



What happens when the great fantasies, like wind power or European Union, collide with reality?

There's a pattern in the unravelling of make-believe projects, whether it's wind power or the euro, says Christopher Booker.

By Christopher Booker

09 April 2011 • 7:00pm



It might seem strange to link global warming and the futility of wind farms with the ongoing collapse of the euro. But in several directions at the moment we can see the unfolding of one of the hidden patterns shaping human affairs, which years ago I called “the fantasy cycle”. It is a pattern that recurs in personal lives, in politics, in history – and in storytelling.

When we embark on a course of action which is unconsciously driven by wishful thinking, all may seem to go well for a time, in what may be called the “dream stage”. But because this make-believe can never be reconciled with reality, it leads to a “frustration stage” as things start to go wrong, prompting a more determined effort to keep the fantasy in being. As reality presses in, it leads to a “nightmare stage” as everything goes wrong, culminating in an “explosion into reality”, when the fantasy finally falls apart.

Recent events show us two huge examples of this cycle moving to its final stages. One is the belief, which took hold 20 years ago, that the world was in the grip of runaway global warming, caused by our emissions of greenhouse gases. The planet could only be saved by abandoning fossil fuels and drawing our energy from wind and sun. For a while (the dream stage), all seemed to go according to the theory. As CO2 levels rose and the Earth continued to warm, our politicians started to propose every kind of drastic measure to reduce our emissions, such as building thousands of wind turbines. But in all sorts of ways, in the past few years, this dream and the theory behind it have begun colliding with reality.

Carbon dioxide levels continued to rise, but global temperatures failed to follow. Three times in the past 13 years – in 1998, 2006 and 2010 – they spiked upwards, thanks to periodic shifts in a major Pacific ocean current – the phenomenon known as “El Niño” – which brings warm water to the surface and boosts temperatures across the world. Each time it was trumpeted as “the hottest year ever”. But each time, as the ocean current reversed into “La Niña”, the spike was followed by an equally sharp cooling.

In 2007, temperatures fell by 0.75C, more than the entire net rise recorded through the whole of the 20th century. After they rose again to a new El Niño peak in 2010, we were told, only three months ago, by the compilers of the two chief surface-temperature records – the UK Met Office, in association with Phil Jones of East Anglia’s Climatic Research Unit, and James Hansen of NASA – that 2010 was the “equal warmest” or “second warmest” year ever.

Last week, however, with a new La Niña, it was reported that global temperatures, as measured by satellites, had fallen by 0.65C since March 2010, making the world cooler now than its mean over the past 30 years. Yet again the computer models, predicting that, thanks to rising CO2, the world should have warmed in the past decade by 0.3C, have proved hopelessly wrong.

If it hasn’t looked too hot for the theory on which our politicians base their plans to change the world, then last week it looked equally dodgy for what has been one of the most grandiose of their responses to this supposed crisis. Two sets of figures exposed

most grandiose of them responses to this supposed crisis. Two sets of figures exposed more than ever the degree of delusion which surrounds the wish of our governments, in Brussels and in Westminster, that the centrepiece of our energy policy must now be to build even more windmills.

The report that drew most media attention was that from a Scottish environmental charity which focused on the fact that last year, despite our building yet more turbines, the lack of wind meant that they operated, on average, at only 21 per cent of their capacity – the lowest percentage ever. Several times, when demand was at record levels, the contribution of wind to our electricity supply was virtually zero.

Less attention was given, however, to figures put out by the Department for Energy and Climate Change, showing that the 3,168 turbines we have built, at a cost of billions of pounds, contributed on average, if very irregularly, only 1,141 megawatts to the national grid last year – less than the output of a single large coal-fired power station. From the DECC figures it is possible to work out that, for this derisory contribution, we paid through our electricity bills a subsidy of nearly £1.2 billion, on top of the price of the electricity itself.

Thus, in return for less than 3 per cent of our electricity, nearly 7 per cent of our bills were made up of hidden subsidies to the wind developers, a percentage due to treble and quadruple in coming years as the Government strives to meet EU “renewables” target by building up to 10,000 more turbines, at a cost of £100 billion. The dream of using the wind to keep our lights on is being shown by reality to be one of the most absurd fantasies of our time.

Another, in its own way even greater fantasy has been the colossal project taking shape over the past 50 years to take away the power of the nations of Europe to govern themselves and to hand it over to a weirdly dysfunctional new system of government centred in Brussels. No single element in that project was more ambitious or seen as symbolically more crucial than the wish to integrate Europe’s economies around a single currency.

Back in the 1970s, when this was first talked of, Sir Donald McDougall, a senior Treasury official, was commissioned by Brussels to produce a report on “The Role of Public Finance in European Integration”. He warned that economic and monetary union could only work if Europe was in effect given an economic government, with the power to dispose of between 25 per cent and 40 per cent of Europe’s GDP. This was because, as he foresaw, one of the core problems would be that if weaker countries were deprived of the power to set their own interest rates or to devalue, they would require a massive injection of resources from richer countries. Which, of course, is just

what we now see being acted out in the desperate efforts to bail out Portugal, following in the wake of Greece and Ireland – with Spain, bigger than all three put together, possibly to follow.

As McDougall and many after him warned, the single currency could only work on conditions which the builders of a united Europe blithely chose to ignore, in pursuit of their make-believe. As a result, its collision with reality is now coming about, threatening a disintegration of the eurozone that could tug much of the European dream after it.

- - - - -

A third great fantasy of our time has been the belief that we can sort out the world's trouble spots by reckless military interventions which fail to anticipate the bloody chaos they will unleash.

Another little instance has been the tragedy unfolding in the past few days in Camp Ashraf in Iraq, where Iraqi and Iranian terror squads have finally moved in to crush the 3,400 defenceless Iranian exiles who in 2003 gave up their arms in return for written personal guarantees of their safety by the US government.

Since Thursday night, more than 30 Ashraf residents have reportedly been killed and hundreds injured. This may be only a small example of the price so many others have had to pay for that act of folly when Bush and Blair sailed into Iraq like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza charging windmills.

But our adventures in Afghanistan and Libya still have to unfold to the point where we are forced to recognise that yet another vainglorious act of make-believe has collided with reality.



More stories