

Environment

Politicians avoiding tough questions on fracking issue

While the shale gas mantra focuses on jobs, cheap energy and recovery, the evidence contradicts these claims

Scott Coombs

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When I was in school, my English teacher introduced me to the concept of "God words", words whose associations are so visceral that they can't be argued against.

As a result, rational discourse flees from them like birds from the sound of a hunter's rifle. I went to school in Ronald Reagan's America and my teacher cited "Liberal" and "Communist" as God words. Use these words against your opponent and they're unlikely to get a fair hearing.

Thirty years later and we have new words. During his recent speech at St Angela's College in Sligo, Taoiseach Enda Kenny linked fracking to reducing emigration, creating jobs, and lowering the cost of energy. Jobs. Recovery. Cheap energy. Never mind that many legitimately question whether these are jobs worth having, or that the energy is really cheap when you consider all the costs.

David Cameron is at it too, writing in the Daily Telegraph that fracking has "real potential to drive energy bills down" and that a thriving shale-gas industry could create tens of thousands of jobs and millions of pounds for local communities. Jobs. Recovery. Cheap energy. How can anyone not be in favour?

Fracking – in the form that Messrs Kenny and Cameron are so keen on – is roughly a decade old and involves drilling horizontally underground for miles and then injecting the bores with water, sand, and chemicals under high pressure. The liquid absorbs the gas, and when the pressure is released, about 20 per cent of the water comes to the surface where the gas is extracted. The rest of the water and chemicals (including substances like benzene, diesel, and formaldehyde) remain underground. Estimates for the number of wells that could be drilled in the northwest are in the region of 3,000, drilled in sets of between 16 and 24 on sites about five to nine acres each, requiring an infrastructure of roads, pipelines, storage and treatment facilities, millions of gallons of water and hundreds of tons of chemicals, delivered by thousands of lorries and forced into the earth's crust by large noisy compressors each time you frack each well. If analysis by the US Securities and Exchange Commission has any relevance to Ireland, only 600 of these wells will be commercially viable.

Value for money

But what about jobs? Tamboran Resources, the Australian company who applied for a licence to explore the shale in north Leitrim and Cavan, claim that "€7 billion gas investment could create 600 full-time jobs". That's €11.6 million per job. Leaving aside whether that really represents value for money, let us bear in mind that that is not a net figure.

Food, agriculture and tourism support almost 500,000 jobs and even a marginal loss resulting from fracking will significantly exceed the jobs promised by fracking promoters. Just last month, the New Zealand-based dairy co-operative Fonterra announced that it would no longer accept milk from any new dairy suppliers based in areas of New Zealand where fracking waste has been spread and covered. In the United States, if all the jobs promised by fracking

promoters materialised, it would have reduced the 2012 unemployment rate by a whopping 0.5 per cent. Hardly a “game changer”, Mr Rabbitte.

But what about cheap energy? According to Deborah Rogers, former adviser to the US Department of the Interior on extractive industries, the gas is cheap only because producers have glutted the market to service their debts. Fracking is very expensive and investors expect rapid and significant returns. If these low prices persist, the fracking industry will collapse. In her lecture *Fraconomics*, she says that claims about the amount of extractable gas have been vastly and routinely overstated – in many cases, by more than double the actual production rates. She goes on to say that the much-touted 100 years of US gas available “simply isn’t true in a way that is meaningful”. At today’s prices and using today’s technology, there are only about 11 years of gas available.

But what about recovery? If only about 11 years’ worth of gas is recoverable, how much of a recovery is that going to fuel? Certainly not a sustainable one. According to an industry publication, *Powers Energy Investor*, production at the Fayetteville shale play in [Arkansas](#) reached peak production a mere six years after drilling began. This is relevant because Tamboran believe that Fayetteville is the shale play that most closely resembles the shale in Leitrim. And Tamboran’s projections assume rates of productivity that have simply not materialised in the US.

Jobs. Cheap energy. Recovery. Fracking is not necessarily going to provide any of these things, and it is reasonable to argue that it will do the exact opposite. So why is there no debate at Government level? The sad truth is that debate is pointless – facilitating onshore gas extraction is already government policy.

Political decision

The focus of the Coalition’s efforts is to ensure a legal basis for fracking. The EPA study is not considering whether it should be allowed, or the impact 3,000 wells would have on human health. They’re only considering the effects of fracking in exploration. And once exploration proves commercial reserves, firms will have the right to exploit them. They’ll need planning permission and safety permits, but ultimately the use of fracking is a political decision – and this one’s being made without any meaningful public debate.

Jobs. Cheap energy. Recovery. These words tell us to accept the future, not to choose it. Choice requires debate, openness and accountability. But that’s not what we’re getting. School’s out.

Scott Coombs lives in north Leitrim and is a member of the Love Leitrim group, which campaigns against fracking

SOME COMMENTS

kate mawn

An excellent article highlighting the completely contradictory policies of the current government. Enda Kenny and Minister Coveney are constantly stressing the importance of selling Ireland as a green ,high quality food market. Have they read any of the research? Going ahead with Fracking would destroy not only the reputation of Ireland’s food but would be a disaster for agriculture and indeed the Irish economy. Can they please come out and debate this issue openly so we can see how much they actually understand about it.

Colm McGinn and ecolingo like this.

Eddie Mitchell

Are the EPA considering whether fracking can go ahead in Ireland?

Is the research, been administered by the EPA looking at impacts on human health?

Could we be a little off the mark about what's actually been considered and by whom?

The EPA are Looking into the impacts to drinking water and of seismic activity associated with use of hydraulic fracturing in exploration drilling. The impacts beyond exploration of fracking at a commercial scale have never been assessed in Ireland and I don't believe the EPA will propose to consider cumulative affects of the production phase as part of their terms of reference. They're proposing to carry out research to meet their statutory obligation as part of assessing applications for exploration licences.

Fergus O'Dowd TD outlined the policy position in the Dail on the 18th January 2012;

"The policy approach is therefore one of encouraging investment in exploration, while ensuring all exploration and production activities are carried out in a safe manner and without harming the environment."

The EPA has regard to government policy.

Recent statements by the Taoiseach made in Sligo again confirm this policy talking up the practice of fracking in America. You might wonder how he could make such comments while fracking is been investigated by the EPA. I don't, I think he's just been open about the government views. I worry about why we're not assessing the implications a policy in favor of developing onshore gas against its impacts on human and animal health, on agriculture and tourism. We are we not assessing whether onshore gas production is sustainable development and obviously the nature of onshore gas production has changed since the generation of policies that lead to the 1960's mineral act. This legislation is been applied to the current industry, and it forms the basis for the current onshore licensing round. Somebody made the comment that the EPA should be left to make this decision. They need to study themselves and ask some more questions. There is a democratic deficit in how fracking is been introduced into Ireland. I say Ireland, I'm not saying Leitrim or the Lough Allen Basin! This is just as important for people living above coal seams in Kilkenny. Those of us that are aware of this democratic deficit have as citizens a responsibility to make others aware of it and to try and make the necessary changes.

Ronan Furlong

Several independent reports have concluded that the shale gas industry in the U.S. has created a large number of jobs and has had a profound, positive economic impact, such as reducing consumer costs of natural gas and electricity, stimulating economic growth and increasing federal, state and local tax revenue.

"The Economic and Employment Contributions of Shale Gas in the United States", published in December 2011, concluded that in 2010 shale gas production contributed \$18.6 billion in federal, state and local government tax and federal royalty revenues. Also, the study reports the shale gas contribution to GDP to have been more than \$76 billion in 2010 and more than 600,000 jobs were supported by the shale gas industry.

To 'pooh pooh' the obvious economic benefits to Ireland is plain wrongheaded in my opinion and makes me question the overall credibility of the anti tracking movement. I'm happy to let scientists, economists, the EPA, the planning authorities and our elected officials adjudicate one this one..... rather than letting the malcontent tail wag the national dog.

Tom White

Ronan, the Government has failed at the first hurdle. Energy projects should have an SEA (Strategic Environmental Assessment). This never happened. This would identify all the areas of potential Shale, coal bed methane and the like. Indeed I believe there may be a similar problem with the onshore wind farm given that the people protesting there believe its also being done piecemeal, and no one can give a grasp of the bigger picture. This particular project in Leitrim has also got serious transboundary considerations

The other thing I would say is accountability is seriously lacking. Ministers and public servants must be accountable for their decisions.

Public Health Impacts do include the positives (ie having a job, being employed is beneficial to economic and mental health) So why not have a debate which encapsulates the whole picture.

The democratic deficit exists with lack of accountability - no more, no less. Your claim that Leitrim should be a sacrifice zone for the good of the rest of the country does beggar belief.. what about when the shale runs out in Leitrim, Roscommon and Sligo next ? then Cavan then Monaghan, Mayo..Donegal bay (the shale spreads that far .. what about all the old coal fields, Oh and shale in Clare, Limerick, Cork Kerry. Surely the democratic deficit you speak of means we should get digging those up. What about water needs for Dublin, Energy needs of the UK ? lets plant the country with windmills, Wait the forests can go as well.. the chinese are interested ,

IF decisions are being made on purely economic grounds which you've presented, why bother with ABP and any of the other legislation. Its clear you're only playing lip service to it. If we can make a quick buck, just like in the Celtic tiger we'll all be grand... (that one didn't work out too well did it ?)

EddieMitchell

Yes Ronan

Fracking or any other proposal should go through the democratic process. Its starts with an open debate where the public inform themselves by looking at countries where it is already practised. Political parties will develop policy by consulting with their grass roots and perhaps put a policy paper together. They will be elected and given a mandate to make decisions based on there policies. You mentioned the Corrib project. First of all the community in the Corrib were and are not against gas extraction or even gas coming on shore. They had legitimate concerns about their safety and were forces to take a stand because of bad decision making. If the process does not meet the needs of the community depending on it then people are forced to get involved in protest as is their right in a democracy. Indeed protest is an important part of the democratic process and has led to many of the rights we enjoy today.

If you read the EPA review or the Aarhus convention or indeed are interested in sustainable development you will understand the importance of participation of affected communities.

Using policy and legislation from the 1960's to open the door to industrialisation of large tracks of land in Ireland without political debate and without proper assessment is the democratic deficit I speak off and will lead to the creation of another Corrib in Leitrim. We are doing our best here in Leitrim to make sure this kind of situation will not occur and we won't accept research on exploration drilling as adequate assessment of a policy to encourage 3000 commercial shale gas wells in north Leitrim and the introduction of coal seam gas and fracking into Ireland as a whole. I look forward to the EPA publishing the final draft of the terms of reference for its research. I know many people working within the EPA will want to carry out adequate research without anyone with health expertise or animal health expertise on the steering group, its hard to expect that the right questions are been represented. That's a democratic deficit and we wont be founding wanting in our resistance flawed process. You will find Leitrim people standing proudly against fracking until it becomes government policy to have the process banned