

Britain would be “mad” to ban fracking

An attempt to impose a moratorium on fracking failed in the Commons this week, but only after some last-minute concessions by the government. These included a ban on fracking in national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty (some of our biggest shale reserves are thought to be in protected areas, such as the South Downs and the North York Moors). “Had the vote been passed it might have sounded the death knell for fracking before it had even got off the ground,” says The Daily Telegraph. But while the “anti-fracking lobby will take heart” from the government’s concessions, the reality is that the coalition “has put in place a robust regulatory regime for shale extraction”.

Indeed, it’s hard to see what a moratorium would achieve, says the FT. The UK has already had an 18-month moratorium during which questions about safety were addressed. “The drilling regime that emerged from that process can hardly be judged, given that no projects have taken place.” Yes, the industry does need to do more to assuage environmental concerns: a “dispassionate and calm” debate is needed. But the concessions “to 13 new opposition-inspired fracking safeguards smacks of expediency rather than sound policy”. Further opposition on environmental grounds is “preposterous”, says Philip Johnston in The Daily Telegraph. In the US, technological advances have overcome early environmental problems – though, as the Daily Mail points out, the industry is still dogged by controversy, with some areas including the state of New York banning fracking. What’s more, since the UK will be dependent on gas for most of its energy needs for the foreseeable future, it is hard to see how transporting 75% of our requirements from the Gulf is more environmentally friendly. The idea that banning fracking will “push us towards greener fuels” is naïve, agrees The Times. Indeed, the opposite is likely to be true. Energy self-sufficiency also has great appeal. As North Sea gas continues to decline, we will become increasingly vulnerable to “upsets in the European gas industry”. With an estimated 1,329 trillion cubic feet of natural gas under north England alone, Britain could be a “global pioneer”. “We would be mad to leave it there.”