The business radical

Irish pioneer Eddie O’Connor believes Europe has to go big offshore, writes Gail Rajgor in the first of a regular series on the industry’s leading personalities

I live in the future for better or worse, says Dr Eddie O’Connor. For the chief executive of Irish developer Mainstream Renewable Power, and founder and former boss of Airtricity, that future is offshore wind. “It’s the big play in Europe from here on in.”

Some may baulk at the current high cost of offshore and others berate the sector’s inexperience, but O’Connor says it is the only viable, sustainable solution for European countries to secure their long-term energy independence and meet their climate change obligations.

“This was never going to be easy. We’re undertaking a radical departure and we’re only undertaking it because none of us see very much alternative.”

He is a particular admirer of the UK’s approach. “The way to get prices down is to have a much bigger industry than we have now,” says O’Connor, pointing to the last decade’s onshore boom in Denmark, Germany and Spain.

“You get more and more companies coming in, you get more and more innovation into the process, you get mass production, bigger volumes being shipped and moved, and you get competition. That’s what Britain has done.”

O’Connor set up Mainstream in 2008 after selling Airtricity to SSE. He had to build up the company in the teeth of a global recession, something he saw as an opportunity rather than a deterrent. “We were able to innovate and do things others only dreamed of,” he says. Since its

Aiming to be first to produce Round 3 power: Mainstream chief executive Eddie O’Connor

Photo: Mainstream

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O’Connor is convinced the price of building wind offshore will fall organically but Mainstream is leaving nothing to chance by investing in Dutch turbine outfit 2-B Energy.

The aim of the company, which was set up in 2007 by former GE engineer Herbert Peels, is to design what O’Connor describes as a “dumbed-down” turbine, “a really simple affair that has two blades that... will be simple and cheap to produce.” A 6MW offshore prototype will be built next year and 2-B is starting to attract other big partners from industry, as well as grant funding from the Dutch government and, O’Connor understands, from the British government as well.

Building offshore allows companies to design parameters that are “actually radically different from what you are designing onshore”, he explains.

“A lot of the drive onshore in electrical terms over the past while has been to make turbines grid compliant, but there’s no need to make offshore turbines grid compliant so you can take out all that cost. The (spending) needs to be in things like the infrastructure to transport the electricity.”

Which leads to the Supergrid, the pan-European subsea power grid pet project. O’Connor has long been convinced will cement offshore wind power’s future.

And thanks to the UK he is even more convinced it will happen. “It is not possible for the British government to build the 30,000MW that they want in the North Sea by 2020 if they don’t build the Supergrid; quite impossible, and it’s only being realised now.”

Using something like the existing onshore grid structure was never going to work, he says. “You cannot shoehorn a system built for another purpose. I thought the sooner we faced up to that key issue the sooner we would be able to resolve it.”

“Not everybody thought like that but with the industry being given connection dates out at 2018 (for R3 projects) everybody is beginning to realise it’s not going to work,” he says.

Trying to secure planning permission for a major new grid system on land in the UK would prove the biggest obstacle. “It’s just not going to happen.”

The same is true of other countries, he notes, citing the inability to get power from northern Germany, which is saturated with wind, to southern Germany. “The public lack of acceptability is so overwhelming that it just doesn’t happen. Hence the need for the Supergrid.”

Building the beast would be fairly easy, O’Connor suggests, but governments have to come onboard ahead of time. “It has to be a political decision or it won’t happen.”

He is convinced the politicians will make a positive decision in Supergrid’s favour, regardless of the...
RWE bull’s-eye on Ryedale

RWE npower renewables is in the early stages of planning for an up to 26MW wind farm near East Heslerton in the Ryedale District of North Yorkshire.

The project, the first in that part of England, will feature 13 turbines with tip heights of up to 125 metres.

It is currently the subject of an ongoing scoping exercise with local authority planners. An application for erection of a met mast has been submitted to Ryedale District Council as part of design work expected to include public exhibitions later this year.

East Heslerton is planned for grazing and arable land that features some small areas of woodland.

Elevations rise from 115 metres to around 183 metres at the centre of the site.

Consultancy Arcus has been carrying out initial environmental work.

Peel lines up Midland bid

Peel Energy is working towards an autumn planning application for an up to 27MW wind farm at Asfordby in the East Midlands.

The company has kicked off scoping and is currently compiling environmental work for the nine-turbine project, which is planned for the site of a former coalmine near Leicester.

Tip heights are set at 125 metres and hardware of up to 3MW is in the frame. Public exhibitions are planned for later this year.

Melton Borough Council will determine the fate of the project.

Success down to the wire

outcome of today’s UK general election.

“Britain doesn’t really have an awful lot of options about going offshore. The three parties as far as I can see are wholly committed to this… so I don’t think we’re going to see a violent shift in policy.”

A Conservative victory, O’Connor says, would likely put Charles Hendry in charge of DECC, a positive outcome for the offshore wind industry.

“Charles has often shown himself to be very open to good ideas and he’s a strong supporter of things like the Supergrid and the offshore endeavour. In fact, he gave me a letter saying that if elected the Tories would continue the policies that have been followed by Labour.”

Whoever wins the election cannot procrastinate. “You will be able to get the first couple of thousand megawatts ashore using present grids but the British government has to face up to the issue that it cannot build 30,000MW now without taking onboard the Supergrid and dealing with all the issues that arise today,” he says.

“Let us deal with them in 2010 so we start to build elements of it in 2014 and 2015.”

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