



Part VI: People's Power

Part VI tackles contemporary tensions over energy, independence, the environment and the state's future. Chronicling the struggle to close the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant, it reveals the power of protest, the influence of lobbyists and the importance of town meeting debate and a citizen legislature. It follows the battle over windmills in Lowell—a struggle over scale, aesthetics and environmental impacts—and explores thorny questions about economics, sovereignty and climate change. Finally, the devastating impacts of Hurricane Irene reveal the power not only of nature, but of people and community.

No State is an Island

By Bill McKibben

I get to write this small essay on an interesting day. A few hours ago Entergy announced they were pulling the plug on Vermont Yankee, which represents a great victory for the valiant Vermonters shown in Part VI who have fought for many years to shut down what must be the worst-run nuclear power plant this side of Fukushima. But it also, of course, represents a great challenge, because it means we're going to need to get more energy from somewhere else.

Some of that will come from backyard solar panels—in fact, that's what's powering the computer I'm writing these words on. I've had panels across my roof and on a stalk in the backyard for a decade now, and it's a great pleasure to watch such installations slowly spreading, and to see the occasional pasture turned into a solar farm. Some will come from small windmills on people's farms—here in Ripton we have two such installations turning. But if we're going to convert the car fleet of the state to electricity, which we'll need to do to reduce our biggest source of global warming emissions, it's going to take a broad mix of renewable power sources. Including putting some windmills up on some ridgelines. Meaning, getting more serious about what self-reliance actually looks like.

Windmills are just one example—but a good one, given the passions they arouse. Some people don't like to look at them, and others insist they do grave damage to the mountaintops where the wind blows hardest. That second argument is true—the acres that their concrete pads cover, and the linear corridor for the roads to service them, cause irreparable harm. There's no free lunch, and that's why we should be careful about trying to place them where they'll do less disturbance.

But if you want to see what real irreparable harm looks like, go to the places where we'll be increasingly getting our electricity from now that Yankee is closing: the fracked-over portions of Canada or Pennsylvania. Go look at the tarsands field where the gasoline comes from our cars. Check out the utterly disappeared mountaintops of Appalachia, dynamited and flattened to get at the coal

underneath. And check out the places increasingly wrecked by our appetites for fossil energy: when we drive our cars, the damage gets done in, say, Bangladesh, where dengue fever is skyrocketing; in sub-Saharan Africa, where drought now breeds malnourishment; in the mountains of the Andes where disappearing glaciers threaten the water supplies for many millions.

If Vermont wants to be its own sweet place, that is, it needs to take into account its effect on the rest of the world. And the effect of the rest of the world on it: there's another story in the news today, about how agriculture at places like the Intervale in Burlington may not be viable much longer because of the effects of climate change. The Intervale is our great farming showpiece, the most imagination-spurring spot in the entire state, a battery for our local food revolution. But it's also in the floodplain of the Winooski. Which means that as year after year we see record rainfalls, it's turning into a dreary place to try and grow food. And it's not alone—Irene scoured out dozens of beautiful small farms, leaving sand and rock where soil had been slowly and patiently built up. We can't escape the world we've helped create—As Gov. Shumlin has pointed out, our climate is increasingly tropical. And that's with the one degree of climate change we've seen so far, not the four or five scientists expect unless we convert to renewables immediately.

A future Vermont can be beautiful, but it can't be sentimental. If we want a place that works, we need to act now to get our house in order, and to help lead a global political transformation. I hiked this morning up the Long Trail above Middlebury Gap, through the clearings cut long ago for the college ski area. It was beautiful up there, with views east towards the Connecticut and west across Champlain. But it will be more beautiful still someday when there are a couple of big wind turbines slowly spinning, making visible both the breeze, and our sense of responsibility.

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