

Many of us are tired at the lack of transparency and the political deals that some in the anti-fracking campaign have been involved in over the last number of years. We know that there are many good, genuine hard working people in these groups that are at times being led by some with very close ties to Fine Gael hence the government. I am not saying all that has been done by these groups has been damaging far from it, I commend much of the work. But at times and more importantly at critical times many of us feel things were not done for the benefit of the campaign but instead to facilitate politicians and or the government. If others in the campaign had done such things there would have been uproar, but this is all history now. What is not history is the fact that we are about to have a general election.

Many of us feel that unless there is real political change in this country we will never get a ban on fracking. I haven't met anyone who has been clued into this campaign or Irish politics who really believes Fianna Fail, Fine Gael or Labour would actually ban fracking. This is why many of us believe the key to getting a ban on fracking in Ireland is to have as many politicians elected to Dail Eireann who together with our campaign will force whatever government is in place to ban fracking.

That why many of us in this campaign are not seeking promises from politicians or parties that no-one can believe in, but we are asking people to support a movement of change and those politicians who are committed to this movement, Right2Change. Many may disagree with us on the points I have just made and that is fine. I understand that for many, if you have not been on the ground, here in the north-west and only following this campaign online you are probably not aware of why I and others feel this way, we have not written about or documented many of the things that have gone on in this campaign. For anyone who is interested I have tried to explain mine and many others who share the same feelings on these issues in more detail below.

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## ELECTION HUSTINGS OR HUSTLING ? Everything Is Not Always As it Seems - Especially At Election Time

For the duration of their time in power the Fine Gael / Labour government in Ireland have left the threat of fracking, a most intrusive, dangerous, destructive and corrupt, ponzi scheme, disguised as an energy plan, hanging like a dark cloud over rural communities all over this country. The same government, using our money, then ordered the EPA to do a research study into "fracking". On examination of the detail of this EPA research study, many of us in the anti fracking campaign quickly realised it was a sham, led by industry insiders and basically designed to lay down the foundations for the industry and ultimately give fracking the green light in Ireland. Since the EPA study was launched, many of us in the anti-fracking campaign have been calling for it to be immediately and permanently scrapped. We do not need any more studies on fracking, we have all the evidence we need, from scientists all over the world, to use the precautionary principle and like France, place a ban on fracking in Ireland.

On the very first day the election was called, February 3rd, Good Energies Alliance Ireland (GEAI), a government funded company, based in north Leitrim, who are involved at certain levels, in the campaign against fracking and Tony McLoughlin Fine Gael TD for Sligo/Leitrim both released statements announcing that the EPA's scandalous, research study into fracking had been "stopped". "Good News! It's Official", was the headline of the announcement from GEAI on their website. The announcement from GEAI went on to say, "A statement from the Department (DCENR) yesterday (2nd) confirmed that the study has been

stopped after its first phase, which included an overall look at regulations and legislation governing fracking. Phase 2, on-the-ground studies in Leitrim and Fermanagh which would have included some drilling, will not proceed and a report of Phase 1 will be published in Q3 of this year". Further down in the same statement from GEAI on February 3rd, the "Good News" headline lost its shine, GEAI went on to state, "It is great news that this has been confirmed. Basically, the study is stalled and, moreover, it is unlikely to proceed in the future". The use of the words "stalled" and "unlikely", referring to something this important, on the first day of a general election raised alarm bells with many of us in the anti-fracking campaign.

As already mentioned, Fine Gael TD Tony McLoughlin also released a press statement on the very same day. The first two lines of Mr.T McLoughlin's statement read, "Fine Gael TD for Sligo - Leitrim, Tony McLoughlin, has strongly welcomed the decision of the Minister for State, Joe McHugh TD, not to proceed with Phase 2 of the EPA's Joint Research Programme into the potential effects of hydraulic fracking in Ireland. "The decision to put Phase 2 of the EPA study into the potential health and environmental impact of Fracking on hold represents a considerable setback to those trying to promote fracking in our country".

The following day a news report on Ocean Fm's website stated, "assurances" given by Joe McHugh, Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR), were welcomed by "a prominent anti-fracking group". The Ocean Fm news report ends by stating, "Aedin McLoughlin of the Good Energies Alliance says that in her opinion it's unlikely that the study will be resumed". According to Ocean Fm, "...no official statement has been released by the Department of Communications", but that, "the information was shared in a document between Fine Gael Election Candidate (Tony McLoughlin) and Minister (of State) with responsibility for Natural Resources Joe McHugh...".

The next line in the Ocean Fm report throws another spanner in the works, "The EPA has confirmed that it has been requested to pause the next phase of the research to allow time to review the multiple outputs of Phase 1". Another news report on Ocean Fm's website from the same day states, "The EPA has confirmed that it has been requested by the department of communications, energy and natural resources, to pause the next phase of its study into the effects of fracking in Ireland. According to a statement issued to Ocean FM this afternoon, the Environmental Protection Agency said that it was asked to do so, to allow its steering (committee) time to review the multiple outputs of Phase 1 and produce a report later this year."

It was becoming clear to many of us that this, "Good News" was being told in one way by a radio station and a very different spin was being put on it by GEAI and Fine Gael TD Tony McLoughlin. Many of us, who, at a grassroots level, without any funding, have been involved in the anti-fracking campaign in Ireland since we first learned Fianna Fail had signed off on licenses in the dying days of their government, exactly five years ago. We have been involved in and have tried to follow closely the events over the last number of years. Now with all the will in the world, many of us in the anti-fracking campaign would love to just accept this "official" news as GEAI have described it. But any sane Irish person knows that politicians will, time and time again, tell you what you want to hear once that election circus comes to town. And the difference between the way GEAI announced their, "Good News" and Fine Gael TD Tony McLoughlin when compared to what Ocean FM said is important, tangible and very revealing. This is how you spin a good story to win election brownie votes.

Many of us in this campaign have requested ad nauseam, to see the "document", or the "statement" from the department, as GEAI have described it. We contacted GEAI and were told to look here and there online and we would find it, that turned out to be a wild goose chase. As of yet, we are still waiting to see this "document" from the Minister or department that was released on the 2nd of February according to GEAI

and that supposedly assures us that phase 2 of the EPA's research study "will not proceed". If such a "document" exists, then anyone reading this will understand the importance of us seeing the exact content and wording of that "document", we the public are entitled to see this so-called "assurance" in black and white. If this "document" does actually exist and it does say Phase 2 of the EPA study is "not going to proceed" , then we would like that officially stated by the department and not a junior minister, but the Minister in charge of that department, Alex White. But having said all that, even if we got that official "statement" from the department and the Minister, would that stop the EPA from moving on to "Phase 2", if instructed to do so by the next government, of course not.

In his press release the day the election was called the Fine Gael candidate, Tony McLoughlin said, "Minister McHugh has stated that, "initial indications of these results (from phase one of EPA research) are clearly pointing to the fact that the practice of Fracking would not be a viable option in Ireland". I wonder what junior minister McHugh means by "viable". Could it mean that because of the fact, that right now, the price of oil and gas is at an all time low and so fracking is, at the moment, economically not "viable" for the industry? If that is what the junior minister means when he is using the term "viable", then we know only too well, that this situation can change at any time in the future from not "viable" to "viable" as the price of oil and gas can rise again.

In other words there's no money to be made from fracking in Ireland at the moment and even if there were plans to do test drills, the government and the industry know that there is too much resistance on the ground. Besides the industry is trying to get kick started in the U.K and N.I, and perhaps the industry and the government here in Ireland are willing to leave this plan for now, because of reasons aforementioned and wait and see how things pan out in the U.K. and NI first. So if you think about it, just a vague, worthless, incoherent mumbling about stalling fracking, spun well with the help of a "prominent anti-fracking" group at election time, to people in the Sligo/Leitrim constituency and beyond, would indeed be handy to desperate government party candidates. Why would the minister bother to elaborate and explain the situation fully, unequivocally and officially? Well one answer to that is, that by being vague and ambiguous, he can appear to be saying 'nice' things, in a "document" that we have not seen and these nice things will help Fine Gael and Labour candidates in constituencies where this issue is ongoing and extremely contentious. The other reason for being vague and ambiguous is that the junior minister is being careful not to cause a big hullabaloo among his seniors or scare off his friends in the oil and gas industry, which would greatly annoy his conservative friends in the U.K. and Northern Ireland who are doing the damndest to help get this industry off the ground.. Just keep it vague, confusing, that will work, without really saying anything at all.

I believe the plan to announce the so-called "stopping" of the EPA research study was hatched some months back. I believe Fine Gael in this area, knowing an election was on the way, thought that an announcement on this issue, delivered at election time, would help claw back vital votes they have lost because of their pro-fracking stance to date. Wealthy businessman Gerry Reynolds, who is a Fine Gael hopeful election candidate, was the only councillor in Leitrim County Council to have actually voted for fracking in the past, so to help the situation something needed to be done on the ground

On February 10th myself and others protested at Enda Kenny's election visit to Leitrim. Our message to Enda Kenny was simple and focused on what we believe to be extremely important issues that in the main get ignored or misrepresented by the media. We believe that right now, apart from fracking, there are other pressing, pertinent issues that need immediate attention and yet in many ways are also linked to fracking. Many of us also believe that given the obvious links between various campaigns going on right now in Ireland it is only natural that these campaigns should unite in solidarity and work with each other.

So our message last week to Mr. Kenny was this; we are against the TTIP/TISA trade deals that would give corporations extraordinary powers over resources and citizens of this country, we demand a ban on fracking, we will never pay Irish Water one cent, we reject his government and its policies that have caused misery and pain for so many, for example the issue of abortion and homelessness and finally that we are supporting the candidates of the Right2Change movement in this general election. We didn't get to meet Mr. Kenny, we were told by Gardai that it was an invite only event. Liam Breslin who is on the board of Good Energies Alliance Ireland Ltd (GEAI), (the company that made this announcement about the EPA study, alongside Fine Gael TD Tony McLoughlin) also turned up for Mr. Kenny's election stop off in Leitrim. I asked Mr. Breslin did he have an invite, because we had been told by Gardai if you didn't you were not allowed in, Mr. Breslin said he did not have an invite, nevertheless after chatting to Gardai off he went to see Enda. When Mr. Breslin emerged from the event I asked him, as a Fine Gael supporter but also an anti-fracking campaigner, what did he say to Mr. Kenny in regards to fracking. Mr. Breslin told me he didn't speak to the Taoiseach about fracking because he had already done so in December and because, "he (Enda Kenny) did everything we asked him to".

I believe everyone who is involved in the anti-fracking campaign is genuinely against fracking, maybe for many, if it wasn't going to happen in their backyard they may not be involved at all, but that is par for the course in many campaigns ie. until it happens to you, you have little interest or understanding of what others are or may be faced with or going through. There are of course many reasons for a NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitude, the most obvious one of course is that the mainstream media do not really tell us the truth of, for example, what it is really like living in a small community threatened by and having to stand up to, the most powerful industry in the world, the oil and gas industry. I've always thought it shocking, the fact that RTE have never shown the award winning film "The Pipe", which tells the story of what the people of Rosspoint in Mayo went through while standing up to the oil and gas giant Shell. For many campaigners the ongoing Shell 2 Sea campaign is a case study in what to expect if you dare to stand up to the state and the oil and gas industry.

I have spoken to many people involved in the Shell 2 Sea campaign over the years. They described being disappointed many times over the years, even by some they believed to be on their side. But one thing that was repeated by many of the Shell 2 Sea campaigners that I met, was not to get comfortable and think that you can win by entering negotiations with the companies or the state. This point was, for many of them, a valuable lesson they learnt and that they obviously thought needed to be shared. I believe that the close political ties of some of the most prominent people in the anti-fracking campaign with Fine Gael, has steered the anti-fracking campaign at critical times in the wrong direction. This is a view that I share with many in the campaign. I freely admit that at times these close political ties have benefited the campaign. However, at other crucial times in the campaign, to avoid embarrassment to their political overlords or damage to the government publicly or electorally, decisions have been made, at times, by some in the campaign, to protect or facilitate Fine Gael and the government on the issue of fracking. Over the last number of years many meetings have taken place between some of these prominent, Fine Gael friendly, anti-fracking campaigners and councillors, TD's, ministers, council officials, EPA officials and apparently, I have now learned the Taoiseach too. These meetings have taken place behind closed doors and the details of what the purpose of the meetings were, what was discussed and the outcomes of such meetings have not been documented or shared publicly. I do not believe you can lead a successful, credible, campaign unless there is transparency and room to question actions.

The majority of us, in the grassroots anti-fracking campaign, believe we are not in negotiations with government parties, we are demanding a ban on fracking in Ireland, full stop. Yes, that goal does have various stages but those stages should endeavour to benefit our campaign not facilitate politicians, local councils or the government. The grassroots groups in this campaign work on many levels, we have been involved in lobbying politicians, a camp at Tamboran's site in Fermanagh, public awareness, organising

meetings, workshops, protests, travelling abroad to anti-fracking camps and conferences and offering support to anyone who may find themselves in court because of peacefully protesting against this industry. As I write, one campaigner in Fermanagh is having to deal with that situation of defending his right to be allowed to peacefully protest against fracking. Some grassroots campaigners from various groups have been there to support him through his trial, but if the truth be told, there should have been a much better response by the campaign as a whole in helping defend this protester's basic rights, he is basically standing up on behalf of all of us in this campaign. his trial continues in March.

Getting back to this election and the situation at hand. The fact that just a few days before the GEAI and Fine Gael TD Tony McLoughlin's announcement on the EPA study, both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael Councillors voted against Ind candidate Declan Bree's motion in Sligo County Council, to place a ban on fracking in the county development plan, speaks volumes about the true feelings of both parties on the issue. At the same time we have Fianna Fail and Fine Gael candidates in the election signing pledges stating that they are anti-fracking, the fact is even if they are, if anyone knows anything about traditional party politics in this country, it is extremely rare that TD's from these will go against their party's stance. Even if they do in most cases nothing happens. The Sligo Fine Gael and Fianna Fail councillors, wishy washy excuse that legally they could not support Bree's motion, is rubbish, as proven by the fact that Leitrim County Council did enter a ban on fracking in their development plan and the sky did not fall in on them. Although these Fine Gael and Fianna Fail councillors in Sligo squirmed their way out of supporting Bree's ban, days later we are supposed to accept, an election time promise, delivered second-hand, through a "document" from a Fine Gael junior minister to a Fine Gael TD. that supposedly no one in the campaign has seen apart from GEAI and perhaps the spokesperson of Love Leitrim who is also a member of GEAI. This is quite simply a joke. In reality, this announcement by GEAI and a Fine Gael TD, an announcement that we are supposed to be "delighted" about, amounts to nothing, It is a classic you scratch our back, we'll scratch your back scenario eg. don't question us as the leaders of the anti-fracking campaign because we are delivering results and Fine Gael are taking the right steps in moving towards a ban on fracking, so if you're against fracking you can vote for us in the general election, a win win deal, right.

The truth of the matter is that the most likely government that would allow fracking to go ahead in this country, is a government made up of Fine Gael, Labour or Fianna Fail. Fine Gael's British counterparts, the Tories, as I write, are vigorously trying to push ahead with fracking all over the U.K, despite all the evidence against fracking and huge community resistance. The fact of the matter is that in Europe the oil and gas industry go hand in hand with right wing governments, that means with a right wing government in power here, the oil and gas industry will get what they want. That means a vote for Fine Gael in this election and Labour or Fianna Fail, is a vote closer to allowing fracking take place in this country. Our immediate problem right now is not fighting the fracking industry, but fighting to get rid of the politicians whose parties are the very ones, that if fracking is to be pushed through, like in the U.K, these are the parties that will do the pushing. So allowing Fine Gael to come out at election time and spout nonsense about pausing, stopping, stalling, halting, the EPA study, without questioning this announcement, is the height of political naivety in my view and once again protecting government parties at a critical time. Anti-fracking campaigners coming out announcing this nonsense alongside Fine Gael, is not only extremely disappointing but also very damaging to our campaign, when at a time, during an election we should be capitalising on the situation and using the opportunity to be heard and supporting good candidates who are truly anti-fracking and will really stand up and fight on our behalf over the next four years in the Dail. If Fine Gael were really "stopping" the EPA study, which is the first steps towards laying down the foundations for fracking in Ireland, then Fine Gael would be shouting this from the rooftops, as would their Labour party colleagues. We would have an official statement from the department and the actual Minister in charge of the department would have already sent out an official statement. The fact is all we have is mixed messages, spin and mutterings from a junior minister. This so-called "assurance" we have been given really amounts to nothing and to pretend we have won something, only benefits Fine Gael in this election and why in gods name would you do that, when

Fine Gael is the party most likely to copy their Tory friends in the U.K. and open the door when the frackers come knocking.

Politics is a dirty game and at election times you see strange things happening, we must always try to speak the truth and expose the spin during times like this and allow people the opportunity to question what is really going on behind the scenes. Fortunately, Fine Gael and their supporters were caught out on this worthless, EPA study, election stunt. I would say it isn't worth the paper it's written on, but as you know it's not even written on any paper. I will continue to work with the people I have been working with for the last five years in this campaign, grassroots people, who are honest, open and transparent in their work in the anti-fracking campaign and people who at critical times in the campaign, would never put their political allegiances first by facilitating an election stunt that in reality is of no tangible benefit to our campaign. We will continue to fight to ensure we get a ban on fracking on both sides of the border on this island. Infrastrata an oil and gas company with a license in Antrim are trying to commence drilling for oil, meters from a reservoir that supplies drinking water to thousands of people throughout Belfast. We need Sinn Fein who are in power in Northern Ireland to come out with a clear statement regarding their stance on this situation.

My view for what it is worth, is that we should support the Right2Change candidates in each constituency in this election, there is an alternative to the politics of elitism and dirty deals. Don't fall for the election stunts. From a master of spin in Irish politics, when asked about politicians making false promises during elections, then Labour Minister, Pat Rabbitte famously said, "Isn't that what you tend to do during an election?", at least he's gone into retirement, let's try and see that a few more TD's from this government and the last one, are forced into joining him. At the election hustings organised by Love Leitrim, last Saturday night in Manorhamilton, many people from the audience tried to seek clarity on the issue of the EPA study. I also spoke and pointed out political ties in the campaign that I believe have facilitated this Fine Gael election announcement. After making these comments and wanting to explain why I was doing, so the MC on the night a green party member and a member of Love Leitrim shut the meeting down. Others also tried to get answers to questions from the election candidates about Minister Joe McHugh's announcement regarding the EPA and other issues. Independent councillor Gerry Dolan was one of those people who has genuinely worked on this issue for years and without whom we may never have got a ban on fracking into the Leitrim County Council Development Plan.

I am not surprised at the fact that I was stopped from raising concerns that many others in this campaign also share, this has happened before many times. We have also had to fight our corner before many times because on other occasions again we felt some were putting their politics before the campaign. Of course these things are never done in an overt, obvious way, that's not how you get away with political stunts, these deals are done slyly and behind closed doors, anyone who understands Irish politics understands this. Aedin McLoughlin director of GEAI said to Sligo Today, "I am very upset that a small number of protesters seem to consider public meetings to be an opportunity for anarchic disturbances for their own sake". Dr. Aedin McLoughlin a former Fine Gael county councillor may describe the events on the night as "anarchic disturbances", she has every right to her opinion. But the fact remains that the almost worthless, Fine Gael announcement that she also delivered with "delight" on the first day of the election, regarding the EPA research study, stinks of electioneering and there was only one party it was really designed to benefit. Some in the campaign believe we should wash our dirty linen behind closed doors, I disagree, I believe if we express our concerns and fears publicly, there is a chance we might stop these types of stunts from happening again in the future.

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