

Windfarms On The Hills – Yes or No ? **from Charles Gladstone**

First, I'd better declare my hand. I'm Charles Gladstone, a landowner. About 15 years ago I inherited a chunk of Kincardineshire. You'll have probably heard this said before, but I don't really consider my interest in the land to be "ownership"; "stewardship" is a better word. Whatever you call it, for better or worse, it is me and my advisors who decide what happens on Glen Dye and Fasque Estates: where trees get planted, when footpaths are repaired, where the gamekeepers work, what crops are planted. Anyway, I love my patch and live here with my wife and six children.

I'm interested in the social fabric of the Scottish countryside; in keeping people living and working in remote rural areas. It's important that people who live in the countryside are connected, in a real way, to the soil, to nature. These are people that know what a magpie does, where the best mushrooms grow, where the foxes return to year after year to rear their young. And I do all that I can to make sure that these working men and women stay working in the countryside. I'm also interested in the natural environment, in bio diversity, and in the way that the environment looks. We don't have many natural resources in Scotland, but we do have large swathes of wonderful countryside. And we need people to visit this countryside; locals, foreigners, Londoners, walkers, runners, shooters.

Why do these people visit the more remote corners of Scotland ? Well, for lots of reasons, but crucially most of them come because Scotland is beautiful and relatively pristine. I'm a runner and a walker and I love the solitude of the hills. I understand completely why these people come here: they come for the views, for the air, for the unique feeling that being alone in the Scottish hills gives them.

Ten years ago I formed a Trust with some hillwalkers to protect and repair some footpaths on my Estate. So far we've raised about £250,000 and the quality of our paths improves each year. As more people head to the hills to walk, or bicycle or run or just think, erosion has become a significant problem. The Scottish Executive have, of course, worked to try to improve access but they have left path, gate, stile and car park maintenance in the hands of landowners who I hope are willing and, as importantly, able to manage and fund the repairs and improvements that increased access will demand. We'll see.

I digress slightly, but what I am trying to say is that I understand why people want to enjoy their leisure time on my Estate and I am doing my very best to welcome them here. It follows that part of my job is to protect the landscape that people come here to enjoy.

In the last few years I've been approached by a number of companies keen to investigate the siting of windfarms on my ground. Glen Dye is appealing to these companies because we have hills and therefore wind and, crucially, because we have a good sized road running through the Estate. Good access is a vital component in the siting of windfarms because it keeps the cost of installation and maintenance down. Initially I was very tempted by these propositions: they came with the promise of huge sums of money, sums that would have allowed me to make incredible improvements to the Estate. Oh, and there was also the promise of big chunks of cash for the "community" – a piano for the village hall, a decent playground for the park, that sort of thing. Money that would in essence shut the locals up should they see fit to complain about the installation of industrial turbines on their patch.

On first glance it all seemed so simple. The energy companies get to site their windfarm on my ground. I get a lot of money. The government gets to fulfil their obligation to create green energy. I get to feel good because I'm part of the green energy revolution. And, after all, these turbines don't look too bad, do they ? And 90 metres isn't that big, is it ? In fact, they are actually quite majestic, aren't they ?

Well..... I took a good look around and I changed my mind. I spoke to experts in Scotland and the United States and I had a good look at the Danish experience of windfarms. First, I discovered that the windfarm will result in virtually no local long or mid-term employment – in short the only local that might benefit would be me. And I learnt that the energy created would be burnt somewhere else entirely (I don't know where but it's certainly not here in Scotland. We produce a surplus of energy anyway thanks to Hydro Electric.) So, it seemed to me that there would be little local, or even national, benefit to siting a windfarm on Glen Dye.

I also learnt the Danes were pioneers in land-based windfarms but they are now abandoning their programme. I visited windfarms and I went to London and stood beneath Nelson's Column. I soon realised how big 90 metres is. I learnt that windfarms do have a negative impact on biodiversity. I discovered that Westminster are keen to see windfarms based at sea because they are far more efficient at sea and, as crucially, they can't be seen by walkers and residents and all the other people who don't like the idea of bigger roads and vast industrial structures clogging up our last remaining tracts of countryside. I discovered

a massive body of environmentalists working against windfarms. I drove along the fabled Cairn O'Mount road time and time again. And I stood at the top and thought how absurd it was to site 25 mammoth turbines on the boundary fault where tens of thousands of visitors would be greeted not by heather moorland and trees and a magnificent granite tor but, instead, by 25 massive turbines that will make Nelson's Column look small. So I went back to the foreign-owned energy company and I said no and they went on their way. And then another company approached me about a slightly different site and I said no. And then another.....

I am a supporter of green energy and of the idea that we must also work to burn less fossil fuels. But I don't think land based windfarms are the answer, and this is the essence of my concern here. Real doubts about their viability are being widely expressed. I think that all land-based windfarms should be put on hold until there has been a detailed study of their long-term viability. After all, no-one who loves the countryside wants it to be lumbered, in say ten years, with these vast industrial structures that are, quite simply, unviable.

The key things here are that the government have an obligation to create clean energy and wind is freely available in the hills and it is far cheaper to site these turbines on land than it is at sea. It makes sense to stick the turbines in the hills because there aren't many local residents to complain. Locals can be a real nuisance to the energy companies because they don't like these industrial structures near their homes. But these remote sites are, by definition, the very places that we should cherish as our last remaining vestiges of wilderness - and they might well be the victims of bad timing stuck somewhere between a time when sea-based windfarms are the norm and the evolution of green energy.

Eventually the energy companies left me alone because, it transpired, they had found an excellent site on the boundary of my Estate on "Forestry" Commission land. Because the British timber market has collapsed recently due to cheap imports the "Forestry" Commission have been having a tough time. And so they have decided to turn to wind power as part of their salvation, chopping down trees to make way for turbines. I imagine that the executives at the Commission have done their research. They may know that land-based turbines are widely regarded as a red herring. But it doesn't really matter to them because they don't live near to the turbines and their main concern is to balance the books in the short term.

My point is simple. We have an extraordinary asset in the Grampians: pure undisturbed moorland. It isn't pristine but it's pretty good. It's loved by millions from all over the world, precisely because it is about as undisturbed as anywhere in Western Europe. I want it to stay that way. I want it to be the way that it is now for my children and my grandchildren. But the government want green energy (I'm with them there) and they want to provide it cheaply with minimum hassle through a privatised and consequently unstable system. Their logic dictates that they should site their turbines away from centres of population where the NIMBYs will leave them alone. But in doing so they wreak havoc on one of the most precious and unique natural resource that we have. If ever there was a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul then this is it.

My hunch is that the proposal to build a windfarm at Midhill, Fetteresso will go ahead. The "Forestry" Commission obviously have an advantage over most organisations trying to build a windfarm on their land, and amazingly enough I am not sure that many locals care. But I do care about my patch. I want people to be able to walk on Glen Dye, to climb Clachnaben, and to look out over a landscape filled with rocks and trees and heather. I want to protect all of this from the lethal combination of short-sighted Government policy and corporate greed. I'm a NIMBY and I'm proud of it. After all, as one of the Kennedys so neatly put it, (I paraphrase) the first duty of an environmentalist must be to protect his own backyard.