

How rural Wales became a net zero war zone

Protesters fear what is happening there is a trial run for what Labour would do nationally, writes **Jonathan Leake**

It looks tranquil but the countryside in Wales has become Britain's new energy battleground – where lucrative wind farm developments are generating not just electricity but neighbourhood rows and punch-ups at public meetings. Farmers have even allegedly been offered lap dances to surrender their land to turbines.

It follows a change in planning laws that has encouraged a surge in applications for giant wind turbines up to 800ft tall – up to three times larger than any yet built in the Principality.

Protest groups have sprung up in towns and villages from Anglesey in the north to Powys in the south.

“The impact on the Welsh landscape will be devastating,” says Julie Richards, campaigns officer at CPRW, the Welsh countryside protection charity. “Our cherished and beautiful landscapes are being altered for ever.”

One of the most controversial, so far, is the Twyn Hywel Wind Farm on Mynydd Eglwysilan, a 1,200ft hill in Caerphilly, near Pontypridd, where Bute Energy's plans for 14 giant turbines have provoked uproar and lurid allegations in the community.

The minutes of an emergency public meeting called last August by Nelson Community Council, recorded lurid claims about a landowner alleging he was offered inducements to lease his land. Bute strongly refuted that allegation and the minutes have since been amended to remove the claim.

But independent councillor Gill Davies, 84, said the proposed wind farm would be a disaster. She said: “Renewable energy is a good idea but destroying our landscape to produce it is too high a price. Wales has enough low-carbon energy. The power from this wind farm will all go to England, the money will go to the company and we will get nothing. Then the English wonder why we Welsh get stropky.”

The arguments are not just about landscapes. Wind farm construction means drilling massive holes in the ground to install concrete foundations. It also means laying cables and building sub-stations. Usually a brand new road is needed so the construction phase often has huge impacts.

Once built, wind turbines can cause further disruption through “flicker” – sunlight reflecting off moving blades – and low-level vibrations. Welsh planning meetings have become heated or even aggressive. Tim Smith, founder of Motvind UK, which works with anti-wind farm protest groups across Wales, recalls a farmer punching a project manager last year.

Mr Smith is part of Save Gaerwen, a group fighting a “monstrous” wind farm project in Denbighshire, north-east of Bala. RWE, a German energy firm, wants to erect nine turbines each 660ft tall – five times the height of the tallest local church. RWE's newsletter admits that 77pc of people are opposed to the project but said it still planned to go ahead.

Another Bute scheme, at Aberedw in Powys, will benefit the family of former royal nanny Tiggy Legge-Bourke, now Alexandra Pettifer. Her brother, Harry, owns the



‘Renewable energy is good but destroying landscape to produce it is too high a price’

6,000-acre Glanusk Estate plus the 4,000 acres of land on Aberedw Hill where Bute wants to install 18 giant turbines that could earn him up to £500,000 a year. Locals, reports the *Mail on Sunday*, are furious at losing their views with little compensation and at the threat of a string of pylons being built to carry the power from the wind farm to customers in England.

Ms Richards said the spate of applications for giant new wind farms followed the Welsh government's new rules on wind developments. Until 2020 wind turbines were relatively small – less than 350ft high. However, the Welsh government's new policy, Future Wales – the National Plan 2040, revealed three crucial changes.

The first was that “large” wind energy developments should be decided by Labour ministers, not councils. “Large” meant anything over 10 megawatts, equivalent to just two or three turbines. Almost all applications are now approved in Cardiff. The second introduced a “presumption in favour of large-scale wind energy developments”.

So, more and taller turbines, up to 820ft, which were previously deployed only offshore. Ms Richards said:

“Developers are pushing this to the limit.”

The final key change was to create “Pre-Assessed Areas for Wind Energy” – so vast tracts of Welsh countryside are deemed suitable for wind farms, whatever locals think.

Ms Richards said: “These changes have opened the floodgates to developers, such as RWE and Bute Energy. But it's Bute that has by far the greatest number of proposals.”

Bute confirms that it has 10 energy parks in planning with another six in the pipeline. And it also wants to build a network of pylons across Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire to help carry its power around Wales and into England. The largest is Lan Fawr, where Bute wants to install 40 turbines, each up to 800ft tall. It already faces opposition from campaigners in Powys.

Its three founders, Oliver Millican, Stuart George and Lawson Steele, said in a statement that they set up Bute to “leave a legacy for future generations ... because climate change is the biggest challenge facing the world”.

Company accounts show they shared £1.1m in the year to March 2023. Bute said that if approved, their 16 projects would represent £3.2bn

investment in infrastructure and produce enough clean electricity to power 2.25m homes. For protest groups the key is the number and size of the turbines. Data from RenewableUK Cymru, the Welsh wind industry's trade body, suggests there are already 220 operational wind projects in Wales comprising 1,010 turbines with a collective capacity of 1.3Gw – theoretically enough to power 900,000 homes but the intermittency of wind means real output would be a third of this. So total output equates to a single fairly small power station.

Another 33 projects have planning permission and will add 154 turbines to the total. A further 16 projects are awaiting consent, potentially adding another 104 – making a total of 1,268.

Jessica Hooper, director of RenewableUK Cymru, claims most people in Wales have a warm welcome for wind turbines on their hillsides and don't think they spoil the view. She says: “Last year, RenewableUK Cymru commissioned a Welsh poll which showed people living closest to wind farms are the greatest supporters of wind power. While the majority of Welsh respondents (65pc) said they support onshore wind, with only 9pc

‘The power will all go to England, the money to the company, and we will get nothing’

opposed. Approval ratings rose to 72pc for those who live within five miles of a wind farm.”

A Welsh Government spokesman said: “Our policy and planning system supports well-designed renewable projects based on extensive public consultation.” Such claims outrage protesters, however, who warn that the Welsh government's manipulation of planning rules is a trial run for what will happen in England if Labour wins power. England has seen almost no onshore wind developments for a decade after a rural backlash forced the Conservative government into an about-turn. Last year, however, Sir Keir Starmer pledged to more than double onshore wind by 2030.

RenewableUK, the British wind energy trade body, estimates this would need up to 3,000 large, new wind turbines across England.

Asked what would happen if local communities across England also objected, Sir Keir added: “There has to come a point where, if we're going to move forward, we don't have simple individual vetoes across the whole of the country.”

Labour, he said, would “back the builders, not the blockers”.

Mirror publisher warns of Facebook's ‘potent’ threat to society

By James Warrington

THE publisher of the *Mirror* and *Express* newspapers has warned that Facebook poses a “potent threat to civil society”, despite having the social media giant's UK boss on its board for eight years.

Reach, which also owns dozens of regional titles, took aim at Facebook's parent company, Meta, for its decision to deplatform news. It said: “The damage Meta has done to the news industry cannot be underestimated.”

The broadside comes despite Reach

counting Steve Hatch, Facebook's UK chief and later vice president for Northern Europe, as a board member until last year.

Mr Hatch joined the publisher as a non-executive director in 2015. He stepped down after taking up the role of chief executive at pollster YouGov.

Reach is battling to turn its fortunes around after a botched shift to the digital era under chief executive Jim Mullen. It suffered a 15pc slump in digital advertising revenues last year, which it blamed in part on the wider

economic downturn. But Reach, which relies heavily on readers clicking through to its websites from social media, has also been hammered by Facebook's decision to prioritise user content over news articles.

Bosses said this had led to page views falling by as much as 30pc for some local titles, which include the *Liverpool Echo* and *Manchester Evening News*.

Reach slashed about 800 roles last year, including many in its editorial department, in an attempt to cut costs and shore up its balance sheet. In its

£245m

What Google paid out to the top five UK news publishers in its ad network between 2018 and 2020

submission to a House of Lords inquiry, Reach said Facebook's algorithm changes were a “contributing factor” behind the job cuts.

The company said: “Our assessment

is that Meta has concluded that supporting the news industry globally is just too much hassle and, if given a choice, it would rather deplatform news and serve other stuff up to people, rather than be an active player in ensuring communities globally have access to reliable, researched information.”

Reach warned this was damaging not only to publishers but to society as “reliable, accurate information is, at best, being given only equal billing to conspiracy theories and misinformation”. The company said it had “worked well”

with Facebook for a number of years prior to the move to deplatform news. Meta was contacted for comment.

Reach said Google had a “more proactive” relationship with publishers and did try to support the industry. However, it took aim at the tech giant for its frequent algorithm changes, as well as cannibalisation of advertising revenues.

Google said it paid out more than £245m to the top five UK news publishers in its ad network between 2018 and 2020, adding that it paid to license content from almost 300 titles.

Bank sues claim managers over ‘spurious’ complaints

By Michael Bow

VANQUIS BANK is suing a claims management company at the High Court after a slew of compensation demands triggered a shock profit warning.

The lender has lodged a case against TMS Legal, a law firm specialising in financial claims against banks. The level of damages sought is not yet clear but Vanquis has hired City law firm Herbert Smith Freehills to lead the action.

Vanquis shares crashed 50pc last month after it warned that a surge of customer complaints about credit cards would dent profits.

Even though most of the complaints were not upheld, the bank said the £750 cost of processing each one was causing its overheads to balloon.

Vanquis chief executive Ian McLaughlin told investors last week the firm was taking “appropriate legal action” against an unnamed claims management firm.

He did not name the group but case filings show TMS Legal is the target of

the Vanquis complaint. The Dorset-based firm, which employs 23 people, specialises in seeking refunds for clients of financial institutions who, it claims, may have been mistreated or mis-sold financial products.

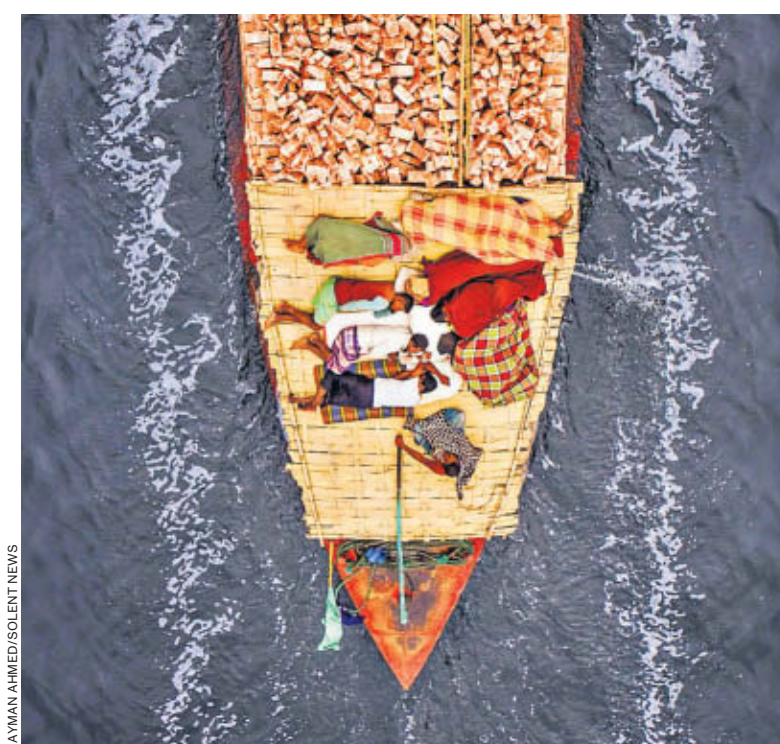
Without naming TMS directly, Mr McLaughlin said: “We are getting swamped with what turned out to be mainly spurious complaints.”

“It's the spurious, speculative complaints that are just scraped off TikTok or social media, that we're really having an issue with.”

Most claims management companies go through a very rigorous process of verification and identification of what the issue is and then submit it. The issue we have with this particular actor is that they do not seem to be doing that and we are getting inundated with a load of claims that turn out to be spurious.

“We're just not prepared to sit back and let this happen if it's not being done in a way that we think is correct.”

Vanquis declined to comment. TMS Legal was contacted for comment.



Hard times Workers sleep on bricks en route to market from a kiln in Munshiganj near Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Workers offered free ADHD tests at Disney and Phoenix

By Adam Mawardi

DISNEY and Phoenix Group have joined the growing list of companies offering to test workers for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) amid soaring NHS waiting lists.

Phoenix, the UK's largest long-term savings and retirement business, is offering private assessments and diagnoses to employees and their dependents under its healthcare plan.

The FTSE 100 insurer will also cover tests for other neurological conditions such as dyslexia and dyscalculia, which is where people have difficulty understanding numbers.

Disney offers all employees ADHD and autism assessments. It also provides workers with online access to nurses, speech and language therapists, and psychiatrists.

Businesses are under pressure to increase private healthcare benefits for workers with neural conditions amid concerns that NHS delays are leaving many without support. The NHS back-

log means patients can be waiting up to 300 days for an autism diagnosis, and as much as seven years for an ADHD one.

Magic circle law firms Clifford Chance, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer and Allen & Overy have all introduced workplace schemes which help lawyers with ADHD diagnostics and support. Big Four auditor PwC UK also provides testing for neurological conditions including dysgraphia, a disorder where people have difficulty reading and writing.

Last week, the NHS launched a national investigation into ADHD in response to concerns over soaring demand for assessments and national medicine shortages. Experts have warned that NHS waiting times are forcing patients to seek treatment from rogue private health clinics.

Amanda Pritchard, chief executive of NHS England, said: “We have recognised that more needs to be done to ensure people can get a timely diagnosis and importantly, that all of their needs are addressed.”