

PROPAGANDA AND THE ULP

The Upland Landscape Protection Society and their literary fellow-travellers face a propaganda problem. They like to be seen - and no doubt to see themselves - as true green environmentalists, not selfish Nimbys. But in opposing the wind farms they are opposing a non-polluting source of power when it is becoming increasingly clear that unless the world switches to sources of power which DON'T pump out CO₂ we risk a global environmental catastrophe. If we are to play our small part in mitigating global warming, we should be shifting to alternative sources of power. That means wind farms (among other things): both wind farms in general and these wind farms in particular. For the likely consequence of NOT going ahead with THESE wind farms is that (in the short term at least) New Zealand will make up any energy shortfall by burning coal for power. Thus, absent compelling arguments to the contrary, building (and/or putting up with) the wind farms looks like the Green Thing To Do. If there were another well-tried technology which could produce the power quickly without disfiguring the uplands, then the wind farms might not be necessary. But wave power and tidal power are still in the experimental stages whereas the wind farms could be up and running within three or four years. Thus in the short term at least, we don't have many alternatives to wind power if we want to go easy on the CO₂. And when it comes to averting and/or mitigating global warming there is no time to lose. If the Otago wind farms were likely do irreparable damage to the relevant ecosystems, and if those ecosystems were of sufficient value, then the net effect of building the wind farms might be better than the net effect of not building them (and producing more CO₂). But the wind farms are unlikely to do serious permanent damage to the relevant ecosystems since the turbines themselves won't take up much space. At Mahinerangi the amount of land permanently excluded from vegetation by the wind turbines would be a mere 0.0079% of the envelope area. There will have to be access tracks but these will cover a mere 1.2% of the envelope once the construction stage is finished . Even at the height of the construction process, a mere 7% of the site will be affected by earthworks. Thus the damage done to ecosystems, flora and fauna is not likely to be severe, and the permanent damage will be pretty minimal. (Though perhaps an exception should be made for bird-life.)

Why then are the wind farms opposed with such bitterness? Because they would spoil the view.

Hence the propaganda problem. The ULP and its fellow-travellers are opposed to the wind farms not because they would do serious damage to the environment but because they think they would be eyesores, even though the likely consequence of NOT building the wind farms is that we shall keep on burning coal for power thus playing our modest part in the poisoning of the planet. How then can they portray themselves, both in their own eyes and those of the public, as friends of the earth?

OPTION 1: BLUR THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND ECOLOGY

Things can be beautiful but bad for the environment (e.g. pollution-enhanced sunsets) and good for the environment but ugly (e.g. decaying buildings or bits of machinery which provide habitats for rare species). Thus the fact that something would be ugly does not mean that it would be environmentally damaging. A good part of the ULPs propaganda consists in slurring over this obvious point. They do this by massaging the word 'pollution', extending its meaning from the emission of harmful substances to the building of turbines which would offend their fastidious eyes, thus creating 'visual pollution'. Since pollution is (almost by definition) bad for the environment and since the turbines would constitute 'visual pollution' it follows that the turbines would be bad for the environment. To paraphrase Bertrand Russell, the method of defining your way to victory has many advantages - they are analogous to the advantages of theft over honest toil.

OPTION 2: DOWNPLAY GLOBAL WARMING

Obviously if CO₂-induced global warming is not a threat, then we can keep on burning coal for power and leave the uplands alone. Thus one way out of the problem is to downplay the threat of Global Warming. This is the tactic of Phillip Temple. He sneers at me for raising the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' and sarcastically chides me for forgetting to mention that the earth might be hit by a giant meteor. I said nothing about this threat a) because it is not very likely, and b) because we can't do anything about it.

Conversely I went on about Global Warming a) because it is very likely, and b) because we CAN do something about it. Does Mr Temple deny the reality, the risks or the human causes of global warming? If so, he disagrees with the general consensus of climate scientists, not to mention Sir Nicholas Stern, former chief economist of the World Bank, and a bevy of Nobel Prize winners. Of course, the scientists might be wrong and Mr Temple might be right, but my money is on the scientists.

OPTION 3: 'WE'RE NOT AGAINST WIND FARMS'

Both Richard Reeve and Brain Turner seem dimly aware that it is not a good look for self-proclaimed environmentalists to be against a non-polluting power source, and claim that the ULP is not opposed to wind farms in general. Their website suggests otherwise. It is full of inspiring stories about other groups the world over who are fighting the good fight against wind farms (or 'wind factories' as they insist on calling them). It seems a bit odd that the professed friends of wind power should display such a matey attitude to its opponents (and indeed a bit odd that they should insist on the pejorative terminology). But if they really are friends to wind power, they cannot consistently use arguments which, if they were any good, would tell against wind farms in general not just the Otago wind farms in particular. For example, they cannot argue (as they do on the website) that the Otago wind farms would be bad because the turbines would be big. For the turbines would have to be big wherever they were situated, so if this is a good argument against wind farms in Otago it is equally an argument against wind farms everywhere. They cannot argue that Otago wind farms would be bad because the turbines would become obsolescent within 70-odd years. For turbines will have use-by date wherever they are situated, so if this is a good argument against wind farms in Otago it equally an argument against wind farms anywhere. Once their propaganda has been purged of these arguments and the matey allusions to other opponents of wind farms, I'll believe that they are not against wind power generally. Until then, I will take their protestations with a large pinch of salt.

OPTION 4: ABUSE YOUR OPPONENTS

Dr Reeve is a master of this art as is Mr Witherow (who in a charming little piece compares Dr Turner of Meridian Energy to the colonel responsible of the My Lai massacres). A great deal of abusive ink has been spilt to prove that I don't know much about the uplands. But you don't have to be an expert on the uplands to realize that the ULP's claims about environmental damage are mostly hokum. Common sense and a capacity for elementary arithmetic suffice. Again they accused me of setting myself up as an expert or 'mandarin' (Reeve) on peak oil and global warming, who pretends to ' authority and knowledge he does not have' (Brian Turner). Their evidence for this is that I made assertions about peak oil and global warming. This is like accusing a man of setting himself up as meteorologist because he happens to remark that it is coming on to rain. In fact, the only expertise that I lay claim to is the expertise that anybody could acquire as a result of a couple of weeks' hard study. But that does not mean that I am mistaken. Here let me quote a REAL expert, namely Associate Professor Bob Lloyd, Director of the Energy Studies Program in the Department of Physics at Otago. When my Op Ed article of 5/9/06 was published he sent me an appreciative email. I wrote back saying that I was 'not an expert in this area' and had been 'worried about saying something stupid' [not a fear that seems to afflict Dr Reeve]. Professor Lloyd replied that I was 'spot on'.

Mr Witherow sneered that I had 'not previously advised us of [my] fears ... of the imminent end of the world'. But does the fact that I only recently woke up to the threat of global warming prove me wrong? Obviously not. Is Mr Witherow so desperate to find a stick to beat me with that any accusation will do no matter how irrelevant? But since he seems to be interested in my ideological development, I am happy to oblige. Like many another, I had been vaguely aware of global warming for a long time. But it was not until early this year that, alerted by a couple of articles in the ODT, I began to realize just how dangerous it might be. I started reading around and the more I read the more appalled I became. High end global warming would be an unimaginable disaster, leading to the downfall of our global civilization and a mass extinction of species. I resolved then and there, that if the world does succumb to an ecological catastrophe it won't be because I haven't done my

tiny bit trying to stop it. Part of that tiny bit is arguing for wind power against the frivolous objections of those who effectively put their aesthetic preferences above the welfare of the planet. And that is what I have been doing in the recent debate.