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The Newfoundland Fracking Protest: Climate Change Action Without Climate Change Arguments

Simon Jansen

Anyone who has worked on climate change initiatives comes to a point where they ask themselves, “Why don’t people care?” Why does it not rattle people into decisive action when they hear that the future of the planet is at stake? This article highlights action on climate change that occurred without climate change being the main motivation. A large number of people and organizations stood up to oppose a hydraulic fracturing project. And we all had different reasons. Mine was climate change. But that argument didn’t win this fight. Others did.

Shoal Point Energy held a petroleum exploration license for several parcels in the offshore of western Newfoundland. In November 2012, they held public consultations in the region to discuss their plans to use onshore-to-offshore fracking in their oil exploration. In January 2013, the company submitted an amendment to their environmental assessment to the Canadian Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board to use fracking to stimulate oil production in one of their wells. They later submitted a new project proposal together with their partner Black Spruce Exploration to use fracking in several other locations on the west coast of Newfoundland.

The economy in the region was struggling and not much resistance was expected from the population in light of a potential economic boom. But small pockets of concerned citizens formed in the region. They started to inform themselves about the risks associated with fracking and soon determined that the risks were not worth the potential economic benefits. The next question they faced was how to bring this information to the public.

Many of the concerned citizens found themselves in a position of environmental activism for the first time in their lives and reached out to other groups for help and guidance. That is how I got involved. I was the chair of the Western Environment Centre at the time and my main areas of interest were climate change and energy. We had experience with organizing events and getting the word out and how to apply political pressure. I knew that transitioning away from oil and gas would also mean leaving oil in the ground.

The motivation to stop this fracking operation had little to do with climate change for most people though. The concerns were largely about the fracking fluids that were used and how they could affect the drinking water. People in Gros Morne National Park were also concerned about how fracking in the region would affect the image of a pristine park and therefore their livelihoods in the park, which were based on tourism.

Generally, the initial belief was that other people would become opposed to the project if they were made aware of the risks. So the Port au Port/Bay St. George Fracking Awareness Group organized a public forum on fracking in April of 2013. They invited government officials from the provincial Department of Natural Resources, elected municipal and provincial officials from the region and reached out to the St. Lawrence Coalition to bring in a speaker from a credible organization who could outline the risks associated with fracking. The St. Lawrence coalition is an organization protecting the Gulf of St. Lawrence from oil and gas development. They are science based and had considerable experience with fracking operations. The Port au Port group also invited Shoal Point Energy, but the company did not participate, later claiming that they had not been invited.

The event drew hundreds of people and the venue was packed. No environmental issue in the region had attracted such attention in a very long time. Government officials insisted that the regulations they had in place were sufficient to mitigate the risks associated with fracking. Those arguments were vehemently questioned by not only the representative of the St. Lawrence Coalition, but also individual residents who had the opportunity to ask questions and voice their concerns. Emotions were running high. The event put fracking in the spotlight. It significantly slowed down the timeline for the proposed fracking project as all the players—government, industry and anti-fracking groups—had to re-evaluate the situation. The battle for information had begun.

Shoal Point Energy and Black Spruce Exploration met with regional boards of trade and municipalities to outline the economic benefits.

They promised a large influx of jobs. Anti-fracking groups put together their own presentations outlining the risks of fracking and the economic reality of fracking regions in North America. The topic was constantly in the media. Each group emphasized their case and countered opposing arguments. During a conversation between parties from both sides it became clear that the public is most likely to trust academia to provide information, with researchers presenting their findings directly to communities so that results could not be misinterpreted.

In June 2013 leaders of the regional anti-fracking groups came together to form what became the strategic think tank behind the movement, the Newfoundland and Labrador Fracking Awareness Network (NLFAN). The name was chosen to draw in a broad base of supporters and include all perspectives into the conversation, deliberately avoiding an anti-fracking position. A common mandate also needed to be formulated with a strategy to exert enough public and political pressure to reach that goal. From media coverage it was evident that the entrenched opposing views had left many residents struggling to place their trust in either side. The argument of hundreds of jobs for the region as promised by the company was matched by the notion of setting your drinking water on fire if it becomes polluted by fracking operations.

In July 2013, NLFAN asked the provincial government for a pause on fracking until an independent science-based review of the process was conducted. NLFAN did so with the belief that all the groups could support this initiative, and the confidence that a science-based investigation was something that a vast majority of residents could get behind in light of all the information and sometimes misinformation that made the rounds in various forms. Of course, there was no guarantee that the government would listen, particularly as Newfoundland and Labrador had been an oil producing province for decades with a strong lobby from the oil industry. So alternative strategies needed to be formulated and NLFAN now had to apply several new lenses.

For example, politicians and residents were targeted with different strategies since they were motivated by different arguments. NLFAN limited the number of arguments they used in their communication and only picked arguments that were scientifically sound and close to the hearts of residents of the region. This approach protected their arguments against misinformation

and counterarguments. The risk of contaminated drinking water for example was very close to peoples' hearts and Shoal Point Energy's assurances that the fracking fluid would remain underground was geologically improbable. That combination made this a powerful argument. Structural details about well casings on the other hand may have been too technical in nature to be effective as a main message and experts could be quoted on both sides of the argument.

The momentum of the movement had also reached a level that few local activists had experience with. In order to acquire expertise on how to push this agenda forward, different members of NLFAN connected with a variety of groups: Ecojustice, The Sierra Club, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, the Save our Seas and Shores Coalition, the Atlantic Office of the Council of Canadians, Indigenous leaders of landmark protests against fracking in New Brunswick, and citizens that fought the fracking fight in Nova Scotia.

With their main arguments fortified, NLFAN set out to strategically increase public and political pressure. The chosen arguments were communicated through traditional outlets like call-in radio shows, television and radio interviews, letters to the editor and newspaper articles. Social media was also used to disseminate information. Anti-fracking signs were put up in peoples' homes and alongside roads. Particular attention was paid to routes that were traveled by politicians and later on by members of the fracking panel on their way to presentations or meetings. Residents were provided opportunities to express their concerns in the form of a "walk around the block" that the Port au Port group organized in September 2013, which was essentially a peaceful demonstration of residents carrying signs with anti-fracking messages.

Jessica Ernst, a high-profile anti-fracking activist from Alberta, was invited in September 2013 to tell her story. Local groups advertised the event by handing out fliers in front of grocery stores, shaking peoples' hands, and using their connections to get local residents to attend the event, which turned out to be a huge success and significantly increased public pressure. In tandem with local actions were broader initiatives that took on national and international scopes. The provincial Sisters of Mercy sent a letter to the UN as well as federal and provincial government officials that outlined human rights infringements caused by fracking operations. And groups in Gros Morne partnered with the Canadian Parks and

Wilderness Society to call for a buffer zone around the park to protect it from industrial activities, which made national headlines.

In November 2013, the provincial government announced that it would not accept applications for fracking onshore until it completed an internal study of the impacts of fracking, which would include reviewing existing regulations and consulting with the public. As well, Environment Canada asked the Council of Canadian Academies about the state of knowledge on potential environmental impacts from the exploration, extraction, and development of Canada's shale gas resources, and about current mitigation options. The Council of Canadian Academies is an independent, not-for-profit organization that supports independent, science-based, authoritative expert assessments.

The report by the Council of Canadian Academies (Matthews, Cherry, Ben-Eli, Bharadwaj, Chalaturnyk, Dusseault, Goldstein, Lacoursiere, Mayer, Molson, Munkittrick, Oreskes, Parker, & Young, 2014) noted that few peer-reviewed articles on the environmental impacts of shale gas development have been published and that society's understanding of the potential environmental impacts has not kept pace with development. The expert panel also stated that the health and social impacts of shale gas development have not been well studied.

In light of credible documentation on these scientific gaps, NLFAN organized a press conference in May 2014 involving sixteen groups, including tourism organizations, a labor union, a fisheries representative, religious groups and environmental groups, to present a broad and unified base in their demand for science-based answers to their questions that were independent from an internal government review. Pressure was now coming not only from environmental groups, but also from local economic sectors like tourism and fisheries as they determined that fracking was incompatible with their operations.

The provincial government deemed their internal review inadequate in the fall of 2014 and finally announced the creation of a special review panel, which released its report (Newfoundland and Labrador Hydraulic Fracturing Review Panel, 2016) in May 2016 after spending a year and half researching, consulting with stakeholders and the public, and gathering detailed information about the proposed project. During this time, NLFAN and its member groups continued their efforts, this time encouraging the public to submit their

comments to the review panel, educating residents on how to participate in the consultations and connecting the members of the panel to relevant groups and people in the region who could provide important input.

The final report (Newfoundland and Labrador Hydraulic Fracturing Review Panel, 2016) successfully separated misinformation from science-based facts as the groups had hoped, though it did not call for a ban on fracking. It showed the gaps in the current research and recommended numerous steps be completed before allowing fracking in the province. Many of those steps were either so time or cost intensive that the report essentially closed the file on the fracking conversation, at least for the time being.

The west coast of Newfoundland had become famous in the province for their level of activism. Climate change had been the main motivation for a few of us, but it was certainly not what caused the region to rise in this unlikely combination of actors. Climate change is the defining challenge of our time and those of us working on it know that the solutions need to be tailored to people and their regions. But is it necessary that the solution be driven by an argument based in climate science? Advocates of climate action should consider linking their recommendations to arguments unrelated to climate action, but which lie closer to the hearts of the people who should take action.

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About the Author

Simon Jansen is a member of the Steering Committee of the Newfoundland and Labrador Fracking Awareness Network.