

Fossil fuels, research funding and academic independence

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What a pity that Richard Selley and his fellow "geoscientists and petroleum engineers from Britain's leading academic institutions" ([Letters](#), 5 June) appear to be motivated more by a desire to return to the good old days of abundant fossil fuel energy than by the overwhelming case that it is emissions from fossil fuels that are responsible for changing the climate faster than since the end of the last ice age. When in a hole, don't keep digging – but that is exactly what Selley is advocating. There may be short-term national security benefits "on offer" to the UK from Lancashire shale gas but the case is not "undeniable" that there will be environmental benefits. Selley has been trawling the email lists of university earth science departments for months now, sending repeated messages looking for support. It seems only 50 have signed up. Perhaps other geoscientists see things differently. I certainly do.

Tim Atkinson

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More pertinent than the possible "directorships and other commercial interests" ([Letters](#), 6 June) of the 50 academics who signed the pro-fracking letter is the insidious influence of oil industry funding. Of the 21 university departments to which the academics belong, at least 15 are in receipt of research funds from the oil industry. Unfortunately, the days of academic independence are over.

David Smythe

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Democratic society is reliant on a variety of expert advice to make sense of complex issues. Academics are identified by the public as a trusted source of knowledge. It therefore risks undermining academic credibility as a whole when colleagues make categorical and public comment on highly contested issues, particularly when associated with business interests that have the most to gain.

The letter from a group of geoscientists and petroleum engineers, asserting that there are "undeniable economic, environmental and national security benefits" of substantial gas production from the Bowland shale, overlooks important and unresolved issues raised by other academics at the UK Energy Research Centre and the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, among others. Professor David MacKay and Dr Tim Stone, the Department of [Energy](#) and Climate Change's own scientific advisers, note in their recent review of shale gas: "If a country brings any additional fossil fuel reserve into production, then in the absence of strong climate policies, we believe it is likely that this production would increase cumulative emissions in the long run. This increase would work against global efforts on climate change."

It is also clear that were it possible to produce 10% of the British Geological Survey central estimate of the Bowland basin's gas resource, the combustion emissions would exceed the entirety of the UK government's carbon budgets up to 2050.

That academics engage publicly on issues of the day certainly needs to be encouraged. However, when we do so it is incumbent on us to reflect uncertainties, provide clear reasoning and avoid drawing unqualified conclusions.

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