



Damon Winter/The New York Times  
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## Britain Goes Nimby

By Roger Cohen

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Nimbyism is the coming thing in Britain. Leading columnists like it. Simon Jenkins penned whose headline began, “Bravo for nimbyism.” His colleague Alexander Chancellor, “I don’t feel bad about nimbyism.”

Nimby is the acronym from “not in my backyard.” With an added “-ism,” it’s a social phenomenon characterized by a measure of hypocrisy. According to a major study on Britain’s energy future published last year by the University of Cardiff, 82 percent of Brits are favorable to wind power. But try to put a wind turbine near someone’s backyard and all hell breaks loose. Planning permission for onshore wind farms now takes forever; a dwindling number — about a third — ever gets approval.

As they adopt nimbyism in droves, touchy-feely, green, politically correct types who only eat bacon from locally reared pampered pigs and would hug any hypothetical wind farm morph into rabid reactionaries. They bleat about 350-foot eyesores, turbine noise and animal suffering. Chancellor had this to say of wind farms: “They kill bats by exploding their little lungs. They frighten horses with an effect known as ‘shadow flicker.’ ”

Aaah, the poor bats! Give me oil from the mass-murderer Qaddafi or sweet-talking Saudis so long as I don’t have a dead bat or spooked horse on my conscience.

I’ve thought about the aesthetics of wind turbines. Sure, they don’t belong in Arcadia — but then nor do we. I prefer them to processions of electricity pylons. They have a certain sleek muscularity. I like the lazy circling of their honed blades. I would not go as far as Chris Huhne, the secretary of state for energy, who recently declared — to loud boos — at a debate in Wotton-Under-Edge (I kid you not) that he found the turbines “absolutely beautiful,” but nor are they Jenkins’s “aesthetic travesty.” They’re tolerable in the name of secure, renewable, low-carbon energy.

For which Britain has great need. A net exporter of energy for many years, thanks to North Sea oil, Britain became a net importer in 2004 and now relies on imports for 28 percent of its energy. Its 18 nuclear reactors are aging — all but one will have to be shut by 2023. With renewable sources like wind and solar accounting for just 3.3 percent of energy consumption in 2010, Britain is a long way from its target — mandated by the European Union — of 15 percent by 2020.

In theory, green-organic Brits get all this. The Cardiff survey found that 81 percent of people are concerned that Britain will become too dependent on imported energy. Even if fewer people now say there are risks to Britain from climate change — 66 percent today against 77 percent in 2005 (an economic crisis does focus the mind on the present) — they support using a mix of energy sources (74 percent), and 82 percent claim they would “probably or definitely vote in favor of building new wind farms in Britain,” against 41 percent for nuclear power stations.

But that’s before nimbyism kicks in. We live in a nimbyfying world: idealism abounds, propelled by planet shrinkage, but so does ego, inflated by solipsistic online universes. Where they converge is in hypocrisy and humbug.

People, always conservative, want change less than ever — and certainly not on their bucolic patch — even if they acknowledge it’s needed. In the pretty village of Clare in Suffolk, where British Telecom has proposed all of three wind turbines, people are up in arms. Huge signs line the road with slogans like “Stop BT’s turbines.” Opponents summon visions of a Britain so carpeted in windmills there’d be nowhere left for aircraft to make emergency landings or TV signals to penetrate spinning blades.

True, wind power is erratic and no panacea, but nor is it the trumpet of doom.

So, at about twice the price, Britain is now being forced to build most new wind farms offshore. In 2010, onshore installations dropped 38 percent compared with 2009, while offshore ones tripled. All the added cost of that undersea cabling will one day be billed to someone.

Britain is not alone in its inconsistencies. Liberals in Park Slope, Brooklyn, love bikes until an irksome new bike lane beside Prospect Park riles them. Liberals in Massachusetts think wind power’s all right until a wind farm is proposed for Nantucket Sound. Liberal Rhode Island gets exercised over a proposed 427-foot wind turbine.

Some objections make sense. As a paid-up Park Sloper, I think it is nuts to have built a bike lane that fouls traffic right next to a park full of roads for bikers.

Could it be then that I oppose all nimbyism except my own? The horror! I refuse to believe it. Weaning the West of oil dependency is going to take the sacrifice of a few pristine views. Windy Britain should be as pro-wind as it claims — not only out at sea, but in its backyards.