Opposition to shale gas return as Progressive Conservatives threaten to lift moratorium

By TRACY GLYNN

Two dozen people rallied against shale gas in New Brunswick outside a natural gas conference in Moncton on a frigid November 15th. They waved colourful signs and moved their bodies to the beat of a drum.

The rally was a forewarning that rural New Brunswick may soon again become the site of conflict as residents determined to protect the health and integrity of their rural environment oppose the will and power of the provincial government.

“We are extremely disappointed and alarmed about recent statements from the incoming New Brunswick Premier, Mr. Blaine Higgs, that his government intends to lift the moratorium on fracking for shale gas in Sirknutik,” said Kenneth Francis, spokesperson for Kopit Lodge at Elsipogtog First Nation. Kopit Lodge is tasked with working on resource development issues for the First Nation.

Sirknutik is the traditional land of the Mi’kmaq people. “It has never been ceded or surrendered to the Crown,” says Francis.

Blaine Higgs’ Progressive Conservative cabinet was sworn in on Nov. 9 after Brian Gallant’s Liberal government lost a confidence motion to govern on Nov. 2. The Progressive Conservative throne speech on Nov. 20 made no mention of shale gas, however immediately afterward the new Premier began giving media interviews in which he suggested his government would move forward to allow fracking in some communities. The opposition Liberals have introduced an amendment to the throne speech that would keep the moratorium in place across the province. At press time that vote had not been held.

One of the places that Higgs sees open for shale gas is the rural Sussex region, part of the unceded Sirknutik territory.

While the Conservative MLA for Sussex Fundy-St. Martins, Bruce Northrup, supports lifting the moratorium by Christmas, a number of community groups across the province are opposed to fracking for shale gas. The New Brunswick Anti-Shale Gas Alliance wants the government to support the development of green energy sources instead.

Corridor Resources stands to gain the most from the lifting of the moratorium. Corridor operates the McCully Field in Penobsquis to obtain natural gas for markets in the Maritimes and northeast US. Corridor’s McCully F-58 well in Elgin was fracked in 2008 and could be re-fracked for gas production. Their Frederick Brook shale gas prospect is one of “two high impact – high reward exploration prospects,” according to the company’s website.

Patrick Colford, president of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, joined the rally outside the industry conference in a demonstration of solidarity between labour and groups working to protect the rural environment. “We need to stand shoulder to shoulder with our brothers, sisters and comrades to send a clear message to the new Progressive Conservative government that fracking has no place in New Brunswick.”

“I am yet to find out what economic benefit it would bring to our province. Shale gas is basically worthless. It is another example of our province giving away our collective wealth to multinational corporations,” says Colford.

Ray Ritcey, CEO of the Maritime Energy Association, was at the Moncton conference while the protest against shale gas was outside. He told CBC that he was in favour of lifting the fracking moratorium. “It is a good thing to find short- and mid-term solutions to a gas supply gap that exists today and is only going to increase by Dec. 31 of this year.” The Sable Island natural gas deposit has been depleted and offshore drilling off the island is expected to conclude at the end of the year.

Shale gas opponents remain committed to keeping the province frack-free.

“Initially there was regret that we have to fight against fracking again, but as all the familiar faces showed up, it felt amazing. It was heartwarming to see that the solidarity between Acadians, Francophones, and Indigenous people is alive and well,” said Pamela Ross, one of the organizers of the rally and a member of the Moncton chapter of the Council of Canadians.

Francis agrees with Ross: “In 2013, the entire community of Elsipogtog First Nation stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Francophone and Anglophone neighbours and allies in successfully defend this area from fracking.”

Francis and Elsipogtog Chief Arden Sock are the plaintiffs on a 2016 Statement of Claim that seeks Aboriginal title to Sirknutik.

“Kopit Lodge will take whatever steps are necessary to protect our water from practices like fracking,” says Francis.

This article was produced with the support of RAVEN, Rural Action and Voices for the Environment. Tracy Glynn is a doctoral researcher working with RAVEN and an editorial board member of the NB Media Co-op.

By SOPHIE M. LAVOIE

FILMMAKER

Alanis Obomsawin was in New Brunswick on Oct. 24, 2018, to present her film Trick or Treaty? as part of the Indigenous Film Series held by St. Thomas University’s Senate Committee on Reconciliation.

Obomsawin was introduced by film scholar André LaIselle, Dean of Humanities at STU. LaIselle highlighted Obomsawin’s many accomplishments, recognitions, and prize-winning films and initiated a conversation with the filmmaker.

Looking back on her 51 films and her beginnings as an activist, Obomsawin said: “My battle was education.” She had started reading a lot as a teenager and she “was so angry about what was being taught. Books were designed to be happy. We are going somewhere where we’ve never been before. More and more we are respected. Canadians want to see justice to our people. Everywhere in Canada there’s such interest. Young people are doing incredible things. If ever there was a time for our young people, it’s now. It’s a very special time.”

The last 6 films directed and written by Obomsawin

The documentary she presented, Trick or Treaty?, from 2014, is especially concerned with Treaty 9 concerning the Huron-Wendat people of northern Ontario. The film describes how the signatories were not correctly informed of the meaning of the treaties by those explaining the treaty and requesting their signatures in 1905. The film also covers the Idle No More Movement, the six-week hunger strike by former chief of the Attawapiskat First Nation Theresa Spence (2012-2013) as well as the two-month Journey of Nishiyuu by 6 youths from the Whapmagoostui First Nation, from the northeast Cree village in Quebec on Hudson’s Bay to Parliament Hill in 2013.

For Obomsawin, “Canadians have no clue, they think [the Treaty] has no meaning. It’s the contrary for our people.” Discussions of Treaty 9 were ongoing at the time she made the film and people were able to get a clear picture of the Treaty through a conference she filmed in Moose Factory by a noted treaty historian John Lang, author of Treaty No. 9: Making the Agreement to Share the Land in Far Northern Ontario in 1905. Lang’s conferences were crucial “for teaching and making people understand how things were done, [through] cheating and lying.”

Confidently, Obomsawin declared: “I won’t be here but I’m sure there will be justice” for Treaty 9 peoples, through its renegotiation. She sees the current context as positive and got emotional when describing it to the public: “I’m not saying we’re going somewhere we’ve never been before. More and more we are respected. Canadians want to see justice to our people. Everywhere in Canada there’s such interest. Young people are doing incredible things. If ever there was a time for our young people, it’s now. It’s a very special time.”

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“Children have to hear another story”: Alanis Obomsawin, filmmaker

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The last 6 films directed and written by Obomsawin
Filmmaker Charles Thériault reveals how corporate capture is devastating the forest and forest-dependent communities in rural New Brunswick through a series of films that can be accessed online at ourforestreallyours.ca.

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St. Pierre said, “A man reported fish kills along a stream. We need to cut down hardwoods and plants. Glyphosate-based herbicides, VisionMax, Forza and softwood plantations after they have clearcut a forest. We need to stop spraying the forest after she said she and other contractors are in a perpetual debt cycle of working as a contractor cutting wood for J.D. Irving, Ltd. These types of systems, in which workers have their financial affairs tied to the company they work for, are ripe for exploitation. It’s a system of slavery-like control over the workers,” claims Thériault.

New Brunswick’s land base, which has never been ceded to the Wandering Lake, Mi’kmaq and Passamaquoddy peoples, is carved out as 50 per cent public land (also known as Crown land), 25 per cent commercial land and 20 per cent freehold. The New Brunswick government has the responsibility of managing the public forest in a way that benefits all New Brunswickers. However, many, like Thériault, argue that private interests are largely benefiting from forestry practices today.

Forestry has been a main source of jobs and way of life in many rural communities across New Brunswick for generations. The closure of several mills across the province in the early 2000s devastated many forestry-dependent communities. However, as mills closed and people were laid off, the local economy continued to be cut from New Brunswick’s public forest in record volumes. The Conservation Council of New Brunswick reported that timber harvested from public land reached a record high of 5.4 million cubic metres from 2006 to 2007.

Thériault was raised in what he describes as an “Acadian ghetto in Moncton,” Georgetown. He recalls the youth community feeling just outside the city, but only a few blocks from the downtown core. He eventually settled in the rural northern New Brunswick community of Kedgwick with his wife and family. “I was a young man, and many, many, many, many, stood to ‘up.’” In 2009, St. Pierre organized a petition to the provincial government, which St. Pierre says, “taught him how to stand up.” In 2009, St. Pierre organized a petition to the provincial government, which St. Pierre says, “taught him how to stand up.”

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By TRACY GLYN

Children have to hear another story

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have continuity because they are centered around James Bay. After Indigenous people became Canadian citizens in 1960, an office opened and people were encouraged to write to identify their territory. The government wanted to record their stories, but there was no money for such a program, and was returned to the people, along with financial incentives. This was the beginnings of renegotiation and, for Obomsawin, “in some places it was done quite well and in others not.”

Reflective of Obomsawin’s outlook, her recent film, Our People Will Be Healed (2019) depicts the sufferings of Indigenous peoples. This film features the Helen Betty Osborne Ininiw Education Resource Centre in Northern Manitoba as a model for self-governance, a central theme in Obomsawin’s work and specifically taking care of the place, about strangers coming and Indigenous peoples losing their land, and a warning told by a beaver to a woman washing clothes.

Sophie M. Lavoie writes on arts and culture and is a editorial board member of the NB Media Co-op.