do you want to get your energy from, because it's not going to come by magic from nowhere". If you come up with answers that work for your area then the planning system should support you. **Malcolm Ouldcott (public):** The official numbers published for the Soutra wind farm [in the Borders] are 26.9 per cent efficiency. That means it's producing electricity only a quarter of the time it's rotating.

**DM:** I will seek to correct the misinterpretation of the 26.9 per cent figure. That farm generates 26.9 per cent of the potential capacity it would generate if the wind was blowing at the optimal speed it could be blowing all of the time. When the turbine blades are turning slowly it might only be generating 10 per cent. So the blades can be turning 100 per cent of the time and still only be generating 26.9 per cent of the capacity.

**SM:** We've asked this question about marine as well. People say your wave power machine only captures 47 per cent, what's happening to the other 53 per cent? The first point is that energy is free and it's always going to be there. So it doesn't matter if we are losing 53 per cent. The second point is that the installed capacity of a wind farm is the same as having a four-litre engine car. You don't always drive it at 160mph, it just goes that fast if you need it to. **BG:** If you think the credit crunch is bad the energy Armageddon will make it pale into insignificance. Up to 50 per cent of people in Scotland are now suffering some form of fuel poverty. They are not going to thank you every time a wind farm is built. Every time one is built the fuel poverty is going to go up a bit more.

The blackouts will come. Renewables

can't replace base load. We have to have base load generation. **SM:** Depending on fossil fuels that are running out and are so volatile in terms of their pricing is much more risky and irresponsible than putting together a portfolio of all the types of renewables. We are learning. We will have to do it better in the future but it doesn't mean we just say it shouldn't happen.

### DOES THE CREDIT CRUNCH MAKE RENEWABLE ENERGY MORE LIKELY OR LESS LIKELY?

**MF:** If you go back before the last few frantic weeks one concern people were highlighting was the rise in price of fossil fuels. It was inevitable it would happen at some point due to the basic rules of supply and demand. We have become addicted to fossil fuel. We have become dependent on something we knew was going to run out and we have left it far too late to sort out.

**PH:** In the long term the credit crunch should really reinforce the necessity of a transition to sustainable energy.

**MF:** We have been subsidising fossil fuels. We have not put the cost of carbon dioxide emissions on them. We need to put that cost into the

calculations. **JB:** The credit crunch is going to make us look a lot harder at how we spend our money and how the government spends our money. We are going to be alarmed by the amount of our money that goes to subsidise wind.

**BG:** I'm hoping that the wind industry, which is made up of some genuine people but also a lot of cowboy outfits that are looking for money, will be struggling to get loans to put up their wind farms. So from that point of view there will be a positive side to the credit crunch.

**DM:** There will be an immediate shortage of credit and investment. That will also take the money away from critical investments in marine and solar technology and all the other things we need to do.

**SM:** The financial crisis is going to hurt every business. However if you look at the style of investment offered by renewable energy across the board this is an opportunity to invest in a solution. Instead of tracking the price of oil or putting your money in investments so highly complex, renewable energy actually offers an area of the market where there's a constant and growing demand.

It's not tied to volatile oil and gas prices. It's actually starting to look quite sexy compared to all the other options out there right now.

### THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT ONLY PERMITS 25 PER CENT OF HOUSEHOLD WASTE TO BE USED TO CREATE ENERGY. SHOULD IT ALLOW MORE? Asked by Carolyn Riddell-Carre

**DM:** The reason this cap is set at 25 per cent is that the Scottish Government is very wisely aiming to recycle 75 per cent of our household waste. Recycling saves more of our energy than can be

released by burning it. Two to 300 times as much is saved by recycling aluminium as by allowing it to go into an incinerator.

**MF:** Waste is not a renewable form of electricity. The waste that we would be burning should not have been created in the first place. We have got to design it out of the system.

**PH:** One of our best solutions with waste is to produce less of it. **DM:** Incinerator companies would like to build big incinerators and sign contracts with local councils for the waste to fill them up. Then there's no incentive for local councils to provide recycling. There's no incentive for local councils to invest in waste reduction. And we go on in the same situation as we are in now.

**MF:** [Talking about what would have happened if a large new incinerator had been built in Aberdeen] There would have been no incentive to reduce waste. There would have been a reverse incentive. We would have to feed the bloody thing. At some point in the future we would have had difficulty supplying it and that's not where we want to be.

### WE HAVE TO CHANGE. ARE WE GOING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION OR FAST ENOUGH?

**MF:** There is a moral dimension to this. The planet can only supply a certain amount of resources and we have been using far more than our fair share. Not only are we depriving other inhabitants of this planet of their fair share but future generations of their fair share by using it up now. We do risk going down in history as the generation that squandered it.

### WHAT NEXT

THE ScotsmanDebates have been organised to promote discussion of big issues facing Scotland. There are two more scheduled:

■ THE MEDIA SCOTLAND WANTS: Tuesday, 28 October, 7pm, Mitchell Library, Glasgow (note change of date).

■ PROGRESS BEYOND POLITICS: 12 November, 7pm, Albert Halls, Stirling (note change of date). Panel includes Mel Young, founder of Big Issue in Scotland, and Prof Susan Deacon.

To reserve tickets, e-mail scotsmandedebates@scotsman.com, or write to David Lee, The Scotsman, 108 Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AS.

The social research consultancy Blake Stevenson is working with The Scotsman to organise the debates. They agree the events are an important opportunity to give local communities a chance to participate in key debates about Scotland's future.

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