



EUROPEAN SHALE GAS & OIL SUMMIT 2015

MANCHESTER
OCTOBER 15TH - 16TH

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BACKING FRACKING: THE LONELY IMPERATIVE

By Josh Potts

The future of UK energy is often voiced in a fiercely oppositional media-sphere, with arguments flaring against one another tirelessly as discussion on climate change slips into demands for safe, immediate crisis management. Wind, solar, nuclear and tidal energy are, of course, established topics for this dialogue, taking chunks of media coverage with space for detraction and support, fuelling considered choices that must be made to forecast our lives in a post-carbon world.

(European Shale Gas and Oil Summit 2015 - Manchester, 15th - 16th October)

Fracking, however, is thoroughly demonised. Its benefits are dissolved and buried under the weight of gauche headlines screaming for hysterical action against drilling sites. Energy companies have been slow to promote the economic, practical and social virtues of shale gas extraction; as such, the anti-fracking movement has commanded the lion's share of public sympathy, simply because it is more cannily vitriolic in its practices that it would care to admit. With news that Cuadrilla's plans for four new drill sites have been blocked by Lancashire County Council (unsettling the prospect of widespread fracking development in the UK, and blighting the government's eagerness to exploit this resource), fracking protestors have jumped at the chance to celebrate another defeat for progressive thinking. In fact, the most damning jibe comes from a politician: the Green Party's Keith Taylor[1] has praised communities

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that refuse to be “bullied or bribed” by fracking companies, painting an image of idyllic British pastures soiled and strong-armed by cartoonish brutes in black suits, adding that “the public’s view of fracking is becoming more and more negative” even as he feels compelled to add to a conversation that’s, apparently, already over.

But why are his words allowed to carry this gargantuan pretence? Why must people be herded into a camp that takes fear and malice as its dominant rhetoric, without seeing the other side of the coin? Furthermore, should the government have more of an influence on local decisions that affect the entire country’s energy prospects – and, while it’s doing so, challenge the cliché of underdog environmentalists squaring up to faceless corporations, exploding the myth of rural development acting for the greater good? The tone of the anti-frackers borders on outright inaccuracy. If people are excluded from other viewpoints, it will harm shale gas’ potential as a transitional energy source. And it is clearer than ever that those views can hide inappropriate behaviour in the guise of chivalry and fair recompense. Taylor’s message about bullying can easily be applied to the supporters of his cause, in startling clarity.

One victim of anti-fracking abuse is Lorraine Allanson, a businesswoman from Yorkshire who set up a Facebook page called FORGE (Friends of Ryedale Gas Exploration) to rally support for a fracking site at Kirby Misperton. Her desire for an open channel to reflect the thoughts of a silent majority was met with a torrent of revenge tactics by protestors. “Up to this point I had led a normal, quiet life, going about my business and being well respected in my

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own industry,” she says. “I was suddenly thrust into an alarming world of online abuse and threats. They even posted a photograph of children from my family, aged five and eight years, exposing them to the possibility of online abuse.” She claims the photo went viral across various anti-fracking websites. Since then, she has been the target of hate mail in her local paper, persecuted for daring to make her opinion heard.

“There are no doubt many people out there who are genuinely concerned about fracking happening in their area,” she adds, acknowledging how industry PR has fallen into a rut over generating good press for shale gas. “[The anti-fracking movement] have been very undemocratic, as they’ve forced out their views and scaremongering into the wider community relatively unchallenged. I am often accused of being an industry stooge. This always makes me laugh as anyone who knows me can tell you I am very strong-willed, fiercely independent and full of Yorkshire grit.”

Allanson’s toughness is admirable, but her experience reveals the sad truth of the fracking debate as a quagmire of misinformation and ill-conceived outbursts. Pluralism is the glue of civilised democracy, and it cannot be achieved by allowing the loudest platforms to a fraction of the whole. Redressing the problem could mean a national rethink of how and where fracking is marketed, and making it easier for people to understand the realities of fracking in their community. Most vitally, a vote in favour of fracking should not be penalised against the unfounded morals of the opposite – our age calls for the sensible use of natural resources, which requires public enlightenment on the strict procedures fracking operates under, calming hearts and minds in the face of rapid change.

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The Conservatives have committed, at first glance, to healing regional divides in Britain. George Osborne's transparency to the idea of economic devolution for city councils has been greeted with tentative nods from the establishment. David Cameron may feel he has pulled Scotland back from the brink, and that his promises for an all-inclusive national agenda are safe. However, if the Tories want to push ahead with fracking by simply relaxing development permits, they will ignore the fundamental trust that secured their second term. People must be reached on a personal level, if they are able to agree to something without feeling it is a dictation. When the subject is an energy reserve that will lessen our reliance on foreign suppliers, and provide a window for sustainable energy to be fully implemented, the alternative approach is inexcusable.

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[1] Cited in The Lancashire Telegraph, 1st August 2015, 'Fracking plans facing two-year delay' http://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/13523623.Fracking_plans_facing_two_year_delay/?ref=rss

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