

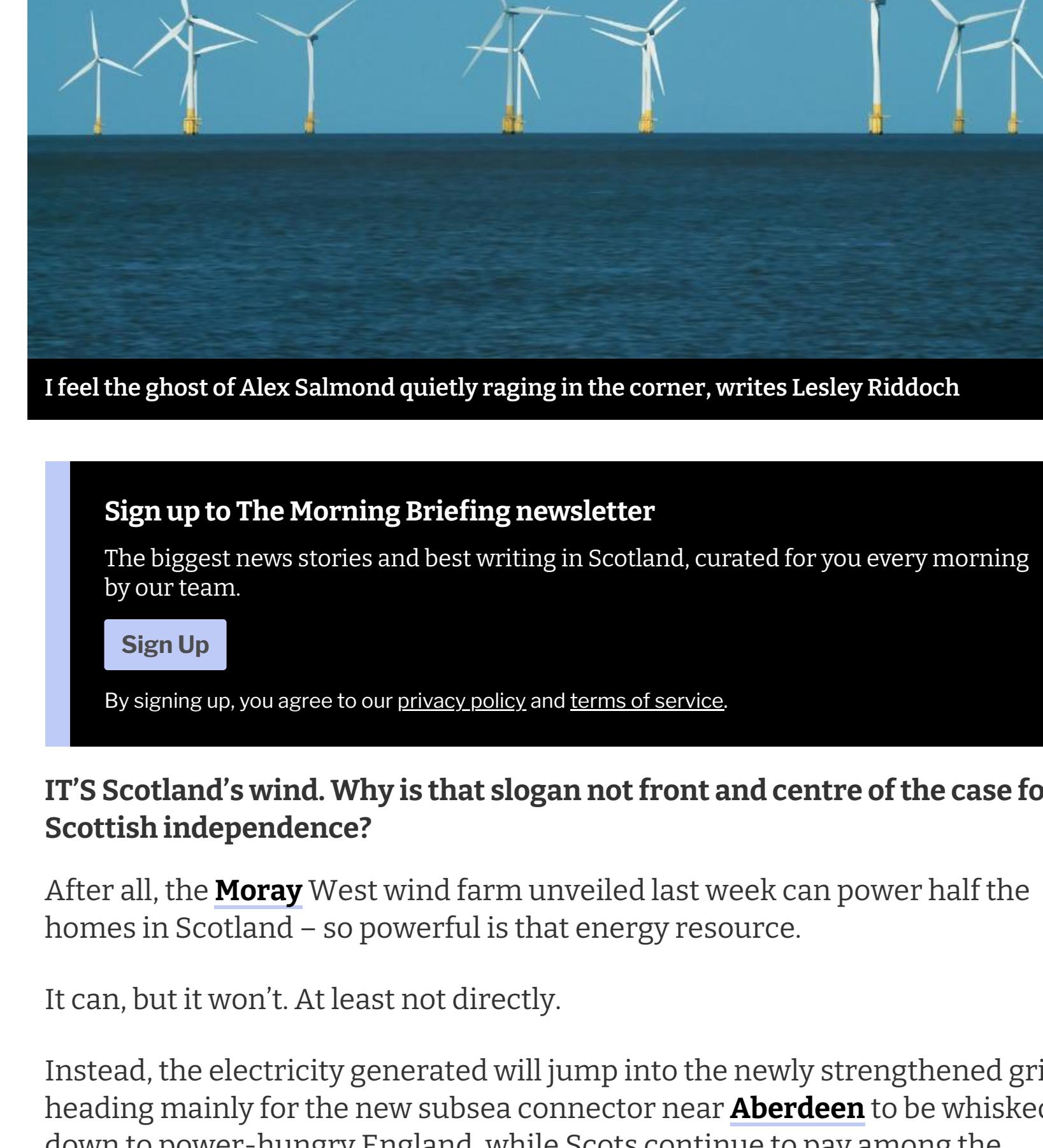
COMMENT

Fight to control our energy resources must be the SNP's next campaign

27TH APRIL ENERGY LESLEY RIDDOCH SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE SNP POLITICS SCOTLAND

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I feel the ghost of Alex Salmond quietly raging in the corner, writes Lesley Riddoch

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IT'S Scotland's wind. Why is that slogan not front and centre of the case for Scottish independence?

After all, the **Moray** West wind farm unveiled last week can power half the homes in Scotland – so powerful is that energy resource.

It can, but it won't. At least not directly.

Instead, the electricity generated will jump into the newly strengthened grid heading mainly for the new subsea connector near **Aberdeen** to be whisked down to power-hungry England, while Scots continue to pay among the highest domestic and **business** energy bills in the UK.

Where is the outrage?

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Of course, no-one wants to put the dampeners on a real engineering achievement and since energy policy is reserved to **Westminster**, it was Scottish Secretary Ian Murray doing the honours and claiming the project for Westminster's march towards net zero and Labour's stotter towards **GB Energy**. Fine. Predictable.

But where was the First Minister reminding everyone this is still Scotland's wind?

I feel the ghost of **Alex Salmond** quietly raging in the corner.

I wish I felt the rage of all independence-minded Scots as well.

Salmond's single-minded determination to push ahead with onshore wind using only planning powers during the noughties stood in direct contrast to successive British governments which let a single local objection veto wind farms south of the Border.

As a result, while Scotland's wind energy was turning Britain's energy supply green, hardly any turbines were erected south of the Border for 14 long Tory years. Too unsightly. Tall towers too industrial for England's green and pleasant land.

Admittedly, visual intrusion also bothers many Scots. But when the alternative is reliance on fast-depleting, climate-altering fossil fuels, when Scotland has perhaps the best wind resource in the northern hemisphere, and when harnessing that resource could eliminate fuel poverty and revolutionise our economy, it made perfect sense for Salmond and Scotland to hammer on.

But where has that got us?

Sure, the planet has fewer emissions. Local people have a relatively small amount of community benefit from big wind farms but still pay among the highest bills in the UK. Others got jobs (including some of the 1500 created in Moray West's construction) and Scotland has got record levels of inward investment – though steel for turbine construction comes from China and profits race back across the Border and out of the UK.

Is that good enough? No. No other energy-rich North Atlantic state would – accept the pennies thrown our way to compensate for the fuel poverty, high prices, shonky grid connections, overhead pylons and the big hole in public spending that comes from not being in control. But then all other North Atlantic states are independent.

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It's crystal clear. Without control over renewable resources through independence, Scotland will continue to be the poor relation, losing population, arguing amongst ourselves and robbing Peter to pay Paul for decent public services.

Consider. On **BBC Scotland**'s Debate Night programme in **Inverness** last week, one questioner bemoaned the parlous state of health services in the Highlands. A vascular surgeon has resigned over safety at Raigmore in Inverness and mothers-to-be in Caithness cannot give birth at home in Wick hospital. Too hard to staff. Too remote. Too small a population. Right.

Compare and contrast the situation with the world's northernmost town – little Hammerfest in Norway.

The Finnmark health board offers a package to entice professionals north – they write off student loans, apply a lower tax rate, help with housing and moving costs and point out that plentiful hydro makes electricity bills cheaper than the Norway average. Yip – Arctic Norway has cheaper energy than the rest of Norway which in turn is far cheaper than Scotland. And partly as a result of that, Hammerfest has a functioning maternity unit for the same population as Wick.

Energy powers equality. And the converse is also true.

Lack of affordable, plentiful energy is accelerating the new Highland – clearances.

When Scottish Hydro was born in the 1940s, it was going to be so different. The Home Rule-supporting Labour wartime Scottish secretary Tom Johnston banged landowners' heads together during the war years to force the construction of hydro dams across the Highlands, finally bringing "power to the glens".

I know because my mother's family in Caithness went from tilly lamps to electricity in the 1950s and the company created to deliver it – the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board (NSHEB) or Hydro Board – had a social remit, inspired by the Tennessee Valley Authority scheme in the USA.

Johnston said it would leave "Scotia resurgent" reversing depopulation, – encouraging new industries and providing employment.

But all that history and purpose went out the window in the 1980s with – Margaret Thatcher's privatisation of energy. Now, no one in Scotland expects what every other small country at our latitude enjoys. Cheap, renewable energy harnessed in the interests of its people.

It's time we remembered and demanded better. Take Applecross.

The 250-strong community over the highest mountain road in Britain – managed to raise £780k in 2016 to win Westminster funding for Apple Juice – a community hydro project. Great.

But they weren't given the extra grid connection promised by SSE – which means only half the hydro's tiny 90kw output can be sold to the grid. It means no other hydro on the peninsula can export, and there are no three-phase energy supplies, which basically means no new businesses and no public charging point for electric vehicles. Indeed, the new Applecross distillery is located off the peninsula near Kishorn.

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The community company has tried valiantly to fill the gap with everything community filling station, housing and local broadband. But everything is difficult when local control of energy would make it so easy.

Feeding into the grid is how energy projects throw six, get paid and secure income and jobs. But the Applecross grid is tiny, already full and SSE only applied for an upgrade in 2022. Since then, it's been stuck in a **Scottish Government** planning process. They won't comment on an active planning application.

So right now, there's no point developing more hydro, wind, tidal or solar.

Applecross is all dressed up with nowhere to go. Awash with energy but losing population and stuck in fuel poverty.

It's a situation replicated across rural Scotland and the islands. But unheard of in other small countries at our latitude.

In Norway, the massive hydro resource has always been owned by local councils, indeed massive public ownership template shaped the decision to create an oil fund in the 1970s.

In the UK, strategic decisions about infrastructure – like grid strengthening and new connectors – are in the hands of the private company SSE, overseen by Ofgem who ensure new investments benefit the majority of – British ratepayers.

And that – until very recently – has produced an aversion to spending our cash on any energy hardware in "remote" Scotland. That short-sightedness and lack of strategic vision in Scotland's energy-rich islands have not even had subsea connectors to harness the vast energy resources they possess.

It's also the reason Applecross has been left high and dry.

No-one else in Europe makes vital energy decisions this way.

For fairness' sake, Scotland is being led by the energy supplier Octopus, arguing for a new pricing mechanism that would leave Scots with the lowest bills in Europe. Yet there is a deafening silence from the **SNP**.

It is Scotland's wind, rain and natural, abundant, home-grown energy.

Yet that ownership issue is not being pushed front and centre by the **SNP**, Greens or anyone else, and Scots are not as animated about "wind" ownership as we were about the black stuff 50 years ago.

Might feisty political leadership change that, or will Scots have to do the heavy lifting ourselves with a new political movement or civil disobedience campaign?

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New documentary soon on https://www.youtube.com/@Lesley_Riddoch

Applecross, Scotland – energy-rich power-poor

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