

The coal industry and climate change



In a time where we should be reducing our carbon dioxide emissions, we're looking to get more of our electricity from coal. Coal-fired power stations are the biggest CO₂ emitter per unit of electricity produced. Britain is more reliant on coal for its electricity than it has been at any time over the past decade (in the past 5 months 50% of Britain's electricity came from coal). Economic pressures which make coal cheaper have pushed up Britain's carbon dioxide emissions to their highest in 10 years.

This 'economic sense' that is increasing our CO₂ emissions stems from the super-abundance of coal across the globe (there is an estimated 200 years of coal left, probably much more), it is easy to stockpile, and it is not reliant on a small number of suppliers and pipelines like gas.

The madness of the economic system means that despite having plenty of coal here, we import more and more from across the globe because it's cheaper. UK coal-fired power generation uses some 50 million tonnes of coal a year, of which less than 20 million tonnes come from the UK. The rest is imported from all over the world. Over half of this comes from as far away as Australia and South Africa! Many of these coal mining operations across the world are in places capitalism has hardly touched and so are destroying forests, eco-systems and rural communities. As people's homes are destroyed so are some of the most carbon neutral ways of human life on the planet.

The coal industry justifies its existence in a time when we should be reducing CO₂ levels by pointing out coal powered electricity generation in the UK accounts for only 2% of the global coal fired electricity generation. It points to India and China, and says unless they move away from coal, why should we? They are saying, there is no point us doing anything unless other people do something first. This is what we ALL need to stop saying. The buck has to stop somewhere, and it stops with everyone of us. And with some more than others.

Can new technologies make generating electricity from coal more environmentally friendly? The coal industry is trying to sell itself as possibly at some point in the future being nearly as 'environmentally friendly' as gas if only it was invested in. It says that the government needs to create the right policy framework to encourage this otherwise nothing will happen. They say they need to be able to build confidence in their industry before they will invest significantly in cleaner technologies.

There are some high-tech 'solutions' to heavy industries like coal. People are looking to a time when we can capture the CO₂ produced by power stations and force it under ground. These solutions are extremely expensive, very energy intensive and it is a long time before the technologies will be advanced enough before we can use them. We have not got that time. We need to reduce our carbon emissions NOW!