

# Why net zero plans may lift Reform's rural vote

Overhaul of Britain's energy is a battle for hearts and minds in the countryside, write *Jonathan Leake and Matt Oliver*

**E**d Miliband's plan to decarbonise Britain's electricity supply will change the topography of Britain's countryside and the views from our shores – and may yet redraw the political map too.

A report published today by the UK's National Energy System Operator (Neso) tells the Energy Secretary that his dream of decarbonising the power grid by 2030 means he must double onshore wind capacity, triple offshore wind and quadruple solar power in just five years.

To hit his target he must first rewrite the UK's planning system, raise billions of pounds in finance and oversee the creation of a massive supply chain capable of producing thousands of wind turbines and solar panels, plus the miles of cable needed to connect them all up.

Some of the proposals are relatively uncontroversial – there will be few objections to expanding offshore wind, or boosting the UK's battery storage network, for example. But others, such as Neso's call for thousands of giant new electricity pylons, will be incendiary in some areas.

Objectors say those planned pylons will not just be unsightly but will also open the way to industrial-scale wind and solar farms that will transform the landscape.

In Westminster, however, the growing fear is the transformation of the political landscape with Reform and the Conservatives eyeing up net zero for winning future votes.

"The net zero agenda is about to become a big political issue," says Reform leader Nigel Farage.

"The public are waking up to the fact that we have the most expensive electricity in the world – and Red Ed's plans will make the situation far worse."

"As for the Tories, they can hardly backtrack. In next year's county council elections, we will campaign hard against this lunacy."

**Delivering net zero will define Ed Miliband's time in politics**



He is confident that such issues will play big in next May's county council elections.

The Tories may too be about to change tack. New leader Reni Badesoch has described herself as a "net zero sceptic" but "not a climate change sceptic". She warned that net zero was "making energy more expensive and hurting our economy". Just what will the country

look like when the public next vote in a general election? Neso has proposed two pathways to decarbonising the grid – giving up on carbon-emitting fuels such as gas to drive power stations – by 2030, each requiring investment in the region of £40bn per year. One envisages the UK becoming highly reliant on wind and solar farms, as well as greater flexibility in the system, and building to new power stations.

The other involves less offshore wind but a surge in "dispatchable" sources of power, from gas plants topped with carbon capture to biomass, hydrogen and even new nuclear power plants.

Neso's report makes clear that both pathways will be hugely challenging. Offshore wind farms must form "the bedrock" of Britain's future energy

system, meeting more than half of our electricity needs, according to Neso. "There is no path to clean power without mass deployment of offshore wind," its report adds.

The 2,800 wind turbines surrounding British coastlines are already delivering 15GW of power capacity and have the potential to deliver far more. The challenge is not the technology but the timescale.

Neso has suggested adding up to 35GW by 2030 – or about 3,500 more machines. But that means installing two of the giant turbines every day for five years.

It is a similar story for onshore wind and solar. Neso envisages a trebling of solar power, from 15GW of capacity now to 47GW by 2030. Since solar needs about 5,000 acres per gigawatt this means solar panels will have to

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cover about 250,000 acres of farmland – roughly the size of Dartmoor National Park. This makes solar one of the most controversial low carbon technologies. Most of these new solar farms will be in the South East – close to the cities that want the power.

By 2030, nuclear power stations will need to be providing between 3.5 and 4.1 gigawatts of electricity, according to Neso. At present, all but one of Britain's existing plants – Sizewell B – are scheduled to close this decade.

Neso assumes operator EDF will be able to extend the lifespan of at least one or two of them but Great British Nuclear does not expect any SMRs to come online until "the early 2030s".

Generating clean electricity is one thing but it must then be transported to the right place. Double the amount of pylons, cables and other transmission infrastructure must be built in the next five years as has been built in the previous ten in order to rewire Britain for net zero, Neso says.

Without this, it will not be "fully possible to utilise renewables". This is because there is insufficient capacity on major north-south power lines to ensure that wind power generated in Scotland and the North can be transported to where it is most needed in the power-hungry cities of the South. Fixing the problem will involve £60bn of investment to build around 620 miles of new onshore power lines and another 2,800 miles of offshore ones, across 88 construction projects, Neso says. Of these, at least 80 must be delivered for the Government to hit its 2030 clean power target.

What all Miliband's plans depend upon, however, is the planning system. Cutting the time taken for planning consents and massively accelerating development is key. What will it mean for local democracy? "The only way to achieve change on this scale would be to suspend the planning rules," says Ashley Kelly, an energy analyst at Panmure Gordon.

For rival politicians, that could be a gift – enabling them to portray Labour as obsessed with net zero. The unrest in the countryside is already palpable. Wera Hobhouse, a Liberal Democrat who sits on the energy select committee, warned that losing the support of local people could derail the whole net zero project. She says: "We are calling for decisions to be devolved to local authorities and we believe that without their buy-in, the ambitious targets cannot be achieved."

For now Miliband and his party are firmly set on their mission. But the stakes could not be higher.

Responding to Neso's report, the Energy Secretary says: "The Government is determined to ensure the significant reforms we need."

"Every family and business deserves affordable, secure power – and that is what we will deliver."

See quote from Lib Dem Wera Hobhouse at the end