

The cracks in fracking

Caroline Lucas MP

In an open letter to her constituents dated 11 October 2013, Caroline Lucas, Green MP for Brighton Pavilion, described her arrest after protesting peacefully against fracking at a nearby site. A few months earlier, she had explained her opposition to shale gas extraction to the House of Commons. We reprint excerpts.

On 19 August 2013, I took part in a peaceful local protest against fracking. I sat down on a path just off the road and at the entrance to a drilling site run by Cuadrilla. Along with 29 others, I was arrested. I was subsequently charged with obstructing the highway and failing to comply with police conditions imposed on the protest.

I want the people I represent in Brighton Pavilion to be the first to know that I'll be pleading not guilty to these charges when I appear in court... I also want to explain what led me to take this action in Balcombe a few months ago.

The campaign to reduce the threat of climate change has been incredibly important to me throughout my political life. Fracking for shale gas seriously undermines efforts to tackle the climate crisis, which in turn means that our children and grandchildren will inherit a more dangerous world. I know that this is very important to large numbers of my constituents, because so many of you have written to me about the risks that fracking poses to our environment.

The impacts of climate change are already being felt today – in the UK and elsewhere. September 2013 saw the publication of the most comprehensive report on climate science ever produced. It highlighted the need for urgent action and set out the increasing risks of delay – from more expensive food and political instability overseas to increased drought, flooding and heatwaves.

The latest scientific evidence suggests that as much as 80 per cent of known fossil fuel reserves must remain in the ground if we are to have any chance of avoiding

dangerous climate change. The widespread use of shale gas is quite simply incompatible with the UK's international commitments to keep global warming below two degrees. But instead of listening to the scientists, or the huge number of people and organisations who have concerns about fracking, the Government appears determined on a reckless and irresponsible new dash for gas.

I'm in the privileged position of being able to make the case in Parliament. I've tabled motions, arranged debates, put questions to ministers, and spoken out in the media. But the Government is flying in the face of climate science and ignoring evidence that fracking won't cut energy bills here in the UK. Ministers refuse to accept proposals, supported by a huge coalition of charities, for a radically more ambitious programme of energy saving to make all of our homes more energy efficient. This would cut bills, tackle fuel poverty and create hundreds of thousands of quality jobs across the country. Alongside much better policies to support local community and co-operatively owned renewable energy schemes, this would mean you are no longer held to ransom by the big six energy companies.

There is a proud tradition of non-violent direct action in this country. In joining the peaceful protest I wanted to send a clear message to the Government, and to support the people at the proposed fracking site in Balcombe who were standing up to be counted.

It's likely that there will be a trial in 2014. I want to reassure you that you will be able to contact me as usual, and I will continue to hold my weekly surgeries, attend local meetings and represent Brighton Pavilion in parliamentary debates.

Thanks to everyone who's been in touch to offer their support, and I hope this open letter goes some way towards explaining why I believe in the importance of 'speaking out the whole truth and acting accordingly' – a phrase from Gandhi that continues to resonate today.

*Caroline Lucas, MP
Brighton Pavilion*

* * *

Caroline Lucas MP posed some basic questions when she spoke in a debate on fracking in the House of Commons on 18 July 2013, from which these excerpts are taken.

... Do we understand fully the local environmental and health risks of shale gas and what our constituents and the general public think about fracking, and can regulation and the OUGO [Office of Unconventional

Gas and Oil] adequately address such risks and concerns? ... Does shale gas really have the potential to deliver lower-cost gas power and reduce energy bills, as the Chancellor and other fracking enthusiasts claim? ... Is drilling for shale gas a sensible approach to addressing concerns about future energy security? ... I will set out why, sadly, I believe that the answer to all those questions is ‘no’, and why shale gas ultimately cannot and should not have a role in a secure and affordable energy system that is consistent with the UK’s climate change commitments ... I worry that Ministers and those with financial links to shale gas companies are quick to dismiss people’s concerns, especially about water resources. The International Energy Agency, not known for an overtly environmental perspective or for hyperbole, states:

‘The scale of development can have major implications for local communities, land use and water resources.’

It goes on to list serious hazards

‘including the potential for air pollution and for contamination of surface and groundwater.’

The number of wells would, of course, depend on how much extractable gas there is and the geological conditions ... All estimates are assumptions, but a study by Bloomberg based on average well extraction data from the US, rather than just sweet spots, found that meeting North Sea production levels of 1,460 billion cubic feet and sustaining those levels for 10 years would require between 10,000 and 20,000 shale gas wells. Does the Minister think that the visual impact of so many drilling rigs and the associated traffic would be considered preferable to the aesthetics of wind turbines, for example?

... Opposition to fracking goes way beyond organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. One example this week is the Quakers, who issued a statement on the EU’s climate and energy package and said of shale gas:

‘This is not an option for replacing coal power. The greenhouse gas emissions during the life cycle of a well (including after decommissioning) are too high to enable us to reach our long-term climate targets and stay within the vital 2°C limit, especially given the high risk of methane leakage.’

... Even the National Farmers’ Union has raised concern that fracking represents an additional water user, which could increase water stress in times of shortages, and what about the views of farmers in places where

fracking is already established? In Alberta, Canada, the Canadian NFU has led calls for a moratorium, with the co-ordinator, who is a dairy farmer, warning last year:

‘Many farmers in my area who either have direct experience with the destructive nature of hydro-fracking technology on their water wells or who have neighbours who have been affected have come to me with their concerns ... our ability to produce good, wholesome food is at risk of being compromised by the widespread, virtually unregulated use of this dangerous process.’

... Another local concern is that leaks from well casings that have been inadequately completed or have subsequently failed are one route by which water and air pollution can occur. The first report from the Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change said that the risks are

‘no different to issues encountered when exploring the hydrocarbons and conventional geological formations’

and recommends that the Health and Safety Executive tests the integrity of wells before allowing drilling activity to be licensed. The Minister has indicated that such a regime will be put in place. I wonder whether those same assurances were given in the US and elsewhere ... Examination of studies into well leaks by various bodies in the US, Canada and Norway shows that it is likely that world leakage rates come in at between 5% and 20%.

The Minister says that robust regulation is now in place and that there is nothing to prevent licensees from bringing forward new drilling plans and seeking the necessary permissions ... It was heartening to hear the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) speak of the need to put in place the highest environmental safeguards, as opposed to what is simply convenient for the industry. He also made the point that in addition to strong regulation, there must be sufficient resources to ensure that they are applied ... The proposed growth duty to be imposed on non-economic regulators such as the Environment Agency through the draft Deregulation Bill is of great concern in that respect. The Government claims that it will support growth without weakening environmental protection, but lawyers from the UK Environmental Law Association warn in their consultation response that

‘A growth duty, as currently proposed, would make it harder for non-economic regulators to refuse environmentally damaging development, including those that threaten nationally important wildlife sites – even if the overall societal benefits of such a refusal are greater than the development.’

... Ministers have a lot of explaining to do before anyone will be persuaded that this growth duty is not simply the latest attempt to weaken crucial environmental and public health safeguards, capitulating to corporate lobbyists who want short-term profit-making to trump public interest.

An additional concern, which is almost entirely ignored in the UK but is at the centre of debates in the US, is the radon risk from fracked gas pumped directly into householders' kitchen stoves and hobs. Two months ago, the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) was told in a written answer from the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), that

'Public Health England ... is preparing a report identifying potential public health issues and concerns, including radon ... that might be associated with aspects of hydraulic fracturing ... The report is due out for public consultation in the summer. Once released for public consultation, the report will be freely available from the PHE website.' – [*Official Report*, 20 May 2013; Vol. 563, c. 570W.]

... As chair of the all-party group on fuel poverty and energy efficiency, I believe that the cost of energy policy decisions to householders, particularly those on low incomes, is an absolute priority. Current estimates suggest that fuel poverty now affects more than 6.5 million households throughout the UK. The Government's figures show that rising wholesale gas prices are the overwhelming cause of higher energy prices, which raises questions about the economic merits of the gas strategy in which gas plays a big role long into the future, never mind that a gas-powered future would bust carbon budgets ...