Is the planning system adequately resourced and fit for purpose?

I am full of admiration for the actual people working in the planning system but they are being used by national government to impose a policy that is rarely accepted at local level. Our once admired system is now in the thrall of developers knowing they have full support from top government. A development can be thoroughly investigated by qualified planners in Local Planning Departments and found wanting according to Local Plans and National Plans. Their recommendation is then seriously investigated by local democratically elected Councillors representing their constituents.

A decision is taken. If the Councillors refuse the application most developers now appeal. It is not right that National Government appoints one person to then impose his opinion at Public Inquiry. Of course you must have appeals if the decision is found wanting but these decisions, for the most part, are just a matter of opinion as to the severity of the effect. If a Reporter is being paid by the Government he cannot refuse all Appeals. To keep his job he has to side with the developer a certain number of times. This is not like appealing about facts- this is opinion. Councils can only fight a few of these battles because of expense and the public are left with a complete feeling of mistrust of our National Government. It is a very slippery slope.

I was personally involved for five years trying to preserve the Pentland Hills from the Auchencorth wind farm proposal on its southern edge. At the Midlothian Local Plan Inquiry the Reporter included protection for the setting of the Pentlands Hills Regional Park in the new Local Plan. The developer was represented at this Inquiry. Midlothian Council rejected the wind farm application, yet the developer still appealed. Midlothian Council taxpayers had to pay an enormous sum for a Public Inquiry.

One might feel the planning system worked because the proposal was rejected but it hasn’t worked. We have since had to fight a second wind farm application only three miles away from Auchencorth at Spurlens Rig. This has been rejected by Borders Council but on the web site the developer has shown he won’t take no for an answer and has listed all his options. He includes increasing the height of the turbines so the application would be heard at appeal by the Scottish government. This says it all. Why does the developer assume he will get it through by going to the Department of Planning and Environmental Appeals? Now the original landowner is proposing a third wind farm with twelve turbines only two and a half miles from his first attempt at Auchencorth.

Midlothian Council taxpayers have already spent enormous sums upholding the Local Plan at the Auchencorth Public Inquiry – it is wrong that they might have to pay to preserve the Pentlands yet again for both the locals and the tourist industry. Such landowners and developers who completely disregard
Local Plans and Public Inquiries are making a mockery of our planning system.

I deplore the way this government has engineered this position where our well-respected institutions are being undemocratically manipulated. It is a bully-boy world where money talks. The government has consistently changed the planning laws in favour of wind farm developers over the last decade. There is no mandate as the SNP manifesto, when they first came to power in 2007, said wind farms would be mainly off shore.

There should have been a national plan and areas chosen which would have left areas without turbines as the 2008 Moffat study into the Economics of Wind farms and Tourism indicated. The efficiency of the turbines and the expense should have been assessed before this policy was allowed to reign paramount.

I note there is no mention of the effect of the wind farm policy on the economy of this country in regard to its hugely important tourist industry. I would be grateful if you would consider my comments on this. I did Bed and Breakfast for fourteen years and know that the type of people who choose Scotland for a holiday primarily come for its landscape and history.

In 2008 the Government published a report from Caledonian University, called the Moffat Study, on the economic effect of wind turbines on tourism. Interestingly the authors did not dispute there would be a negative impact on tourism from wind farms but as the report was based on only a small number of wind farms they said that the negative impact would be manageable. They could not have foreseen the immense scale of wind farm development that was to come in Scotland. The report, for example, showed a table of wind farms consented or pending decision - the numbers for Scottish Borders were 13 wind farms and 274 turbines. The comparable figures from Scottish Borders Council May 2010 stand at 20 wind farms and 451 turbines. There are a further 16 wind farms with 225 turbines at the scoping stage. In the Moffat Study the estimate of loss of tourist expenditure because of wind farms for the area was £2.77 million per year. I wonder what the estimate would be now.

In that Moffat Report it was noted that when tourists were given a photograph of the view from a hotel window featuring a wind turbine, 63% said they would prefer not to see a turbine. In June 2010 in an unusual turn around a wind developer, Wind Prospect, objected to a holiday complex planning application because it feared it would be likely to trigger noise complaints from its nearby proposed wind farm. In a revealing letter it said “Moreover, this is a proposed holiday centre where patrons would reasonably expect to sit outside to enjoy the relative peace and quiet of the countryside.” At long last an acknowledgement that turbines do make noise! By the way is it only holidaymakers who deserve to sit outside in peace and quiet? What about residents?
At the Scotsman Conference on the Economics of Renewables the Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism, was questioned on whether there was a conflict of interest in his brief for Energy as well as Tourism. He said Scottish tourism was holding its own. Another speaker churned out the same mantra that there is no evidence that wind farms damage tourism. It was said some wind farms were a tourist attraction in their own right. Whitelee wind farm on the edge of Glasgow was singled out. It has been visited by thousands of schoolchildren, curious locals, mountain bikers etc but how many people in the emerging tourist markets in China, for example, are sitting down today putting Whitelee wind farm top of their list of places to see in the world? Has Whitelee been put in the top hundred places one must see before one dies? It is ludicrous if it wasn’t a tragedy that the Government is listening to these people and not to those of us who have been in the tourist industry for years.

In the Scotsman in October it was reported spending by overseas visitors slumped by 17% during the first half of 2011 with an 8% drop in the number of foreign visitors. In contrast the number of foreign visitors to the UK as a whole and the amount they spent rose by 5%. Would you call a drop of 8% in Scotland “holding its own” when the rest of Britain must be doing very much better for the UK average to be up 5%?

In the same way, at the Scotsman Conference, it was suggested that the wind farm industry is only redistributing jobs and wealth from other energy providers within the UK at a cost to the consumer through massive subsidies without bringing in income and new jobs.

Our tourism statistics show a massive drop in overseas visitors. This is not the same for other countries. In 2006 we had 2.73 million overseas visitors – last year we had 2.34 million, a drop of 14.2%. The comparative figures for Switzerland are 36.4 million and 36.2 million, a drop of only 0.5%. I have visited Switzerland over many years and despite its expensive exchange rate it has succeeded in attracting tourists.

It is not sufficient for Fergus Ewing to say these are challenging times. Since 2000 there has been a huge percentage change between currencies. Quoting a recent Swiss website since 2000 the Swiss franc is now 11% more expensive for a Euro visitor, 37% for a pound sterling visitor, 38% for a dollar visitor and 24% for a yen visitor. In 2010 the comparative price level index in the hotel and restaurant sector in Switzerland was 40.9% higher than the EU27. We have effectively devalued our currency and yet we are still not “holding our own”. Visits to Scotland from our biggest overseas market, the USA, were 475 million 2006, 340 million in 2008 and 275 million in 2010.

How does Switzerland do it? It keeps its beautiful scenery pristine. It does not put up industrial machines in front of major attractions like the Jungfrau in contrast, for example, to the erection in Scotland of the Braes of Doune wind farm near Stirling Castle. We are not under grounding the Beauly Denny line also near Stirling Castle. If we do not value the scenery how can we expect people to come from all over the world and spend their precious short holiday
time and scarce resources in our beautiful country? We must keep our side of
the bargain and treasure the scenery for them.

A masterstroke in pushing through this wind farm policy was not to make Visit
Scotland a Statutory Consultee for wind farm applications. I am not aware of
Visit Scotland objecting to a single wind farm proposal. Who are these people
representing an industry whose biggest asset is being destroyed and yet who
say nothing? The last I heard after a letter of mine to the newspaper was that
they were monitoring the situation!

The wind farm lobby insist wind farms do not affect tourism. Another
masterstroke was to have some initial reports that dismissed fears that there
would be a problem. One such report was by Dr Charles Warren. It seems
in the report he spoke to people living near six wind farms and found the
majority “strongly supported them”. Dr Warren’s study was conducted in July
and August 2003, but not published until November 2005. His team visited
four wind farms in Ireland, and “two in the Scottish Borders”, one at Dun Law
and the other at Black Hill. There were no turbines on Black Hill, as the wind
farm was yet to be built. Of the four sites in Ireland, only one had more than
20 turbines (23), the other three had six, seven and nine. These Irish
wind farms bear little comparison to the huge industrial scale facilities present and
planned for much of Scotland.

Visit Scotland commissioned a survey in 2002 on the impact of wind farms on
tourism. It said that 26% would be less likely to return to an area with turbines,
15% saying they would definitely not return and 50% think that wind farms
spoil the landscape. This is not 50% of the general population this is 50% of
people who had taken the trouble to visit Scotland. How can we increase our
tourism by the present target of 50% when we would be disappointing 50% of
the people we have already persuaded to come here?

The Moffat study states that it is the initial break into unspoilt countryside
which does the damage, and that a few large wind farms which could be
advertised as “green areas” would damage tourism far less than small wind
farms dotted about. The Government has not taken this advice and because
of the generous subsides there is a free for all. Please review this disastrous
wind farm policy immediately.

Celia Hobbs
19 February 2012