

Europe is not for Shale!

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Subjects to Citizens

Fracking and the Struggle for Renewal in Europe

Speech by John Ashton

1. It's an honour to be here today, on this platform, in this company.
2. In the company of a legend like José Bové, who chose to stand with his people against the might of unaccountable power, and built his life around that choice.
3. In the company of some of the heroic men and women who across Europe and on our doorstep in Algeria are choosing to stand with their people, against the misbegotten proposition that fracking shale for oil and gas should be part of our energy future, whatever the costs for the communities on which it is being pressed, and for the effort to keep climate change within manageable bounds.
4. I feel presumptuous even to be in your company. But there is nowhere else I would rather be this morning. Because I also feel at home among you - more at home than I have ever felt in this strange city of disembodied governance. I hope there is something useful my voice

can add to the rich political testimony of the lives you are living.

5. I am, as you can probably tell, English as well as British. But I've just come from Scotland. How many of you have been to Scotland since the referendum? Can I ask you to raise your hand if you have? [*A few hands, but raised with obvious animation*].
6. What's happening in Scotland is remarkable. It's the most significant thing that has happened in my country in my lifetime, possibly for hundreds of years. It's as significant as anything that is happening anywhere in the European Union today.
7. Scotland is in ferment.
8. In Scotland the limits of the possible used to be locked in place by a heavy weight of history. Now those limits are dissolving and anything feels possible.
9. In post-Enlightenment, post-Imperial, post-industrial Scotland, outside the corridors and boardrooms of established power, many people came to feel they had no voice. Now those people are finding their voices. They are finding their voices in the belief that the future doesn't have to be something that just happens to you, that with our voices we can tell each other a story about who we are and where we came from and where we need to go, and inspired by that story we can build our future together.
10. Now for the first time the young people of Scotland are finding their voice and becoming a force to be reckoned with. In a continent where so many young people have lost confidence in my generation and have turned their backs in disgust on mainstream politics,

young Scots are helping to rebuild the public conversation, the first step to repairing the broken contract between the generations.

11. I am not starry-eyed about Scotland. It faces immense challenges and is full of contradictions, made sharper by the ferment itself. Some would say I am overstating the significance of what is happening. But many others would disagree. That in itself is a sign of ferment - but also of division.
12. I don't know if Scotland will resolve its contradictions and move forward. And I don't know if it will eventually become an independent nation. The referendum put that question on the table, it did not take it off the table, and on the table it will remain until it is answered. What is clear is that if we English want to remain part of a united kingdom, we will have to do a better job than we have so far of talking to our Scottish neighbours in the language of "we" not "you".
13. But what matters most for all of us is to come to an understanding of the nature and potential of the historic forces now in play in Scotland. Only by unleashing similar forces in all our societies, in Britain and across Europe, can we hope to heal our widening divisions and bring about the renewal we need.
14. The people of Scotland are building an asset for renewal worth immeasurably more than the North Sea oil and gas into whose declining revenues their economy is still locked in potentially lethal dependence.
15. That's one of the biggest contradictions, by the way. You can't be a low carbon pioneer while squeezing every last drop out of the North Sea, or keeping open the possibility of fracking and other unconventional

methods of extracting gas, especially at the behest of wealthy offshore investors not themselves rooted in the society whose public interest they claim to promote.

16. There are two kinds of power.
17. There is the power by which incumbencies impose themselves on the people.
18. This is “power over”.
19. In the world of “power over” there is the inside and the outside, and only those on the inside have a voice.
20. In the world of “power over” those on the inside build the future while those on the outside can only accept it.
21. To live in the world of “power over” is not necessarily unbearable, even for those on the outside. When the wall between inside and outside is not too high; when those on the inside act in the public interest instead of putting their own gratification first; when there is trust to bind people together and maintain a decent prospect of progress for everyone: then under such conditions the consent of the people can be maintained and the centre can hold for a very long time.
22. How many of you think those conditions apply in Europe today? Does anyone think so? Please raise your hand if you do. [*No hands raised*]
23. But the world of “power over” has one big weakness, and this is its downfall. The world of “power over” can change at the margins, but it cannot easily transform itself. Incumbencies define themselves by the status quo from which they profit. It is hard for them to contemplate anything else.

24. In the world of “power over” you can do a bit more within the limits of the possible. But you cannot expand the limits of the possible.
25. So when there is a need for transformational change, the world of “power over” tends to cling with a zombie grip to the status quo. First it denies the need for change in the first place. And when that becomes too ridiculous, it falls back to its inner citadel, pretending to embrace change while resisting it in reality.
26. Anyone who has followed the climate debate will know exactly what I mean.
27. And then, sooner or later, the centre gives way under the rising stress. Change comes anyway, from the outside, and sweeps the incumbencies away. And when change comes like that, by default not by design, it may not be change for the better.
28. Then there is the other kind of power. There is “power with”.
29. In the world of “power with”, you build your future together. You build it through the interplay of voices in a public conversation from which nobody is excluded. You build it through a project of collaboration, in a phrase I heard repeatedly in Edinburgh.
30. In the world of “power with” there is still an inside and an outside. Society cannot function without institutions after all. But there are no barriers. Those on the inside never forget where they come from and whom they serve. Those on the outside are empowered and won’t let them forget.

31. In the world of “power with”, the status quo is always provisional. Incumbencies can still become powerful but they must measure themselves constantly against the public interest and open themselves to change, even to extinction, if the public interest demands it.
32. Only in the world of “power with” can there be a prospect of transformational change by design, brought about through common purpose and justice, woven together into a single story of a shared tomorrow.
33. In the world of “power with” the centre always holds because the centre is everywhere. It is in the ground beneath your feet.
34. “Power with” is more unusual in history than “power over”. The impulse towards “power with” is easily hijacked by pied pipers or demagogues, and the cure becomes worse than the disease.
35. That could yet happen in Scotland. But right now, more and more Scots are glimpsing the opportunity to build a “power with” society. They are choosing to try and seize it. They are going to bed as subjects and waking up the next day as citizens.
36. In England we are still subjects. On paper we are subjects of the Crown. In reality we are subjects of our incumbent powers.
37. But in England too, if you look more closely, something is stirring.
38. From Lancashire in the northwest, across the Pennines to Durham, Teeside, North Yorkshire, and along the flank of the grey North Sea to Lincolnshire; westwards through the Midlands to the Derbyshire

Peaks; south to the rolling upland of the Weald and down to the Channel coast of Kent, Sussex, Hampshire and Dorset; and beyond into the West country: across the length and breadth of England something is happening.

39. In kitchens and living rooms, in public houses and community halls, people who have nothing in common except the place they inhabit are coming together.
40. People from all points of the political spectrum, from all backgrounds and professions, from the various cultural tribes and social classes for which we English are famous, people of all ages and levels of political engagement are coming together.
41. People with no shared language or experience are learning to talk and listen to each other, learning to build a conversation about the kind of community they want to belong to in a way that has never happened so widely across England since in the years after Hitler's War we repaired our shattered country and built our welfare state.
42. Yes, in England too, albeit in a more fragmented, less reported way than in Scotland, subjects are waking up as citizens - citizens like Kathryn McWhirter, here with us today.
43. The prospect of fracking is waking up the English.
44. When people realize that fracking is heading for their community they inform themselves about it. They discuss it together. And the more they do that the more they feel on the wrong end of a very bad deal.

45. Intoxicated by what has happened in the US, and perhaps by an idealized memory of Margaret Thatcher's windfall from the North Sea, our government wants to unleash a fracking frenzy across our country.
46. And aroused by this threat, like giants of old waking from slumber, in villages, towns and cities all over England, people are finding voices they never knew they had. And they are using their voices to organize and mobilize so that they can resist the pressure they are being put under to open the door to fracking.
47. Fracking is and only ever can be a "power over" process. It seeks to impose itself, like a cuckoo in the nest, on communities whether they want it or not, cloaking the self-interest of those who promote it in a false story about economic and energy security.
48. If there are benefits, they will be enjoyed by others. If there are costs, they will be borne by the communities themselves.
49. The offers now being made to communities that open their doors to fracking reveal that those costs are likely to be high. So does the refusal to accept full liability for any damage caused. So does the practice in the US of using the law to gag those who have suffered harms already, not least to their health, as a condition for compensation, so that nobody can find out what those harms were and how they came about.
50. There is no place for fracking in a "power with" society. No community in Britain, whatever the inducement, has said or will say "yes" to fracking.
51. The disruption and disturbance from this intrusive, carpet-bagging industry in our crowded country would

simply be too great. The unanswered questions about the immediate and long-term consequences for physical and mental health are too troubling. The risks to existing livelihoods, in farming, food and tourism; to the value of your house and your quality of life; and to the social fabric itself - each one of these risks is too threatening.

52. Fracking in England will only be possible if it is imposed by “power over”. It cannot happen by consent.

53. And though I am telling here a story of England, exactly the same is true in Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland itself. Friends of the Earth have been at the forefront of all of this, supporting communities, cross-fertilizing between them, and making sure they have access to the best legal and other advice.

54. Jake White who will speak to you in a while, and his colleague Tony Bosworth, also with us today, are two more heroes in this struggle, and by no means the only ones at Friends of the Earth in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland.

55. There is no need for fracking, anywhere in my country. There is no national interest case. The same investment can yield bigger dividends in jobs, prosperity, and energy security if applied to wasting less energy, speeding up the deployment of wind and solar energy, building modern dynamic power grids, and promoting the community energy systems that will themselves help drive our transition to a “power with” society.

56. And, realizing this, the communities saying no to fracking are beginning to organize also to say yes to

efficiency, yes to solar and wind, and yes to community energy.

57. And all that, important though it is, is before we come to the question of climate change.
58. To deal with climate change we need to build an energy system that is carbon neutral within a generation. To embark on a fracking adventure now would take us backwards not forwards, locking in infrastructure, supply chains and vested interests, and strengthening the forces of high carbon incumbency. There is no place for this in a climate-compatible energy future.
59. You can be in favour of fracking. Or you can be in favour of dealing with climate change. But you cannot be in favour of both at the same time.
60. What is true in Britain is true across the EU.
61. Here we are in the European Parliament. But where, today, is Europe?
62. The Europe of which I am a proud citizen was built on justice and a celebration of shared humanity.
63. But latterly in the EU we knowingly turned our backs while our desperate neighbours perished daily, boat by leaky sinking boat, in the Mediterranean Sea, our Mediterranean Sea, the cradle from which we arose.
64. And some of us, egged on to my shame by my own government, some of us even sought to justify that with the argument, if you can call it an argument, that by refusing to save one drowning man or woman or child

we save many more by warning of what will befall them if they set out on the same terrible journey.

65. Oh fellow Europeans of my generation, if your mothers and your fathers, as they built a new and better Europe from the ruins of a weeping war-torn continent, if your mothers and fathers could have heard you whining thus from the distance of their unforeseen future, how they would have scolded you!
66. How they would have scolded you!
67. Where today is Europe?
68. The Europe of which I am a proud citizen found a formula for prosperity. By enabling the economy to grow, we could invest the proceeds of growth to make sure nobody was left behind. For two generations it was a successful formula.
69. But the formula no longer works because the ever more simplistic ideology of market supremacism it came to be based on, especially after 1989, no longer corresponds to reality under current conditions, even if it ever did.
70. In a healthy “power with” Europe, today’s incumbents would be looking for a better political idea. They would be looking for a basis from which to deal with systemic risk before it becomes systemic crisis; a basis from which public policy and private capital can work together so that the market is the servant of the people not their master; a basis from which to build with confidence the low carbon, resource efficient, resilient model of prosperity without which our only prospect will be further decline.

71. But in fact our leaders and the institutions they inhabit are locked too tightly into the failing incumbencies of “power over” to see why this is necessary. While pretending to recognize the need for change they cling to the familiar, even though after the crash of 2008 they really should know better.
72. The result is a system based on plunder. Those with power and wealth use their position to plunder more of it from everyone else. We all, systemically, plunder from the ecological foundation, under the delusion that the economy floats free and unconstrained. My generation plunders from our young people, diminishing their prospects. It is hardly surprising that they are losing confidence in our ability to act in the common interest.
73. This, today, is Europe. It is a failing project.
74. The centralized “power over” institutions of our precious Union go through the motions as if nothing had changed, with the best of intentions, often with great skill, usually unthanked, mistaking the merely immediate for the truly urgent.
75. But on the ground, out there across our continent, the Europe built by my parents and their contemporaries is dying. Once an inspiration for its citizens and a beacon for the world, the light is dim and sputtering.
76. It was Hegel who wrote cryptically that “the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk”. Minerva was the goddess of wisdom and Hegel meant that we only become aware of our impending doom when it is too late to do anything about it.
77. Now we must prove Hegel wrong.

78. The struggle to stop fracking is on the front line of the struggle to prove Hegel wrong.
79. The struggle to stop fracking is on the front line of the struggle to restore our lost sense of justice and shared humanity.
80. The struggle to stop fracking is on the front line of the struggle to build a new model of prosperity fit for today's challenges not yesterday's; a model that allows us to overcome our current obsession with an unwinnable race for supply side competitiveness and start investing in the repair of the ecological and social fabric.
81. The struggle to stop fracking is on the front line of the struggle to build a "power with" Europe.
82. We Europeans know a lot about subjects and citizens. We have been both in our time. Today we are subjects; subjects of a system of power and money and ideas that is turning on us. It is time to become citizens again.
83. This is as much a challenge for the green movement as it is for anyone else. We are good at talking to ourselves. We have our own myths, our own languages, our own stories.
84. Our green values will be at the centre of any "power with" renewal across Europe. No other kind of renewal is possible. But the renewal we need will only happen if we too reach outwards, if we learn to listen to the people, if we learn their languages and stories and myths, if we build that renewal with the people rather than trying to impose it on them.

85. At the moment, from the outside, we can seem self-righteous. We may inspire each other, but we have not yet inspired a people demoralized by the inertia of the status quo and beguiled in places by those peddling an illusion of simplicity in a complex world. We must try harder.
86. It is on the edge, on the far-flung fringes, not at the centre, that we will find the inspiration we need if we are to inspire others. It is on the edge and on the fringes where the authentic ancestral voices of the people can most clearly be heard.
87. One of the last redoubts of an ancient oral tradition that reaches back in our continent to the time before the Romans lies to the northwest of the Scottish mainland, in the islands of the Hebrides.
88. Last week my friend Alastair McIntosh told me a story. He had heard it from Angus Peter Campbell, the Bard of South Uist.
89. The story lives in its Hebridean culture and in Alastair's activism, but I hope it is no presumption against either for me to offer my own retelling of it to you today. It is of great relevance to our proceedings. And if anything, as it were, gets lost in translation, I take full responsibility.
90. The Lowland King, in one of his regular raids into the Highlands, captured some prisoners. Informed that among the captives was the celebrated Highland Fool, he had the Fool brought in chains into his presence.
91. The King by the way would have looked somewhat askance at the notion of "power with". As warlords go,

he was more of a “power over” man, and rather proud of his ability to impose himself.

92. “Fool!”, he roared, answer me now three questions, if you value your life.” The Fool trembled, for the King was well known for his violent tantrums.
93. “Fool!” roared the King again, “Tell me, how many stars are in the sky?”
94. The Fool knew he was treading on eggshells. Who could possibly answer such a question? And if he guessed the answer the king might know it was wrong and punish him.
95. “Sire” said the Fool carefully. “I am but a simple Fool. It would take the wisdom of a King to answer a question like that. Only you can say how many stars are in the sky.”
96. The King’s brow darkened with irritation at such an obvious evasion and the Fool trembled again. He knew he would have to do better with the next question.
97. “Fool!” thundered the King, now with real menace. “Tell me, how much am I worth?”
98. By now the Fool was beside himself with terror. If he pitched the price too low he would offend the King. But too high a price might seem frivolous and the King might think he had not taken the question seriously. To err on either side would surely be fatal.
99. The King drummed his fingers impatiently. The Fool had to say something or silence would condemn him just as surely as any misjudged answer.

100. Then inspiration came. "Sire" he blurted out, "you are worth no more than thirty pieces of silver."

101. "Thirty pieces of silver?" bellowed the incredulous King. "Why, there is more than that in this purse at my belt. How can I, a mighty King, be worth so little?"

102. "Hardly so little" answered the Fool, feigning more confidence than he felt. "If the most valuable person who has ever lived could be sold for thirty pieces of silver, how could any man be worth more?"

103. The King had recently embraced the Christian faith, for he wanted its powerful new God on his side. Now he considered the Fool's answer. He could, he conceded to himself, see no flaw in it.

104. So now in a more indulgent tone he continued: "Fool, perhaps you are not such a fool after all. Now, answer me this, and if you answer well you can return to your people. Tell me, Fool that you are, where is the centre of the world?"

105. The Fool knew the answer to this question. He looked the King for the first time directly in the eye, suddenly his equal not his prisoner.

106. And with a strong and steady voice the Fool replied: "The centre of the world, Sire, is in the ground beneath your feet".

107. And the King nodded knowingly back at the Fool. He signaled to the guards to unfasten the chains.

108. The ground beneath your feet.

109. All your power lies in the ground beneath your feet.

110. You *draw* your power from the ground beneath your feet.
111. We stand tall, as citizens and communities, on the ground beneath our feet.
112. Standing tall and steadfast on the ground beneath our feet our voices carry across mountains and oceans.
113. Standing steadfast and proud on the ground beneath our feet we look fools and kings alike in the eye.
114. Fool I stand no lower than you.
115. King though you sit on your throne you sit no higher than I.
116. Here on the ground beneath our feet there is no centre because the centre is everywhere.
117. On the ground beneath our feet we will build a Europe of progress resumed, repairing our foundations not plundering from them.
118. We will build a Europe of climate security no longer hooked on fossil energy but liberated from its tyranny.
119. We will build a Europe of prosperity reimagined and reconfigured.
120. We will build a Europe that succours the desperate and never turns its back on them.
121. We will build a Europe that celebrates justice and humanity.

122. Here on our European ground, we will together build Europe anew.

[PAUSE]

123. Our Europe thus renewed will be a “power with” Europe not a “power over” Europe.

124. It will be a green Europe.

125. It will be a Europe in which nobody is a subject and we are all citizens again.