

Fracking attitudes show contempt for our beautiful North; Columnist.

Byline: Paul Benneworth

THANKS to the hard work of the Durham Passport Office, I successfully made it back to the United Kingdom for a couple of weeks' holiday.

We've just returned from a fantastic week's walking in Keswick, where I did get to take my son Theo up his first proper Cumbrian fell.

Living in Holland, he doesn't get many chances for hill climbing and he was fascinated by the views from the summits.

From Latrigg we looked up into Borrowdale and across Derwentwater, the day walkers climbing Catbells like tiny ants in the distance. At Castlerigg Stone Circle, he sadly seemed more intent on his Luchini's ice cream than on appreciating the Neolithic monument.

I lost count of the number of foreign languages I heard spoken on the hills and villages. Everywhere we went was bustling with tourists as well as services for those tourists.

Even little hamlets like Grange or Lodore had pubs, cafes and restaurants packed with happy visitors. There was a fantastic buzz to the place and we really enjoyed our time there.

Back on Tyneside, the Tory-led government's clear contempt for the North came through clearly last week. This time it came through efforts to foist fracking on a clearly unwilling country.

For those who have not been following this story, fracking is the unlovely name for the unlovelier process of extracting tarry underground oil residues.

This is done by detonating bombs in solid rock to release the oil. It's as environmentally disastrous as it sounds.

In the United States, it has damaged water reserves and released inflammable gases into domestic water pipes. There's also a subsidence risk; in north Holland, gas extraction recently caused serious earthquakes that damaged houses and roads.

There are some very aggressive commercial interests pushing the UK Government towards the technique, attracted by its high potential profits. But its dirty production method means that it is a clear case of private benefits, public costs.

Largely foreign-owned companies will make the profits and it's us - the public - who will pay to clean up this pollution and environmental damage.

What took my breath away was Lord Howell saying in the House of Lords that fracking could easily be undertaken in the "desolate North East". Lord Howell seemed to me to be arguing that sacrificing our environment's beauty was a 'price worth paying' to make fat profits for the Tories' rich backers.

His comments drew stunned gasps of amazement in the Lords and justified rebuttal in the media.

I personally enjoyed the gallery of 22 photos on The Guardian website of the desolate North East's most beautiful landscapes, from Bamburgh Castle, High Force and Roseberry Topping to the Tyne bridges.

These aren't just places of natural beauty. That beauty comes from a harmony between the natural environment and humans, the ways that humans have sensitively adapted and developed places with an eye to their longer-term sustainability.

Surely only the deluded could think that plundering these national jewels for a quick buck makes any kind of sense.

And Lord Howell did quickly issue a clarification. It was not the North East he meant was desolate, but the North West.

That makes even less sense. The North West is home to the Lake District. Fracking in these places would be a clear disaster for the vibrant, buzzing tourism economy that the North West enjoys.

But where it does make sense is in the Coalition's attitude to us here in the North East. If there's money to made for their cronies in making things worse for us, then the Tories will always in be favour.

Dr Paul Benneworth FeRSA is a senior researcher at the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente in the Netherlands.