



FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Wind farms, the national interest and local democracy

Halina Ward, October 2012

Tory energy minister [John Hayes's off-message remarks about onshore wind in the UK](#) have generated a fast-evolving case study of one of the thorny issues we're trying to get to grips with as we consult on what should go into a [manifesto for democracy and sustainable development](#).

Onshore wind farm developments are often subject to vehement opposition in communities where they are slated for development. But they also have plenty of supporters, and they form an important part of the UK's overall approach to meeting its renewable energy targets.

The issue for our manifesto, in the abstract, is this:

How would a system of democracy designed for sustainable development go about finding a balance between a) national strategic priority-setting and b) local community engagement when it comes to infrastructure or other new development that looks attractive to national government, and unattractive to local residents?

It's not an issue that arises only with onshore wind farms. Carbon capture and storage projects and construction of nuclear power stations also raise the same issues.

From a different entry point (the government's concern to promote economic growth and address the national shortage of housing) so too do do proposals to [relax the current restrictions on new development in the green belts](#) that surround many of the nation's towns and guard against urban sprawl.

Back to onshore wind. The story, in brief, was this. Tory energy minister John Hayes, charged with a brief that includes 'renewable energy deployment', claimed in remarks to journalists following a speech to representatives of the UK's renewable energy sector, that *"we can no longer have wind turbines imposed on communities. I can't single-handedly build a new Jerusalem but I can protect our green and pleasant land"*.

When it comes to renewables, Hayes's boss, Secretary of State Ed Davey, quickly made it clear that Mr Hayes was not towing the official line.

The Prime Minister, David Cameron, denied that there had been any change in the government's commitment to renewable energy, but **hinted at a wider debate to come**, once existing targets for 2020 are met.

The government's **Coalition Agreement** commits the government to increase the target for energy from renewables and to encourage community-owned renewable energy schemes. It doesn't mention onshore wind farms specifically - but the overall commitment to renewables is there.

Mr Hayes argues that the current UK-wide target for renewables - which comes from EU legislation - will likely be met even if enthusiasm for onshore wind were to cool. And he adds **"we need to understand communities' genuine desires. We will form our policy in the future on the basis of that, not on a bourgeois Left article of faith based on some academic perspective"**

The draft principle that we're asking people to comment on as part of our manifesto consultation process currently reads:

Be explicit about the joins: by finding ways to ensure that decision-making with implications for the distribution of 'sustainable' or 'unsustainable' development (for example the location of major infrastructure projects) is transparent and fair. Decision-making on distributional impacts of such decisions should be based on criteria that are publicly accessible, agreed following public consultation, and made widely available in advance.

It's not very elegant language, and some consultees have questioned what it's trying to address, or even whether it's necessary. So please help us to improve it.

Whatever else, the furore over onshore wind farms offers an example of where democracy can be stretched at the joins. For whilst a policy of supporting construction of onshore wind farms might form part of a nation's sustainable energy choices at national level, at the local level, wind farms often feel very far from environmentally or socially benign.

Should a system of democracy crafted with sustainable development in mind allow space for national governments to lead the way when it comes to setting the strategic direction for renewable energy investment? If so, how much?

Should communities always have the last word? If not why not, and if yes, what processes of deliberation should they be asked to engage in before making choices that have the *potential* to undermine global climate change objectives and national energy security?

In coming down on the side of a more radical localism, Mr Hayes may not realise that his remarks also support the aims of an initiative from Occupy Law - to develop a **Community Bill of Rights that can be adopted by local communities wherever in the UK they might be**. Clause 3.8 says:

3.8. Right to Determine the Future of Neighbourhoods

Neighbourhood majorities will have the right to approve all planning changes proposed for their neighborhood involving significant commercial, industrial, or residential development. It will be the responsibility of the proposer of the planning change to acquire the approval of the neighborhood majority, and the planning change will not be effective without it.

And if you have ideas on how best to resolve the dilemma that John Hayes has shone a light on - and how best to do so in a system of democracy that's designed for sustainability - we'd like to hear from you.