

When wind power blows, jobs will fall

You may recall the Beyond the Fringe sketch in which Squadron Leader Peter Cook tells Jonathan Miller, the doleful pilot, that he must set out on a doomed mission because “we need a futile gesture at this stage. It will raise the whole tone of the war”.

I was irresistibly reminded of this by Ed Miliband, the energy secretary, in his launch of plans to cut carbon emissions by switching to “renewables” for more than 30% of our energy use. This, he claimed, would “rise to the moral challenge of climate change”.

Miliband is of the generation of politicians struggling to find a great moral cause. Earlier in the Labour administration Tony Blair thought he had found it with wars of choice far from home, but that has, to put it mildly, lost its lustre. Now it is the “war against climate change”, given additional moral potency by the notion that the greatest concentration of sufferers from global rising temperatures would be among the world’s poorest.

Miliband’s citing of Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech in support of his policy of subsidising the construction of many thousands of otherwise uneconomic wind turbines might appear grotesque, even comical; but not if you genuinely believe that Britain’s switching from coal to wind power for its electricity generation will save the lives of countless Africans.

I have no idea whether Miliband truly believes that it will — but if he does, he is deluded. The UK is responsible for less than 2% of global carbon emissions — a figure set to fall sharply, regardless of what we do, as a result of the startlingly rapid industrialisation of countries such as China and India: each year the increase in Chinese CO₂ emissions alone is greater than those produced by the entire British economy. On the fashionable assumption that climate change is entirely driven by CO₂ emissions, the effect on global temperatures of Britain closing every fossil fuel power station would be much smaller than the statistical margin of error: in effect, zero.

The scientists at the energy and climate change department know this, but their political masters see things differently. Gordon Brown claims: “Britain is leading the world in the battle against climate change.” Such remarks are regarded as absurd in the chancelleries of Europe: if you do take as a measure of such commitment the proportion of domestic energy already supplied by renewables, the UK occupies 25th place in the European Union league table, above only Malta and Luxembourg.

Nevertheless, there is one great merit in being a follower rather than a leader in renewable energy: we can see how other European countries have fared in the experiment. Germany has long been subsidising wind power to the extent of almost €5 billion a year. Yet recent German Green party internal e-mails leaked to Der Spiegel magazine show this has not led to a reduction of a single gram of CO₂ emitted on the continent of Europe. The much-vaunted emissions trading system is



one reason: Germany’s unused certificates were snapped up at negligible cost by coal producers in countries such as Poland and Slovakia, which were thus able to increase their output of greenhouse gases.

There is a second reason, which would remain even if the European emissions trading system were to be scrapped. Because the wind blows intermittently, and may be at its calmest at times of freezing weather, Germany has not been able to close a single one of its conventional power stations, despite its vast investment in wind power.

Indeed, Paul Golby, who runs the British operations of E.ON, Europe’s biggest wind-power producer, has told the government that a 90% fossil fuel or nuclear back-up will

‘THIS WILL LEAD TO THE EXIT FROM BRITAIN OF ENERGY-INTENSIVE MANUFACTURING’

be needed for any of the National Grid’s future wind-power capacity. As Martin Fuchs, his German boss, pointed out: “The wind, sadly, does not blow where large quantities of power are required . . . on September 12 last year wind power contributed 38% of our grid power requirements at all times, but on September 30 the figure went down to 0.2%.”

The powerful wind-turbine lobby in Germany constantly harps on about the number of jobs “created” by its subsidised investment, quite ignoring the number of jobs destroyed by high-cost energy, or indeed the greater number of jobs that could be created if the same amounts were invested in more profitable activities. This is why the Bremen Energy Institute argues that “wind energy macro-economically has a negative employment impact”.

Given the run-down state of our conventional generating capacity, it is easy to see that the government’s suspiciously round number of a “£100 billion” expenditure on installing 7,000 offshore steel structures, each

the height of Blackpool Tower, at a projected rate of more than two every working day over the next decade, does not begin to cover the real cost. This is why the overall price of wind energy is a multiple of that incurred by nuclear power, which is equally carbon-free but does not appeal to the moral vanity of politicians.

Admittedly, the Labour government has made a belated commitment to replacing our ageing nuclear reactors — far too late to fill the yawning energy gap that Britain faces in the coming decade. As Professor Ian Fells points out in the new Civitas pamphlet *Nations Choose Prosperity*: “The energy agenda is focused on carbon emissions rather than security of supply and potential costs. What is rarely considered is the consequential costs when power cuts are inflicted.” These costs are not just measured in the collapse of business, but also in human lives, especially of the elderly and infirm.

Miliband claimed last week that the result of his proposals would be an increase in costs to energy users of about 17%. However, the business and enterprise department admitted last year that Britain’s existing “climate policies” — even before Miliband’s latest Big New Idea — would add an extra 55% to energy bills. It’s obvious where this will lead: to the exit from Britain (and, indeed, Europe) of much of what remains of energy-intensive manufacturing industry — the euphemistic jargon term is “carbon leakage”.

Jeremy Nicholson, the director of the Energy Intensive Users Group, which represents such industries as steel and aluminium, is exasperated beyond measure: “A future administration will have to say in public what ministers and their officials already admit in private, that the renewables target is neither practical nor affordable. Outsourcing our emissions is not a solution to a global problem. Politicians need to understand that unilateral action will come at a terrible cost in terms of UK manufacturing jobs, investment and export revenue, for no discernible environmental gain — is that really what they want?”

On the day Nicholson said this to me, last Thursday, Anglesey Aluminium, the biggest consumer of electricity in Wales, announced that it would cease production, precisely because it could see no prospect of signing up to a long-term supply of electricity at a rate at which it could make a profit. And on the day of Miliband’s announcement, a group of Labour MPs presented a “Save Our Steel” petition, saying: “We need to make sure we act before the light goes out.”

It may well be that the English steel mills will become unable to compete globally, even at current domestic energy prices; but deliberately to make them uncompetitive is industrial vandalism — and even madness when the consequence of Miliband’s Martin Luther King moment may be the lights going out not just for producers but for all of us in our homes. This is worse than a futile gesture: it is immoral.