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George Monbiot is wrong

# Nuclear power is not the way to fight climate change

Wednesday 30 March 2011, by [LEGGETT Jeremy](#) (Date first published: 24 March 2011).

**Renewable energy is a safe, clean source which will become cheaper as we invest in it.**

George Monbiot argues of nuclear energy that the absence of less harmful alternatives has “converted me to the cause” (Why Fukushima made me stop worrying and love nuclear power, 21 March [1]). He says he is driven to his new love by the imperative of battling climate change, and what he sees as the inability of renewable energy to run viable economies.

On the climate imperative, I agree. On the other assertions, I profoundly differ. I speak as someone who founded a renewable energy company because of my fears about climate change and the downsides of dependency on conventional energy. Since I did so, I have watched renewables industries become some of the fastest growing in the world. In 2008 and 2009 more renewables came onstream in both Europe and America than did all fossil fuels and nuclear combined. In Europe in 2009, wind and solar PV alone provided more than half all new generation.

“Energy is like medicine,” Monbiot writes, “if there are no side-effects, the chances are that it doesn’t work.” Were he to visit the renewables frontlines, he would discover many views to the contrary. German government and companies have run a scaled national experiment showing that the modern economy could be powered by renewables. A sophisticated American modelling exercise has shown the same for the global economy. All it requires is systematic mobilisation, and the imagination to believe what Silicon Valley believes.

Ultimately we should be able to provide power far less expensively than new nuclear. As we grow, our costs fall. We do not need to hand open cheques for currently unknowable billions to the taxpayer for things like waste transportation, waste disposal, decommissioning, security at sites, or accident clear-up.

But like Spitfires and Lancasters in 1939, we need to be mobilised fast, along with our even more important sister industries in energy-efficiency. And herein lies the main reason why Monbiot contradicts his own objective to counter climate change. The nuclear industry does not want renewable energy to succeed. Indeed, they lobby to kill our chances.

The chief executives of EDF and E.ON are both on record as saying that renewables would spoil the chances for nuclear, and only a minor renewables contribution can be tolerated if ministers want a “nuclear renaissance”.

“I still loathe the liars who run the nuclear industry,” Monbiot writes. But he now confesses that Fukushima has made him love their technology. He falls in love with the false calculation that it is needed, that it can work economically, and that it can solve its horrific waste, decommissioning and

proliferation-security pitfalls.

And then there are the safety, health and indeed human psychology issues. “The impact on people [of the current disaster] has been small,” Monbiot asserts. My, how I would love him to have to face a roomful of Fukushima citizens with that argument. Or put on a suit and pick up a hosepipe at the plant itself.

**Jeremy Leggett**

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**P.S.**

\* From The Guardian, Thursday 24 March 2011:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/24/renewables-nuclear-fukushima-japan-environment>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See on ESSF: [Debate on the lessons of Fukushima and the costs of nuclear power](#)