Over 600 people rallied at the Legislature on November 23rd to demonstrate their opposition to the government’s plan to develop a shale gas extraction industry in the province. Their concerns stem from water contamination, air and noise pollution and serious health problems in other jurisdictions following the development of shale gas extraction. Photo by Stephanie Merrill.

**By ARMAND PAUL**

When New Brunswick’s MLAs returned to the Legislature on November 23rd, they had to wade through a crowd to get into the building.

Thirty anti-shale gas groups held a public rally at the Legislature to show our MLAs the growing wave of opposition to the government’s plan to develop a shale gas extraction industry in the province.

Some of you may wonder why these people are so upset. Well, it’s been about a year since most New Brunswickers first learned about shale gas, and most of them found out about it only when the gas companies came around to begin their explorations.

There was no advance notice from the government, so people were taken by surprise. As folks studied and transformed their minds about the industry and its record elsewhere, surprise turned into horror and then to anger.

Interested at the lack of consultation and disclosure by their government, New Brunswick citizens wrote letters to the Premier, to cabinet ministers and MLAs, only to receive formulic public relations propaganda that sounded reassuring but never addressed their real concerns.

In the media and at public community meetings, government statements and the gas companies’ talking points were - and continue to be - virtually indistinguishable. It’s the claim that shale gas extraction can be done in such a manner as not to damage to people or the environment.

Meanwhile, citizen investigations revealed a growing body of evidence on multiple instances of water contamination, air and noise pollution and serious health problems.

When shale gas wells were drilled, people and animals got sick, rivers were polluted, well water was suddenly undrinkable - sometimes even flammable - and property values plummeted.

Arogant gas companies flouted regulations and denied any responsibility for the problems, and, worse still, governments in these areas turned a blind eye to their citizens’ plight and counseled their royalty payments.

It seemed as if that disturbing pattern was being imported to New Brunswick, and people in the exploration phase began to feel not just abandoned by their government, but also about to be sacrificed by it on the altar of economic recovery.

Frustrated citizens began to take up signs, and protest rallies sprang up wherever the gas companies held their public open house presentations.

In August, more than a thousand people from all over the province marched into the legislature to air their opposition to the perceived corporate and government conspiracy to impose this whole complicated mess upon the citizens.

Another rally in Moncton drew 600 demonstrators. In August, citizens blockedade seismic testing trucks north of Stanley for two days.

While many other jurisdictions placed moratoriums or outright bans on hydraulic fracturing or fracking, New Brunswick pushed ahead with exploration, even suggesting that social programs might collapse without the expected shale gas royalties.

As the public pressure has revolved around fracking, a process that pumps dangerous chemicals into the earth. In the United States, there have been more than a thousand confirmed cases of water contamination linked to the use and handling of hydraulic fracturing fluids.

While those fluids are clearly a high-risk gambit, other aspects of shale gas extraction have guaranteed negative effects.

Shale gas extraction involves hundreds, even thousands of wells spread across the landscape.

Every well requires more than a thousand trips over country roads by heavy trucks carrying water or other fluids. Traffic quickly wears out roads designed for much lower loads.

Rural retreats resound with the din of traffic and the constant roar of compressors, endless exhaust fumes foul the air, and pristine country vistas are scarred with snaking pipelines and toxic holding ponds. These aren’t minor side effects; they are large-scale phenomena.

It’s hardly surprising that these prospects weight heavily on the minds of the people who have gathered at the legislature, first on Nov. 19, and again on Nov. 23. After all these months, as negative evidence continues to grow, they are driven in: not to kill the bubble, but to find the bottom line, instead of representing the long-term best interests of its citizens.

Armand Paul is a writer, editor and project consultant who lives in Durham Bridge.

**Rural communities being bullied on shale gas researcher**

**By CHRIS WALKER**

Chris Walker interviews Susan Machum, Canada Research Chair on Rural Social Justice at St. Thomas University, about the impact of shale gas on New Brunswick’s rural communities.

Chris Walker: You have argued that rural communities are disproportionately targeted for government cost cutting because they represent smaller proportions of the population and you characterize this as a form of bullying. Where does fracking fit in all this?

Susan Machum: Bullying occurs when someone with a disproportionate amount of power picks on someone with less power. Right now essential services are being cut in rural communities and these decisions are being made at the provincial level. The rural communities don’t get a say in the matter, and it is the same with fracking. Who decided that there should be fracking in the province? The provincial government invited these companies to come and explore for natural gas and the people who are going to be most affected have no voice in the decision making process. Therefore, these people have to go and march on the sidewalk and protest in order to try to have a voice. This tells us that rural residents are not equal, they are not treated with respect, and that they will have to stay outside and protest while these important decisions are made without them. For most people, it’s kind of obvious that the communities which are going to have these machines in them should be part of the decision making process - but that is not how policy is formed.

CW: How do you respond to the argument that rural New Brunswick is poor, underdeveloped, and that fracking, at least in the immediate term, is one way to stimulate rural economic development?

SM: Every time we look for economic growth the resources come out of rural communities. That’s true whether we are looking at Canada, Latin America or Indonesia. It’s rural communities that supply the urban centers with resources such as water. Rural communities are so rural that they are not even on the planner’s radar and are not even considered at all. It’s only when the frontier moves into a new area that the town begins to plan. They don’t even look at the impact of their decisions on rural communities.

In the end all we will get are some royalties - and where are those royalties going to go into the coffers to share up the budget. Is this money going to be reinvested into rural communities? I can’t see it happening. We are told that these communities are a drain on the economy, we can’t afford to plow their roads, we can’t provide 24-hour medical services, and we can’t afford to keep their local schools open. Is it reasonable to expect that these royalties are going to turn things around and save these communities? No. What we are witnessing is a resurgence of the 1960s modernisation model that was prescribed for the ‘third world’. It failed then, and it is going to fail now. We don’t have the knowledge or the new resources to exploit.

CW: Environment Minister Peter Kent has indicated that the federal government has the power to ban fracking if it were deemed a “significant broad environmental risk.” What is your assessment of this?

SM: Governments don’t tend to see any kind of business as environmental risk. They are so concerned with economic growth and expansion. The new UN platform on sustainable development focuses on “green growth,” so it is a growth model but with minor changes. Similarly, when we talk about “clean energy” all we mean is clean at the point of production. In this regard, nuclear energy is considered “clean” because it leaves waste that will be around for generations, it poses massive environmental risk as in the case of Japan, but it is considered “clean.”

The whole concept of Clean is still mirage in the bubble. It’s time for the bubble to burst or the bottom line, instead of representing the long-term best interests of its citizens.

Armand Paul is a writer, editor and project consultant who lives in Durham Bridge.

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