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The discursive politics of unconventional gas in Scotland: Drifting towards precaution?



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ABSTRACT

With a long history of oil and gas production and potentially significant reserves of unconventional gas, Scotland represents a notable case amid the growing international controversy over unconventional gas development (UGD). This article applies argumentative discourse analysis to the Scottish debate over UGD and identifies several important storylines which have mobilised different discourse coalitions and shaped public opinion as well as policy-making. For now, anti-UGD storylines appear more encompassing and have achieved greater resonance. Of particular interest, however, is the role of the Scottish government as a third discourse coalition. Through a moratorium on all forms of UGD and a cautious 'evidence-based approach', the government has established a form of discursive dominance and has successfully minimised electoral risks. But its anti-Westminster storyline – created in the run-up to the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 – has undermined the government's pragmatic strategy by invoking Scottish resistance to the UK's pursuit of shale gas. While the evidence-based approach persists as the preeminent storyline, its interpretation has 'drifted' from (1) a modestly reformed planning policy to (2) an exercise in scientific fact-finding combined with a public consultation and, arguably, (3) to a precautionary approach that might lay the foundation for an extended moratorium.

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1. Introduction

Ever since US shale gas production accelerated in the mid-2000s, unconventional gas development (UGD) has grown into a major political controversy in many countries. The US has witnessed increasing mobilisation against hydraulic fracturing (or 'fracking') of shale gas wells. In Europe, a number of countries have imposed indefinite or temporary moratoria on shale gas: Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands.

In the UK, former Prime Minister Cameron announced in January 2014 that the country was going "all out for shale" (*Guardian*, 13 January 2014). Anti-UGD mobilisation across the country has not weakened the UK government's resolve, but it has led to moratoria by the devolved regional governments in Scotland and Wales. In Scotland, the first application to drill for coalbed methane was made in 2011. A 2014 report by the British Geological Survey found potentially lucrative reserves of unconventional gas throughout Scotland's 'central belt' region [1]. But the Scottish government (constituted by the Scottish National Party (SNP)) imposed a moratorium on shale gas and coalbed methane (CBM) in January 2015,

and on underground coal gasification (UCG) in October 2015, by suspending all relevant planning applications. The government has ordered several impact assessments on public health, transport, the economy, and climate change as well as further scientific studies on decommissioning, seismic activity, and monitoring. A public consultation during winter 2016/17 will follow and a decision on shale gas and CBM may be due by summer 2017.¹

Scotland represents an interesting test case for UGD. The country is marked by a long history of oil and gas production, but many offshore fields are now depleted and profitability is falling. Two very different visions of Scotland's energy future are being propagated. The pro-UGD camp hails the new unconventional onshore reserves as partly compensating for the rapid decline of offshore production. It calls for a realistic energy policy and a more gradual low-carbon transition [2], citing scientific reports that highlight potential opportunities and judge the risk to public health and environment as relatively low [3,4]. The anti-UGD camp deploys a zero-sum narrative in favour of a country powered by 100% renewable energy [5] and promotes a phase-out of fossil fuels and the

E-mail address: h.r.stephan@stir.ac.uk¹ The moratorium on UCG followed a separate timetable and was made permanent on 6 October 2016.

gradual winding down of the fossil fuel-based petrochemical industry [6].

While there are similarities with UGD-related discourse and regulatory dynamics in other contexts – particularly with England, the Netherlands, and New York State – the Scottish case also has distinctive characteristics. The central belt region has witnessed simultaneous controversies over all three forms of unconventional gas. Furthermore, the debate has been decisively shaped by the government's insistence on an evidence-based approach and by the Scottish independence referendum (September 2014), giving rise to partially distinct political and discursive dynamics.

This article employs a discursive approach – based on Hajer's argumentative discourse analysis [7] – to examine the debate over UGD in Scotland. Hajer [8]: 67 defines discourse as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices.” While material resources and political networks markedly shape political outcomes, the power of actors is also “at least in part discursive” [9]: 169. Rhetorical skills and persuasive storylines significantly influence both the wider public and policy-makers.

Industry and other pro-UGD actors deploy a variety of storylines, while opponents work to undermine these with their own narrative schemes. “Linkages with prevailing societal discourses” (ibid.), often described as ‘resonance’, can translate into considerable discursive power. For instance, such is the narrative force of the ‘renewables revolution’ that the pro-UGD camp is working hard to dispel the image of UGD as “a throwback to the bad old days” of heavy industry [2].

Discourse and argumentation are central because political actors cannot stand aside from discursive battles. Actors' understanding of the policy problem itself, as well as its solutions, has been discursively constructed over many years. Their interests are, at least to some extent, “incomplete, ambiguous, and shaped by contingent discourses in which they are embedded” [10]: 1882. Which storylines resonate and can decisively empower pro- or anti-UGD coalitions is a matter of contextual, empirical analysis.

This article thus pursues two main objectives. First, it analyses the narratives (or ‘storylines’) of three different actor coalitions in significant detail and contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the Scottish debate on UGD. Second, it elucidates the evolution of the debate – particularly the ‘discursive drift’ of the Scottish government's narrative from hesitation to discursive dominance (the ‘evidence-based approach’) and, more recently, to precautionary scepticism. Although the government's cautious and evidence-based approach continues to exert discursive dominance, this will likely be a temporary state of affairs.

2. Context and methods

The current regulatory framework for UGD in the UK relies on multiple levels of governance and different regulatory authorities [11]. Companies have to purchase a time-limited exploration and development license for a particular area from the UK government. Before they can start to drill test wells, authorisation is required from the UK government's Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy, the Health and Safety Executive, and the Coal Authority (for CBM and UCG). Further necessary permissions have been devolved to the Scottish level and must be obtained from the local authority and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency. The Scottish government issued a revised planning policy in June 2014 to stipulate public consultation, risk assessments, and appropriate buffer zones for shale gas and CBM. Moreover, the UK will soon devolve both licensing and mineral access rights for onshore oil and gas extraction to Scotland [12]. The issue of access rights

Table 1
Semi-structured interviews with anonymised respondents.

| Date | Placeholder | Organisation |
|------------|-------------|--|
| 13/04/2015 | Interview A | Public health expert (academia) |
| 19/05/2015 | Interview B | INEOS Upstream |
| 20/05/2015 | Interview C | UNISON Scotland (trade union) |
| 27/05/2015 | Interview D | Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) |
| 01/06/2015 | Interview E | Senior partner, global law firm |
| 04/06/2015 | Interview F | Scottish Environment Link (NGO umbrella group) |
| 12/06/2015 | Interview G | National Farmers Union Scotland (NFUS) |
| 11/08/2016 | Interview H | Anti-UGD activist, Frack Off Scotland |
| 28/08/2016 | Interview I | Anti-UGD activist, Edinburgh |

had become controversial after the UK government's decision to change trespass rules and allow drilling at 300 m or more under privately owned land.

As one of the first studies to examine the Scottish debate over unconventional natural gas development, this article draws on insights from existing discursive analyses of energy controversies [13,14,15]. Given the dearth of secondary material on Scottish UGD, extensive media and documentary analysis as well as semi-structured interviews represent the main empirical sources. Numerous reports by and statements given to UK broadsheets (Guardian, The Times), news websites (BBC News, Scottish Energy News), and Scottish newspapers (Courier, Daily Record, Falkirk Herald, Herald, The National, Scotsman, Sunday Herald) between August 2013 and June 2016 (n=282) were analysed – with the help of the LexisNexis database and newspaper online archives, using the search strings “shale gas”, “fracking”, and “coal gasification”. Key government documents, records of parliamentary debates, and leaflets and pamphlets by pro- and anti-UGD actors were also examined.

Through initial selective sampling as well as snowball sampling, nine semi-structured interviews with key actors were conducted (Table 1) to corroborate positions and narratives established by media and documentary analysis and to gain deeper insights into political and discursive dynamics. In the context of fast-moving political events, statements made in interviews were sometimes guarded and indicated possible future revision. Permission was obtained for seven of the interviews to be recorded and transcribed.

The research data was imported into QSR Nvivo software and analysed through a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. Emphasis was placed on the ‘template style’ based on a preliminary list of codes which were derived from the broader literature [16], namely themes or frames uncovered by previous research. However, to counteract the risk of merely confirming the results of existing studies on shale gas, inductive openness was maintained and new themes were pursued in a second round of coding. Overall, a reflexive and iterative research design [17]: 26 allowed for the identification of relevant patterns, storylines and associated actors (Table 2).

My discourse-analytical approach is informed by the emerging literature on UGD in the UK and other countries. Cotton et al. [19] provide a pioneering discursive analysis of the UK debate over shale gas and Metzke [20] examines “framing contests” in the Dutch debate. Cotton [21] uses Q-methodology to identify specific areas of agreement and contestation. Bomberg [22] undertakes a systematic content analysis of UK media frames, assesses their potential effectiveness (or resonance), and detects a “growing dominance of more parochial frames” over broader national or global discourses regarding the economy or climate change. Hilson [23] evaluates the limited legal relevance of such global frames in England's planning and regulatory procedures. Williams et al. [24] scrutinise discourses of risk, while Jaspal and Nerlich [25] and Upham et al. [26] adopt

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