

## Ill Wind

The Scottish government is overruling local objections to wind power developments, making a sham of its promise to consult with communities they affect

Wind power has not had a good year. For much of the summer the turbines failed to turn as winds dropped, and production fell. Renewables are now providing only 7 per cent of the UK's energy needs, compared with 25 per cent in 2020. The result has been a spiralling demand for gas reserves to heat homes and power businesses, accounting, in part at least, for the present energy crisis.

Wind power's unreliability has been exposed at the worst possible time, as Cop26 approaches. Across Europe, countries and regions have started to wonder whether they shut their coal plants too early. With China hoarding gas to keep its economy afloat and Russia building its reserves, renewable targets are being reassessed.

Against this background, the Scottish government's arguments for yet more land-based wind farms are bound to be met with scepticism. It has set ambitious targets, between 8 and 12 gigawatts of installed onshore wind by 2030 — that is, 4,000 new turbines, more than double the number already in place. Can that pace of change be justified when onshore wind energy is so fallible? And how does it sit with the promise that ministers will “continue to protect our natural heritage”?

New figures show that objections are growing, and to deliver on its promise to expand production

the government is having to overrule them. In places such as South Ayrshire, where the number of wind farms has grown rapidly, the objections to new developments run into many thousands. But they appear to be almost routinely rejected.

Across Scotland, between 2013 and 2020, there were 91 applications for onshore wind developments. Only 28 were turned down. The reasons for approving a scheme after locals have rejected it may vary, but there have been cases in which the government has overruled a council because it has taken more than six months to reach a decision. That delay may be not foot-dragging but evidence of a due attention to complex planning issues.

Such intervention calls into question the consultation process that government promised. If that commitment is to mean anything, ministers must be seen to respond to local opinion, to take on board the arguments made and meet them head-on. Not every objection can be classified as nimbyism. Local knowledge, supported by council planning departments, is critical. Civil servants in Edinburgh may not be best placed to decide whether turbines in South Kyle break a view across to the Galloway Hills, or whether the Cairn Duhie development is a threat to the hotel trade, but they need to take the local case seriously.

Scotland's tourist business depends critically on a magnificent landscape of unspoilt hills and glens — that is the “heritage” the government claims to champion. Turbines introduce a uniformity to the outline of mountain or seascape that was never there before. Visitors from Germany or Denmark, where wind farms are omnipresent, are unlikely to be impressed by yet more of them when they had been led to expect Europe's last great wilderness.

As offshore wind power becomes increasingly cost-effective, there is a need to redress the balance. If turbines out at sea are not multiplying fast enough because of planning restrictions, that needs to be addressed yet more onshore developments are pushed.

There may even be an argument for pausing the expansion until real progress is made in storing the energy produced. Another year of still days with no wind would seriously call into question the present programme. Renewables are crucial in our vital struggle to wean ourselves off carbon fuels, but there is a balance to be reached between delivering policy and listening to those most directly affected. If the promise of consultation is not be an entirely empty one, the pace of change should be slowed so proper consideration can be given to the needs of local communities.