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Islay, Jura, Colonsay, Mull and Iona: Plan for 91 giant wind turbines



Local Hero told the story of a small Scottish community facing an international corporation

(Image: Moviestore Collection/REX)

'The greatest risk is not of money, but misjudgement' T.S Elliot

For those of us of a certain age who live and work on Scotland's western edge, Mark Knopfler's *Going Home* from the peerless *Local Hero* movie features brightly in the soundtrack of our lives. For us, going home is an adventure - long, winding roads, ferries that occasionally work, single-track roads and another ferry.

I live with my family on Iona's west coast, above the machair. The next stop west is probably Newfoundland, but a few degrees of adjustment on the outboard and we can be on Tiree for lunch or retrace the route Columba took when he landed on Iona bringing Christianity to our islands. What we see from our farm is infinite - a long, beautiful and sometimes wild horizon that is part of us, and the community.

And like the fictional village of Ferness in *Local Hero*, the besuited industrialists have arrived.

This iconic film resonates with us more than forty years after its release. An international energy company identifies a remote Scottish coastline as the ideal site for an oil refinery. On paper, viewed from a boardroom in a different country, the proposal appears perfectly rational. Yet as Mac Macintyre and Felix Happer come to know the place, they realise its value cannot be captured in technical drawings or profit and loss accounts. Place trumps profit, no matter how glossy the sustainability report.

In our story, Burt Lancaster's role is played by Ignacio Sánchez Galán, executive chairman of Spain's Iberdrola and owner of ScottishPower, who's masterminding, from his offices in Bilbao, the construction of 91 giant wind turbines, each the height of the Eiffel Tower, across the waters between Islay, Jura, Colonsay, Mull and Iona.

Scotland faces a familiar dilemma. Oil platforms will soon give way to wind, solar, wave and tidal power, and decarbonising our economy fairly is one of the great intergenerational challenges.



The cast of the much-loved Local Hero (Image: Ronald Grant)

But who defines fairness? Is it John Swinney, whose experience of our islands is confined to holidays, or Ignacio Galán, who as far as we know has never set foot here?

No serious observer disputes the need for renewable energy. Equally, few would argue that Scotland's most iconic landscapes are ordinary. These are ecologically precious places, internationally recognised, of deep cultural meaning - and, for people like me, home and a workplace.

When companies target landscapes like this, the greatest risk is not technical or financial but misjudgement - not just the misjudgement of Iberdrola or ScottishPower, but of the politicians who facilitate them.

History is instructive. A proposed superquarry on Harris was once presented as a project of national importance; supporters believed economics would trump sentiment. Instead, it became a story of corporate misjudgement and was abandoned.

Señor Galán should read Alastair McIntosh's *A Beach is a Place* before they visit Iona, as they surely must. McIntosh describes an executive who, having finally visited Harris, couldn't believe it had ever been considered for industrial extraction. What looked sensible in a board paper looked very different on the ground.

The parallels with Local Hero have galvanised the people of Iona; others on Mull, Islay, Jura and Colonsay are realising that views cherished for generations may soon be gone forever. These communities are pushing back against the financial imperative of Iberdrola.

For ScottishPower Renewables' directors, Machair Wind is a test of corporate judgement—their reputation depends not only on the electricity they generate but on where and how. For Iberdrola's board in Bilbao, the stakes are equally high: global investors increasingly weigh biodiversity, heritage and stakeholder engagement alongside carbon reduction.

Directors have duties beyond securing planning consent; they must identify strategic risks, including reputational ones that don't show up in financial models. Many technically sound proposals failed because leaders underestimated the importance of place — Brent Spar and Keystone XL come to mind.

The political risk is no smaller. Scottish Ministers promote Scotland as a world leader in climate, biodiversity and heritage. If those come into conflict, the consequences go beyond one planning application for the energy and environment ministers to the First Minister himself.

Scotland's landscapes are not just pretty scenery — they are economic infrastructure. The Hebrides attract visitors, artists and filmmakers because they remain unspoiled.

Local Hero helped shape that image and so did the campaign against the Harris superquarry. Together they reinforced the idea of a people that understands some places have value beyond the commercial.

Twenty years from now, will those running ScottishPower Renewables and Iberdrola stand on Iona, Islay or Colonsay, look at those turbines, and ask whether it was worth it? And how will John Swinney weigh his landscape-defining decisions from the shores of his beloved Tiree?

We have - in hope - extended an invitation to Señor Galán to visit Iona, together with a copy of Local Hero to help him prepare.

Like the film, this isn't really a story about renewable energy. It's about whether those entrusted with power recognise that some places amount to more than a commercial exercise.

In one memorable scene, Peter Capaldi (playing Danny Oldsen) asks Fulton Mackay (Ben Knox), how much the bay on which he lives might be worth. Mackay laughs and laughs and laughs. But for us, this is no laughing matter.

Joanne MacInnes lives and works on Iona

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