**Quidquid id est timeo, Danaos et dona ferentes.**

**Aeneid, Virgil**

In 2003 I stood in the hall of the old Nicolson Institute making my acceptance speech having just been elected to the Plasterfield Ward of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. (There is, you know, a huge amount of history in just that one sentence.) I was excited because the new interconnector to the Western Isles was about to be built. It was to travel down the Minch and link either to Ayrshire or Cumbria. Since then, I have been waiting. There have been many false dawns.

On 6 June 22 an email informs me that LWP have been granted the coveted cfds, the government support to allow our 600-mw interconnector to go ahead from Arnish to the mainland. “At last!” say I. At 11am the Offshore Transmission Network Review (OTNR) cancels the 600mw interconnector. It is quite breath-taking. It is a measure of the regard with which the people of these islands are held by those in authority. Now, it would appear, we are to be lumped in with the Scotwind development off the west coast of Lewis which is in its infancy. The new date for the 1800mw interconnector, which incorporates the 600mw, is 2030 – eight years from now. I certainly will not be a councillor. Will I even be alive?

I wrote the above around the 7 June. I am now in Ireland. This is a most beautiful place where I am very relaxed but since I am unable to join the SD Committee because I will be travelling that day, I am taking the liberty of offering you my thoughts on the present impasse. I hope you do not mind.

I am just as angry and disappointed now as I was two weeks ago. The UK Government, the Scottish Government, National Grid, Ofgem, Crown Estate and others have discussed the wind resource in relation to the Western Isles and have decided how it is to be exploited without any reference to anyone in the Western Isles. No off the record call to the Leader nor the CEO. No call to our officers who spend their lives dealing with these matters. We are just told how it is going to be in the interests of energy security for the UK.

In my view the OTNR has gone too far. There does not appear to be any consideration of the position of island people. Their wishes and concerns do not appear to be part of the consideration. Time to fight back.

We have eight years probably less, to take some control over renewables development in the Western Isles. If we do not make a fuss, we are going to be trampled on.

I have two suggestions for the way forward.

**Firstly**, we have to be proactive in demanding “landfall benefits” associated with the offshore developments. I have no idea what that might mean but it must mean significant developments to benefit local people. Is a massive series of power lines on a par with Beauly to Denny going to march across the Lewis moor from the Westside to Arnish? Should such a cable not be undergrounded? What, in the way of actual jobs, will be created for local people or returnees? Will there be roads to be constructed? Will they benefit local people? How about housing? Will the developers contribute to the need to create local housing suitable for our young people?

There are many other asks we might articulate and perhaps the local trusts are ahead in this thinking? *However, I should be insisting that the developer come forward with its own ideas on how it can invest in the local community to the community’s benefit.* It is no surprise that people are concerned. Truth and information are key.

We do need to make it clear to OTNR that their cavalier attitude towards these islands to date is not acceptable. We must always fight hard on the principle of involvement in discussion on Western Isles renewables. No ifs, no buts. We have met such treatment before and fought to resolve the matter.

**Secondly,** we must use this time to expand on the community renewables sector in the Western Isles. The sector gives to its communities over £2 million per year in community benefit; this year it could be £3 million. From Barra to Galson individual companies set up on their own initiative and created windfarms. It is a tremendous achievement. Nowhere else in the British Isles has achieved this.

Also, most community wind farms have development projects especially in relation to batteries and hydrogen. Local authority projects are now stalled until 2030 at the earliest. Local projects can go ahead, and if all the local players work together, we might obtain self-sufficiency for Western Isles in that timescale at the very least.

We need to establish which communities wish to have their own windfarm and what size of windfarm they aspire to. Community Energy Scotland may well have much of this information, but it is important to be comprehensive.

We make a needs case to SSEN and Ofgem for a second interconnector to Skye. We already know that Ofgem has no objection. Please see my letter to SSEN in 2021.

7.7.21

Dear Rachel

Thank you very much for agreeing to meet with me and for bringing Graeme with you. I very much appreciated the time you gave to me.

I have reflected on what you both had to say, and I have done some research into ED2 as it applies to the Highlands and Islands. I have listened to your opening remarks which I found encouraging and I note the emphasis on ensuring that SSE reflects the aspirations of its communities.

I have studied SSEN DISTRIBUTION RIIO-ED2, Scottish Islands Specific Factors Strategy and in particular Table 3.1.

I am delighted with the aspirations for Shetland, Orkney, and the Southern Isles of the Western Isles. The absence of a second cable from Skye to Harris seems to me an aberration. I can see no logic in the failure to include this cable given that there are six cables, including one to Orkney, which are intended to augment cables which are already in situ. That is what we want for Skye to Harris. Why is it being denied?

At a meeting on 30 June 2021 held to allow dialogue between the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership Anti-Poverty Group and Ofgem a wide range of issues were discussed in relation to poverty, and electricity prices. In the discussion Steve McMahon, Deputy Director, Electricity Distribution, indicated that Ofgem were happy to see a second cable to Harris from Skye and indeed, he indicated that he had suggested that two cables be ordered at the same time by SSE. I am disappointed that this did not happen.

I think the argument for a second cable from Skye to Harris is sound and it will be of great benefit to aspiring community renewables companies in Lewis and Harris who, as things stand, will never have access to the grid. The achievement of community renewables in the Western Isles to date has been exceptional and unique. I think SSE should do everything it can to allow further developments.

I understand that the line from Skye to the south must be upgraded and that future developments depend on that. It seems that Ofgem is confident that any issues will be overcome.

The aspiring community renewables developers will be very pleased indeed if SSE will reconsider its decision in regard to the Skye to Harris second cable. Such a decision will certainly reflect the wishes of the community.

Kind regards

Angus

In relation to community renewables and associated poverty issues I had written to Patrick Harvie MSP Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings etc. His response offered no comfort. Firstly, he says that the matter is not delegated. So, no help there. On the price differential he claims he knows about it but does not say that he plans to do anything about it. On extreme fuel poverty he acknowledges that it exists but does not indicate which Area Based Scheme might help. He also states that, “Scottish Government are aware that SSEN have included the islands as a priority in their ED2 business plans.” *But to date it does not include the Island of Harris to Skye.*

So why should you support my hypothesis in relation to Community Renewables? Let me offer just a few examples from the windfarm with which I am associated, Beinn Ghrideag. The windfarm at 9 mw is the largest community windfarm in the UK. It is run by Point and Sandwick Power (PSP) and the dividend is administered by Point and Sandwick Trust (PST). I am its Honorary President. I was the chair for several years including the period leading up to Financial Close – a very, very exciting time. It took us ten years to reach FC.

Now we are expending large sums in creating capital projects that will outlast us all – the new Urras Storas an Rudha development is a good example or providing small revenue grants to local organisations to ensure that they have basic running costs.

There is a direct influence on crofting. Sandwick North Street benefits because the windfarm is built on its apportionment. Now there are new fences, new roads, new agricultural buildings and new agricultural machinery. The 100 acres is free from rushes and to watch the sward sway in the breeze before cutting is quite wonderful. You will not easily find a better pasture in our islands. It is a revelation. And it has meant that several young people in our village have returned to crofting. That alone is a wonderful advertisement for the benefits of community renewables. Sweeney you must come and visit.

PSP is also a development body. It is working on a battery project which will benefit the Western Isles. PSP is also working on a hydrogen project and has significant high-level support for that. Other windfarms also have ongoing projects, but I do not know the detail of these.

I have been arguing this case for many years but now seems to be an optimum time for pursuing community renewables. Stornoway Windfarm, Tolsta and Uisenis are now in limbo until 2030. Why not fill the vacuum by creating the matrix in which community renewables can grow in the Western Isles? Is it not now time for the Comhairle to build community wind farms – on its own or in conjunction with other community developers? The recent cfd awards includes an award to two council owned community windfarms in Orkney. That opens the doors for the Comhairle and other local developers.

There are other issues to be resolved. The absurdity of the regulations around Distribution and Transmission. Why on earth do we have to send our locally produced electricity off island only to import it at a higher cost? The Outer Hebrides Renewables Group document, **Response to OFGEM’s Project TransmiT Consultation** is well worth reading.

The final key issue is access to the grid. A second interconnector to Skye in the interregnum would resolve most of these issues especially if the Skye interconnectors are designated for community renewables only. That could give a possible maximum capacity of 60mws.

Perhaps I might say in passing that the present windfarm boom in prices is benefitting the Crown Estate to a significant extent. It has increased by 8.3% to £15.6 billion. Presumably at some point we will receive our percentage? Maybe it could be allocated to a fund to assist community renewables companies.

The new Energy MOWG has an exciting way going forward developing a new strategy for community renewables. Maybe there might be a case for bringing into the group representatives from island wide community renewables groups given the use of Zoom etc? It may be possible to augment the group with specialists in the field to assist our own officers? It could be a very exciting future for renewables in our islands.

“Out of adversity comes opportunity” Benjamin Franklin.