

# Fracking

## My Part in its Downfall

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A BAN ON 'Irish onshore fracking' cleared its last major hurdle on Wednesday 31 May 2017, when the Dáil passed a Bill to amend the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development Act. The Bill prohibits fracking in the Irish onshore and its internal waters for both exploration and extraction. The bill was signed into law in early June 2017, just before the summer recess.

Back in August 2011, six months after Brian Cowen's government fell, things looked very different. An opinion piece appeared in The Journal entitled "Want to boost the economy and create jobs? Drill for gas." It was written by the then CEO of Tamboran Resources, Richard Moorman, to whom, in the dying days of the Cowen government, Conor Lenihan gave options on licenses to drill for gas in the Northwest. The column painted a picture of "an exciting energy future in onshore natural gas for Ireland", which Mr Moorman must have thought was a rosy one for a defeated, bankrupt and demoralised people.

I commented on the article, pointing out the environmental and public health risks, as did many others. We were respectful, but firm. And that's how things have played out over the past six years. We participated, we resisted. We argued and protested. We persuaded, we persisted and we succeeded.

Love Leitrim was set up in 2011, after people started to hear about this onshore drilling technique and realised the impact it would have on the Northwest and the country as a whole. Widespread industrialisation, permanent environmental degradation, and severe damage to public health was what we were facing. Still, we wanted to be positive - to be an organization for Leitrim, not just against fracking.

At the time, though, most of the government were in favour of fracking - Pat Rabbitte calling it a "game-changer". Through the grassroots work of many local groups, and the support of local politicians, we got the government to accept that the issue needed more study. This gave us time to make the case against fracking.

Fracking is the fossil fuel extraction



■ Celebrating success outside Dáil Eireann

process of last resort - when you can't just punch a few holes in the ground and pump, when you have to pepper the land with thousands of wells, inject each of them with millions of gallons of toxic fluid, and hope that the wells don't leak, the cracks in the rock don't connect with water sources, the lorries don't crash and the ponds don't spill. And to support this industry you create temporary low skilled jobs, imported high-skilled jobs, and eradicate the industries that have a long term future in the Northwest.

Fortunately, in Ireland people still have access to politicians. People can talk to local politicians, who are their neighbours; they talk to their national ones. We invited people from Canada and the US to Leitrim to hear their story. One of them, Jessica Ernst, stood on the stage at Leitrim's iconic Ballroom of Romance and said "have some sympathy for your politicians, because they're being lied to." Well, some bought into the lie more than others, but we never walked away. We soon discovered that the machinery of decision-making can be used to achieve any outcome that political will was seeking. The strategy of the campaign was to change that will, from the ground up. We met every week for six years, appeared at marts and concerts, worked with other anti-fracking groups and with Good Energies Alliance, Concerned Health Professionals of Ireland, and Friends of the Earth. We knocked on doors, sold t-shirts, made submissions, raised our own funds and made our own luck.

By 2015, the tide was beginning to turn, as the overwhelming weight of peer-reviewed research backed our view of fracking's dangers. Attempts to commence drilling in Northern Ireland concentrated minds further. Parties like

Sinn Féin, People Before Profit, and Fianna Fáil, began to propose restrictions in various forms. But the breakthrough was the Private Members Bill introduced by Sligo-Leitrim TD Tony McLoughlin. Private Members Bills are selected at random to be considered by the Dáil, and luckily Tony McLoughlin's bill was selected and was accepted for consideration with cross-party support in October 2016.

A Joint Oireachtas Committee studied the bill and rejected the report of the Irish EPA research, which could not confirm that risks to water and air quality could be mitigated. The committee's report restated the Dail's opposition to fracking and affirmed the legality and validity of the Bill, but accepted the Attorney General's advice to amend existing legislation instead of passing a standalone bill.

It was this Bill, amending the existing Petroleum Act, that was introduced by Tony McLoughlin T.D. and debated into the closing minutes of allowed time. With four minutes to spare, and no opportunities for rescheduling, the Bill was passed, to applause from the viewing gallery.

Deputy McLoughlin, in recommending his bill to the Dail, acknowledged the support of all campaigners. He also acknowledged the support of all the major parties in the Dail, the result of over six years of local education, campaigning and building consensus. And selling t-shirts.

*This was never just about Leitrim though, or even climate change. It was about the health of communities. Communities that organised - messily, imperfectly, in their spare time, after the kids went to bed - and believed that faith in the political process is also part of a healthy community. A faith that on this occasion at least, was vindicated.*