



These past couple of weeks I have been exercised by the issue of energy once more. It has been the time when the issue of fracking moved south.

An esteemed former colleague of mine sent me the well-travelled story of God and the Northerners – where God was explaining that in creating the Earth He put balance everywhere. Heat is balanced by the freezing cold; poverty with riches; conflict with harmony. And then there was the North of England, where He put the wisest, kindest, most talented people. And the balance? You guessed it – the "tossers" He put down South to govern us.

As if to bear out that epigram, Lord Howell – George Osborne's father-in-law – wedged his foot even further in his mouth by claiming not to know east from west. His idea of an apology was to infer that he really meant North West when he said North East. That's all right then, isn't it?

What the peerless Peer actually did was bring to public attention the fact that there is fracking going on in Sussex. In the leafy South? Not in the desolate North West/East? How is that possible?

So now, as Carbon Brief pointed out in its weekly digest, there are licences for shale gas exploration in the seats of 13 Cabinet Ministers. Watch this space.

- While the drillers look for ways to pump various noxious substances into our rocks, there is an altogether bigger and, I should think, even more risky project going on in the south of France. It involves an attempt to emulate the activity of the sun as it produces energy from fusion. On the Beeb we were treated to a simplistic explanation of how fusion differs from fission in the

production of energy, complete with primary school hand gestures. What they failed to mention is that energy from fusion was around 50 years ago – in the shape of the H-bomb.

- A note of sanity was introduced by the online newsletter Science Omega. It quoted a paper in an American energy journal by researchers from the universities of Lincoln in this country and Auckland in New Zealand. The research described a scenario where solar energy from suburban homes would play a role in compensating for the energy inefficiency of the suburbs compared to city centres. This inefficiency stems from, among other causes, the fact that city dwellers have closer access to facilities and – crucially – workplaces. However, the proliferation of solar PV arrays in suburbs would help fuel commutes and boost energy supplies in the cities.

The journal describes the process as today's suburbs becoming tomorrow's power stations. It sounds like an extension of the process of microgeneration to include whole towns.

At what point, then, will both shale gas and fusion power become redundant as technologies? Probably when it's just too late.

Chris Stokes