

Free to frack - now we're cooking with gas



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Anti-fracking protesters outside the Blackpool offices of Cuadrilla

Free to frack at last. The Government has cleared the logjam stopping the development of [Britain's first shale gas reserves and Cuadrilla Resources](#), the company at the centre of it all, can finally rev up the drills.

The intervention of Sajid Javid, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, opens the door to an industry that will generate jobs, cheaper household bills, energy security and lower carbon emissions. It has taken far too long to get to this point, but now that we have, there must be no more delays.

It has been a staggering six years since Cuadrilla first began work on the Lancashire site it wants to drill. In that time, shale gas extraction has gone from being a marginal industry to the United States' biggest source of energy, making the country self-sufficient for the first time in decades. While this mini-industrial revolution was taking place across the pond, Britain was obsessing over planning documents, legal appeals and face-painted, drumming protesters in kilts.

The [birth of a shale gas industry](#) could be a huge bonus for Britain at a time of rising economic uncertainty. Investors are watching nervously to assess the effects of Brexit and Theresa May has lurched leftwards to deploy a stream of anti-business rhetoric. So it matters more than ever that the Government means it when it claims Britain is open for business. This first permission granted to Cuadrilla is a decent start.



A Cuadrilla rig

The direct economic benefits of fracking are obvious. Cuadrilla's work alone could create several thousand jobs, many of them in the North, and it has several rivals trying to develop their own sites in the region. The development of the US's gas industry also led to a rapid revival of the country's declining manufacturing industry. Companies that had for years been shifting their operations to Mexico and Asia started setting up factories in the Gulf to take advantage of bargain energy prices.

[Full-scale production in Britain is still some years away](#), but when it comes on-stream, the whole country will benefit. We are heavily reliant on gas for heat and power. Household electricity bills have risen 14pc since Cuadrilla started work in Lancashire, even as prices have plunged abroad. MPs harangue energy companies constantly about why Britain pays such high bills. If they were serious about cutting costs, they would look to their own obstructive policies.

Of course, we do not know quite how much gas can be recovered from the rocks under Lancashire, because Cuadrilla has not been allowed to find out. But the estimates so far suggest it is an enormous amount and easily enough to provide a massive boost for Britain's energy security without the eye-watering costs of a project like Hinkley Point C.

Even as we have watched the Middle East tip into turmoil and seen Russia become increasingly belligerent, Britain has done almost nothing to address our dangerous dependency on imports or nearly half of our energy. Instead, we have spent a decade shutting down coal plants with no plan for what would replace them.

Shale gas promises to chip away at that vulnerability and it does so in a way suited to Britain's existing infrastructure. Unlike the US, where the shale industry has been forced to build thousands of miles of new pipelines, the UK has an extensive gas network. We are set up for gas: we just need to turn on the tap.

Despite all these natural advantages for gas, environmentalist protesters have made life a misery for the innovative companies that want to develop this resource. They have camped, blockaded, marched, danced and drummed their way up and down the quiet country lanes of England for weeks at a time to fight an industry that would help the whole country.

But why? Fracking is safe and much less carbon intensive than coal, Britain's cheapest alternative fuel. Stopping gas development is the surest way to raise emissions. Consider the numbers: coal accounted for a quarter of the world's energy consumption in 1973. And now, after decades of environmental activism, it accounts for even more, at 29 per cent. In Europe's energy markets, the enormous growth in renewables in recent years has simply pushed out gas, not coal.

All new technologies come with risks, but this is a calculated risk worth taking. Britain has one of the best regulatory systems in the world to ensure that fracking is done safely and with minimal disruption. Unlike the US, our royalties system incentivises drilling as few wells as possible, rather than pockmarking the land with pipes and concrete. Our use of water resources is carefully controlled and our noise and traffic regulations are stringent. In other words, we are better set up to deal with all of the local problems fracking brings.

The farce of fracking protests and legal wrangling has gone on long enough. Mr Javid has broken the deadlock on this first exploratory drilling project, but that won't be the end of the fight. Protesters are sure to keep up their obstructive tactics. And there are other sites and other permissions needed before this vital industry can start full-scale production.

But Britain was the cradle of the Industrial Revolution. Are we going to turn our back on the country's most promising source of energy and economic revival for the sake of some local traffic jams and picketing druids? The Government must keep up the pressure to ensure that the answer is "no".