

Splitting rocks and dividing a nation in the dash for gas

Is fracking the ultimate stop-gap until Scotland gets its renewables act together, or a harbinger of tremors and toxic water supplies, asks **Julia Horton**

DESPITE the almost relentlessly gloomy economic outlook of the past few years, it is difficult to imagine the lights actually going out across Scotland any time soon. But with demand for energy growing as traditional resources and finances dwindle, such dire warnings are getting harder to ignore, or dismiss as scaremongering by people with vested interests.

Since the failed Scottish devolution referendum in 1979, the SNP has kept faith with the notion that "Scotland's oil" will power – both literally and economically – a fledgling new nation breaking away from the UK. More than three decades on, as the party's government leads the country to a new vote, black gold is still held, rightly or wrongly, by nationalists as the cornerstone of an independent Scotland.

A host of hotly-disputed reports have been produced, resulting in a range of widely-differing opinions and predictions on how much oil is now left and how long it can last. The basic need for alternative sources of energy is not disputed, however.

Yet what and where those sources should be has polarised experts, the public and politicians alike. While the SNP's determination to exploit Scotland's cleaner, greener renewables potential alongside notoriously polluting fossil fuels has already divided the nation into deeply entrenched camps, new battlelines are emerging over what is now the most controversial solution to the country's demand for power.

Many people may still not be sure of the exact definition of fracking or of shale gas, but few can have failed to have heard of either. Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking for short, is a technique where liquid is pumped at high pressure into shale, or sedimentary rock, to extract gas which is trapped inside for use as fuel.

The process has created a boom in cheap energy in America and supporters say it is safe and offers a better stop-gap alternative to oil and conventional gas as countries switch to greener forms of energy.

But environmentalists warn that fracking should not be part of the energy mix because it can trigger earthquakes and pollute water supplies with carcinogenic and "gender-bending" chemicals. It was banned across the UK in 2011 after causing two minor tremors near Blackpool, where energy firm Cuadrilla was using the procedure.

Last December, the UK Government ended the moratorium as ministers ruled that it was safe to resume with stricter monitoring of the impact of the practice. Ever since, a Klondike-style rush north and south of the Border has been forecast with Westminster increasingly leading the charge.

Earlier this year, financial experts at PricewaterhouseCoopers reported that Scotland could be sitting on up to £5 billion of natural gas reserves stretching from Aberdeenshire to Dumfries and Galloway which could be exploited.

The Scottish Government continues to stress that no firm has permission at the moment to conduct fracking here. However, companies have been applying for exploration licences across the country and the SNP is not opposed to exploiting fossil fuels if it believes it can do so while also meeting its commitments to protecting the environment.

A spokesman says: "In Scotland we need a diverse and balanced energy portfolio to provide us with secure

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Mary Church, Friends of the Earth Scotland

and affordable heat and electricity for decades to come but the Scottish Government's view is any projects should only be pursued as long as their development and use is consistent with environmental objectives."

Last month, Prime Minister David Cameron said shale gas and fracking would play a vital role in providing the UK's fuel which the public would support once people fully understood the benefits.

Critics still believe the risks are too great, however, and cite studies warning that exploiting unconventional gas could produce the same level of carbon emissions as coal – something they say would make Scotland's climate change targets unattainable. They also point out that there are major differences in the geology and density of populations in the UK and the US.

A fresh bid by Cuadrilla to conduct fracking in England, this time at the picturesque village of Balcombe in West Sussex, sparked a mass demonstration this summer, resulting in dozens of arrests and an eviction



Dozens of arrests followed demonstrations at Balcombe in West Sussex, where energy firm Cuadrilla plans to conduct fracking in order to extract fossil fuels

Picture: Getty Images

notice served last week ordering the remaining protestors to leave.

Campaigners north of the Border have warned that similar protests could erupt in the Central Belt, where Dart Energy wants to drill for coalbed methane. The Australian firm says it has "ruled out" fracking to exploit the site at the village of Airth near Falkirk because there are alternative new ways of extract gas from coalbeds.

But critics are sceptical and fear that the development will damage the environment regardless of whether fracking is used or not. More than 2,000 people have objected to the application. It is now being considered by the Scottish Government after Dart Energy lodged an appeal for non-determination because the local council kept delaying a decision.

Meanwhile, the energy company has rescinded licences which would have

allowed it to carry out fracking at two other sites near Canonbie in Dumfries and Galloway.

Dart Energy maintains that it did not need the licences, pointing out that it had inherited the documentation from the company which it had taken over to buy up the site, and that it can extract commercially-viable amounts of coalbed methane without resorting to fracking. Protestors claimed victory, however, as they continue fighting to prevent the exploitation of shale gas.

The newly-formed Frack off Scotland sums up its opposition bluntly in its name alone, while established environmental charity Friends of the Earth Scotland is equally adamant that fracking should not be allowed here.

Spokeswoman Mary Church says: "The energy industry promotes unconventional gas as a clean source

of indigenous energy and a crucial 'bridging fuel' [in the transition to greener resources] but opponents point to the toxic cocktail of carcinogenic and gender-bending chemicals commonly found in fracking fluid."

Referring to the Airth coalbed methane application, she adds: "What makes the prospect of developments like these so alarming is that most of the unconventional gas resource in Scotland is located in the most heavily populated parts of Scotland – right across the central belt, with pockets in southern Scotland too."

With political support growing along with energy demand, it looks likely that for better or worse, fracking will be carried out in Scotland before too long. Whether that brings a brighter future, more earthquakes, or a combination of the two, is harder to predict.