

Claire Hoy ? A protest that makes no sense

Earlier this year, my wife and I had occasion to drive through North Dakota, a state which is virtually being transformed by one of the biggest oil booms in U.S. history.

Everywhere you look, the roads are clogged with trucks carrying the product to market and the fields are full of temporary homes popping up like mushrooms to accommodate the extraordinary influx of workers hoping to cash in on \$100,000-a-year-plus jobs. It's likely a mirror image of the Yukon Gold Rush, where small, sleepy villages are suddenly a magnet for furious growth and activity, bringing with it not only jobs and prosperity but also, as always happens, housing and other infrastructure shortages and increases in crime, although in that regard, North Dakota remains one of the safest states in the union by far.

At the base of the boom, of course, is the recovery of shale gas through fracking, a process which requires a vertical hole being drilled hundreds of metres down into rock, after which the hole is filled with water, chemicals and sand. This creates small cracks and the natural gas flows from the shale into newly-created wells.

While fracking has actually been used in the petroleum industry for 60 years, advanced techniques, such as horizontal drilling ? more environmentally friendly than it was ? have led to a major increase in its use in recent years and, along with that, has become the latest bogeyman de jour of the environmental industry.

Environmental activists and ?concerned celebrities,? from Greenpeace to Yoko Ono and Lady Gaga, have been spreading the gospel of fear and loathing, hoping to scare people into believing that the big bad oil industry is out to poison their air and water all in the name of unholy profits to feed the so-called military-industrial complex.

There is even a popular documentary called Gasland which features a dramatic picture of flaming tap water supposedly caused by fracking, even though, to date, there is not a single actual proven case of fracking causing this kind of pollution, let alone earthquakes, which was part of a CBC documentary called Shattered Ground earlier this year for the Nature of Things, the show hosted by Canada's resident scaremonger, David Suzuki.

As often happens when an issue takes off among the usual suspects, it really doesn't seem to matter much whether the accusations of harm are true or not. Just as long as they are scary enough to raise widespread public ire and put those evil entrepreneurs in their proper place.

Which brings us, of course, to the current First Nations anti-fracking protests against shale gas exploration in New Brunswick, protests which turned violent last week and led to some terrible confrontations between protesters and police.

The police action prompted National Chief Shawn Atleo to slam the RCMP for ?extreme use of state force and control,? claiming that the ?peaceful protest? on Elsipogtog First Nation was ?disrupted through police and military intervention? and were ?completely unacceptable??

Perhaps Atleo lives in a parallel universe, but it seems to me that people don't come to a ?peaceful protest? carrying firearms, knives and improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, the kind of makeshift bombs that, as National Post columnist Christie Blatchford pointed out, ?killed so many young Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan.? Nor do ?peaceful protesters? burn police cars and seize media cars and equipment. But there you are.

Former chief and now band councillor Robert Levy told The Globe and Mail that nearly 900 people live in Rexton and about 2,400 in the nearby Elsipogtog reserve. He said the reserve has nearly 80 per cent unemployment and about 70 per cent of the residents are under 30 years old. Up to five families are sharing homes.

He said issues coming at it ?from all angles,? and the possibility of fracking and concerns about its effects on water quality were the last straw and why they're so determined to stop the shale gas exploration in the area.

Meanwhile, back in North Dakota, the 14,000-person town of Williston produced 14,000 new jobs between 2010 and 2012 alone because of the fracking boom. The state has about 41,000 oil industry jobs plus another 18,000 support jobs. It has a billion-dollar surplus and the economic impact of oil production to the state's economy is estimated at \$34.4 billion. There's more, but you get the picture.

Somehow the native protesters think it's better to snuff out the opportunity for high-paying jobs for their currently unemployed young people, continuing the horrible cycle of hopelessness, all in the name of saving their world from an environmental danger that doesn't exist.

How does that make sense?

