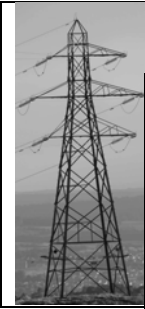


# STIRLING BEFORE PYLONS

## THE PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO THE BEAULY-DENNY POWER LINE

**Strategy Session Week 1: 6-9 February 2007**



The long-awaited Public Inquiry into SSE's proposals to build the Beauly – Denny power line opened in Perth on Tuesday, 6 February. The Strategy session of the Inquiry, dealing with all the over-arching and generic issues (including the need for the line, the health issues, and the principles of undergrounding, as well as a lot of methodological issues) will continue until 11 May, Tuesday to Friday, between 10 am and 5 – 5.30pm, at the Quality Hotel, next to Perth Station. There will be a 2-week break for Easter.

Local issues will be dealt with at four local sessions, starting in Inverness, and reaching Stirling on 20 November. The Stirling session, and the entire Inquiry, will eventually reach its end on 20 December 2007.

All the evidence to be brought by SSE – comprising 35 witnesses – will be brought in turn, taking up the first 5 weeks of the Inquiry.

The first week was taken up with the evidence of just 3 witnesses. The first dealt with issues relating to SSE's and Scottish Power Transmission's licenses to transmit and distribute electricity across Scotland. He was interrupted by the Scottish Executive's Reporters – the 3 men sitting in judgement on the evidence that will be brought by SSE, the Councils, SNH and a wide range of community groups and individuals – to be asked a question about undergrounding.

This question seemed to set the scene for the Inquiry. Even though SSE dismissed the possibility of putting any of the line underground when they brought forward their proposals in October 2005, and have since said they would not be putting forward any proposals for undergrounding, they have been forced into something of a U-turn by public and political pressure. Issues relating to undergrounding have in fact cropped up regularly throughout this first week.

The second witness gave evidence on the need for the line, and the possible alternatives. Although this is a highly technical issue, it is absolutely central to SSE's case, and the witness was grilled for 2 solid days by the Advocate for the Councils and the Cairngorms National Park Authority, followed in turn by the QC acting for Eilean Aigas Estate and Stirling Before Pylons, the Chair of Highlands Before Pylons, a specialist in the workings of the national grid, and the technical adviser to the Inquiry from the Department of Trade and Industry.

It is hard for the lay person to follow such technical issues, but what seemed to be emerging was that SSE had made up its mind as early as 2002, if not before, that it would pursue an overland, overhead line, and it has not given serious consideration to other possibilities. The witness did however acknowledge that a wide range of other possibilities existed – including using 2 sub-sea cables, instead of an inland power line. All the other possibilities seem to have been excluded from consideration, on the grounds that they cost more, even though they would still be cost-effective in terms of the savings to the consumer.

However, in developing their proposals, it seems that SSE has had regard only to two issues: resolving the technical challenges, and finding the cheapest solution. In justifying their choice of an overhead, inland route, SSE's witnesses referred frequently to the economic and efficiency justifications for their choice, but failed to acknowledge or put costs on all the environmental damage that would be done in the process.

It may be that the whole case will rest on what price should be put on saving all the environmental and human damage that would result from the overhead line, and whether this is sufficient to justify the additional costs of using alternative methods, such as putting the most sensitive parts of the route underground, or installing cables under the sea.

It is interesting to see that these messages have already been grasped by many politicians and other key people. BBC's Newsnight programme on 6 February featured a discussion between Mark Ruskell MSP, and Brian Wilson, once Energy Minister in the Labour government in Westminster, now Chairman of a wind farm development company, Airtricity. They both seemed to agree that the solution was either a sub-sea cable, or selective undergrounding, and they deplored – as we do! – the fact that this cumbersome, immensely expensive Public Inquiry is going to drag on for most of this year, exploring all the minutiae, when the solution is so obvious.

Nevertheless, the Inquiry is taking place, and we see no choice but to participate in it to the best of our ability, in order to stand up for the people and landscapes of the Stirling area.

We gained one small, behind-the-scenes victory this week. SSE, despite all their denials, turned out to have commissioned some work on putting parts of the route underground, and this included 3 short lengths round Stirling. They distributed the report in mid-January. SSE say they chose all the areas simply as examples of the many types of terrain that might be involved, to investigate the technical challenges and costs, but nevertheless, their examples were put forward in some detail. On Day 1 of the Inquiry, SSE's Advocate stated their intention of dealing with all aspects of this report in Week 3 of the Strategy session, but we have won the concession that the detailed examination of their "example" routes will be left to the area sessions. In this way, many more people in the Stirling area will have time to take an interest in this report and its implications, and will be better able to attend the local session of the Inquiry to listen to the debate on the issues.

In the background, we have been irritated by comments coming from Scottish Renewables, the body promoting the interests of commercial wind farm developers, to the effect that SSE are being prevented by NIMBY objectors from getting on with providing the capacity to harvest electricity from wind farms. Our view is the opposite: if SSE had done their job properly in the first place, they would not have left themselves open to all the criticisms they have received, but would have taken them seriously, and looked carefully for alternatives that would have minimised or done away with all such objections!

There is now a website for the Inquiry, at [www.beaulydenny.co.uk](http://www.beaulydenny.co.uk). This contains every party's Statements of Case, and the evidence to be brought by all the witnesses, as well as the timetable and an indication of progress.

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