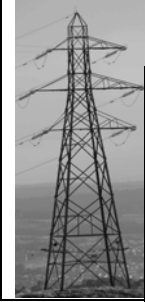


STIRLING BEFORE PYLONS

THE PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO THE BEAULY-DENNY POWER LINE

Strategy Session Wk 3: 20-23 February 2007



1. Undergrounding & Under-sea cables

Week 3 has seen undergrounding put firmly on the map. Despite all their protestations that they would never consider putting any part of the line underground, SSE fielded three witnesses to talk about doing just that. They looked at the generic issues, including the possibility of putting in an HVDC sub-sea cable link, perhaps right down to Sunderland or Deeside in England, but wriggled out of answering questions as to whether the costs of this (around £590 - £680 million for a 1.2GW under-sea link) should properly be compared with the costs of upgrading not only the Beauly – Denny line (£350 million) but also the Denny – Wishaw ring (£100 – 150 million) and a third Scotland – England interconnector (£425 million). Indeed, it may be the case that the sub-sea link would need to be of higher capacity to be equivalent to the full Beauly – Denny upgrade, but this awaits clarification for those of us without the technical knowledge to have worked it all out for ourselves already.

SSE's experts confirmed that, if parts of the line were to be put underground, then XLPE would be the technology of choice; and that that would have been their recommendation to SSE, had they been asked, in September 2005, when SSE's proposals were being finalised. SSE, of course, continued to recognise only the older and much more expensive oil-filled cable technology until very recently, even though the manufacturing base is shrinking rapidly as XLPE takes over everywhere.

SSE's consultants had even worked out 5 "case studies" of stretches of line that could be put underground, that just happened to coincide with the three areas where the overhead line is being most hotly contended. One at least of these is highly impractical, going as it does right through the campus (a HGDL) of the University of Stirling (one of the largest employers in the area), and up a very pretty little rural road, the high rocky sides of which would have to be blasted away to achieve this. One suspects that even the authors of the report may agree that it is perhaps not really feasible to put an underground route this side of Stirling, but as we aren't allowed to talk about specific locations at this Strategy session, we'll have to wait for the Stirling area session of the Inquiry, at the end of the year, to ask them.

The case studies were supposedly designed to highlight the costs of undergrounding and, while the details presented were all highly contentious, there is no doubt that using underground cable is many times more expensive than an overhead line. SSE's consultants' comparisons varied between 5 and 11 times more.

The week ended with the cross-examination of SSE's landscape architect consultant, who has had a finger in every pie, it seems, and who is totally and utterly against using underground cable anywhere. He comes across as rather rigid on this issue, as also on the issue of what constitutes a "highly sensitive area" – anywhere that is not designated a National Scenic Area is ruled out by definition, in his book. It was nevertheless rather interesting that the advocate for SSE made the point of reading

out, before leading him in evidence, the ruling made by the Inspector to the Inquiry into the North Yorkshire line, whose definition of what constituted a highly sensitive area was rather more generous, and would certainly seem to fit a number of the areas most at issue here.

The cross-examination of this witness is to continue at the start of Week 3, to be followed by the witness on EMFs, who is being flown over by SSE from New York for this purpose, then the well-known Dr MacLean on the consultation process, and the witness on Tourism.

2. Getting Balfour Beatty to share information on EMFs

Another theme that has rumbled on through the course of this third week of the Inquiry is that of the Electrical and Magnetic Fields (EMFs) that would be generated by the Beaulieu – Denny power line. The DTI's Technical Adviser to the Inquiry made enquiries early in the week about 2 appendices missing from a report that Balfour Beatty (the contractors who will build the line, if permission is granted) had commissioned from independent consultants, to get an external audit of the appropriateness of their proposals.

The missing appendices detailed the levels of EMFs that would occur at the point of greatest sag of the wires between each pair of pylons and, when produced the next day, showed some of these to be in excess of the maximum permitted by the Health Protection Agency (HPA). SSE, when challenged, acknowledged they hadn't considered these issues or assessed their importance, or complied with HPA requirements to set out whether this would be expected to cause problems and, if so, what design changes will be needed to comply with the regulations. They claimed that they didn't need to do this until such time as the line became operational, but that didn't appear to satisfy the Technical Adviser, who asked for the relevant information to be made available.

SSE's advocate made a somewhat rambling complaint to the Reporters late in the week, the gist of which appeared to be that the Technical Adviser is asking too many awkward questions without giving them due notice. The Reporters are to consider the issues over the weekend.

3. Third party participation in the Inquiry process

This week showed up still further how very difficult it is for third parties to engage effectively in this Public Inquiry. The Inquiry is being run rigidly, according to very arcane rules and, while these are quite familiar to SSE, the local authorities and SNH, and their legal representatives, they contain endless bear-traps for inexperienced third party groups, who are expected somehow to get to grips with the processes unaided, or founder.

One example relates to the process of asking questions about the great piles of relevant documents (amounting to 3 linear metres on a bookshelf) deposited for the Inquiry by SSE, often at the very last moment (and long after the supposed cut-off date). One has to wade through all the precognitions (i.e. the written evidence), and/or ask persistent questions of witnesses, to work out which witness is likely to be the right one to question about any particular document, and this may be counter-intuitive. So it was that one third party representative discovered that the witness he should have

asked about a report on HVDC Sub-Sea Cables was in fact the Week 1 witness whose evidence was titled “Needs Case & Government Policy”, and not the Week 3 witness whose subject matter clearly covered the other two reports on HVDC cabling, including under-sea cables. As a consequence, he found himself unable to ask the questions he wanted, and was told it was up to him to work out all this sort of thing for himself. He has appealed for the recall of the Week 1 witness.

Third party representatives frequently get into difficulty regarding the rules on cross-examination of witnesses. Another third party representative has been persistently knocked back from referring to such pertinent issues as how the electricity generated from the gigantic Lewis Wind Farm would fit into SSE’s calculations of “need”, or whether putting cables under the sea would give rise to fewer environmental impacts than an inland overhead line, with or without underground stretches.

His frustration gave rise to a somewhat outspoken set of comments to the press which resulted in an article in the Aberdeen-based Press & Journal newspaper, questioning the even-handedness of this Inquiry process. Few people would have seen this, had it not been for SSE’s advocate drawing it to the attention of the Reporters, and everyone else, at the start of the week, and asking the Reporters to rule that no-one could brief the press during the course of the Inquiry. Fortunately, the Reporters required very little time to confer among themselves before stating bluntly that they would do no such thing.

One can gain a certain amount of pleasure from observing SSE delivering such own goals – a little light relief, in an otherwise rather difficult and very demanding process.

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.

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