

Piper Alpha and Independence

Sir,

The Yes campaign and Sir Ian Wood profoundly disagree about remaining oil reserves (The Times, 22 Aug). A realistic assessment of future production from a mature oil field (like Scotland's) however can be made delightfully simply. Hubbert's method (based on a bell-shaped curve) has reliably forecast long-term production for scores of individual oil and gas fields from all around the world. There is absolutely no reason to suppose that Hubbert's method is not the best tool available for making a candid assessment of Scotland's likely remaining oil wealth (including new finds). It reveals that UK oil is a sharply dwindling resource. In brief UK oil production began in 1975 (with great fanfare), peaked in 1999 (2.8 million barrels per day), currently is declining fast (no fanfare), and by 2025 will have almost completely petered out. If the Hubbert analysis is so straightforward, why do vastly different forecasts persist? Is it that due cognisance of the legacy of the Piper Alpha disaster has not been made? After Lord Cullen's inquiry into Piper Alpha, oil production was deliberately cut back in order to allow the installation of new safety measures. As a result UK peak oil was delayed by 10 years. Once due allowance is made for the Piper Alpha effect, UK oil production is seen to follow a Hubbert curve closely, and so will soon be an exhausted asset. It would be a second Piper Alpha tragedy for Scotland if its historical effect on oil production has not been adequately acknowledged, thereby resulting in a major overestimate of Scotland's future economic wealth.

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