

Inquiry into unconventional gas in Victoria – submission

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- I thank the Environment and Planning Committee for allowing me the opportunity to comment on matters relating to the exploration, extraction, production and rehabilitation for onshore unconventional gas in Victoria.
- I have been much involved in this issue, having run as the lead Senate candidate for the Stop CSG Party in the 2013 Federal election. The party has now been disbanded, but I remain active in my opposition to unconventional gas mining. I have also run for my local ward in the last two Bass Coast Shire Council elections, with the unconventional gas issue forming a major part of my platform. I live in Inverloch and I am a builder by trade. I am much involved in my community, especially through local sporting clubs. I coach the Under Fives for my grandson's soccer club, and also act as referee/rules coach/game co-ordinator for his Under Eleven squad.. I also work part-time for the YMCA, running kinder soccer classes. I write a column for the local newspaper, commenting on local issues and affairs. These activities have brought me close to the children of the district, and it is their future which has propelled me into my committed opposition to unconventional gas mining, given the danger which I believe it represents to their long term interests.

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Let me state from the start that I believe unconventional gas mining has no place in the Victorian environment, and should not proceed in any form.

I have chosen to address the terms of reference of this inquiry in a somewhat informal manner, before entering into a discussion which extends those terms of reference only slightly. My reason for doing this is that I am sure the inquiry will be receiving ample submissions on the technicalities of the way in which this industry operates and the attendant environmental and health risks which this represents to the communities already living in the affected areas.

Some concerns over the industry's method of operation, however, cannot be over-stressed and demand comment even in a general overview. First and foremost is the potential for the contamination of ground water. It would seem that the majority of unconventional gas sources are not viable without the practice of fracking, which breaks open ancient coal seams by high pressure fracturing. Any guarantees given by the industry that this process does not pose the risk of toxins entering groundwater resources would seem highly optimistic given the interconnectivity of the water table directly adjacent to the coal seams involved. So the not small question of whether you would risk dissolving the toxins contained within coal seams into this nation's most precious resource, while also introducing a mix of fracking chemicals, demands a serious answer.

It must also be noted that the process of then pumping the water introduced to these coal seams during the fracking process back to the surface, and then storing it indefinitely in open dams, totally beggars belief. At issue is how we can even consider shackling our children's children with the ongoing maintenance of pools containing highly toxic material, dotted throughout our landscape for the foreseeable future with no chance of rehabilitation. The chemicals contained in coal seams and those used in the fracking industry are simply not for human consumption. Many of them are volatile, meaning that if the dams dried out they would be released in the form of a gas. And at flood times the dams could

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overflow into our watercourses. So it would seem the height of recklessness to consider such a thing in any district, let alone one which produces copious amounts of food for domestic and export markets.

A further serious problem is that of gas flare offs, in which the unwanted gases brought to the surface are simply burnt to the atmosphere. The dangers of inhaling petrol fumes are well known, yet this industry indiscriminately burns off related hydrocarbons on a daily basis. So even if they were far less toxic than concentrated petrol fumes, the length of exposure by neighbouring communities would still logically demand that anyone downwind of these flare offs has a serious problem. This is evidenced by the incidence of serious medical conditions in existing gasfields, which has long since mounted well in advance of such incidences elsewhere, as I am sure many well supported submissions will concur.

The industry regularly uses the “tobacco defence” to deal with these problems; namely, that there is no evidence of a causal link between their industry and any health or environmental problem which may be occurring adjacent to it. The tobacco defence has been totally discredited in the case of the industry which spawned it. It was also used for many years by the asbestos industry, with tragic results. It even made an appearance during the thalidomide disaster. All of which begs the question as to why anyone would give it any credence in the modern world, especially when no regulatory regime exists to oblige fully scrutinized testing of new technologies, as now exists for the pharmaceutical industry. Lack of evidence simply points to lack of independent research. It can never point to a clean bill of health for a given activity.

And so I could go on, covering the issues of rogue methane emissions in a climate challenged world, the threat to farm gate sales, and the massive impact of an industrialised landscape upon tourist destinations, to mention but a few. But there seems to be little point when others will be covering the same ground. So I will save you the time of repeatedly reading similar material and move on to what seems to me to be the most salient point.

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And that is this. The gas which could be procured by this industry in Victoria is not needed for domestic purposes. We have sufficient gas in Bass Strait to satisfy domestic needs quite long enough for our entire economy to benefit from the ongoing development of perfectly viable renewable sources of energy. So presumably the gas which may be produced from Victoria will be used as an export product, feeding into an international market which is at present beginning to wean itself off dependence on fossil fuels, and may well do so far more aggressively as climate change and other pollution issues begin to bite more deeply.

So the profits which will flow from this industry may well be very short-term, as might the royalties which would come to the Victorian State government. Surely this raises the question of whether the huge risks involved in this industry, amply demonstrated by fully documented evidence from around the globe, outweigh the short-term gain to the coffers of the State. And this is the point I would make, even though it is not directly covered by the inquiry's terms of reference.

For surely an innovative State government in a climate changing world should be able to generate greater wealth by promoting other far more sustainable and far less dangerous industries. Certainly, the current state of Federal politics does not seem conducive to this point of view. But is the government of the day in Victoria to be bound to the views and direction of the government of the day in Canberra. Or might it stand aside and show the courage to be different, to embrace another future so much the better for its people and their children.

Unconventional gas is an industry redolent with risk; risk to water, risk to health, risk to the future viability of entire communities. At present, given the amount of research available, it is an outrageous risk. Even with a part of the necessary research completed to some degree, it would still be a major gamble. And governments are not elected to gamble. They are elected to assess the balance of probability of various actions and their outcomes, and to act accordingly. Some governments may disregard this

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obligation as they attempt to balance their books during a short-term electoral cycle. But surely such gambling is reckless in the extreme, with the attendant risk of being exposed as such.

The wiser course must be to look to the long-term health and well-being of the state, and to explain your actions in those terms. Unfortunately, the party which I represented at the last Federal election is no longer in operation. But I feel that one of its founding principles should outlive it. This is the concept that every generation, as their legacy to the generations which will follow, should leave the land in equal or better condition to that in which they found it. I'm sure that the founders of the party will have no problem with me offering this concept to the present Victorian government, in the hope that they will adopt it in their deliberations over the unconventional gas mining industry, at the very least.

I totally fail to see how this industry can do anything but fail that yardstick, and by a good long measure. The consequences of such a failure could well be catastrophic.

Indeed, I see no reason why a government which was brave enough might not adopt this concept of inter-generational responsibility as its banner. The very least that could happen would be that it would gain a powerful amount of respect for adopting a principal which all logic would suggest to be the bare minimum requirement for responsible administration.

And a wonderful start towards that end might well be contained in the conclusions of this present inquiry. Because your deliberations are not for this generation alone. This industry will expire within that time frame. But a fast growing body of research and personal experience strongly suggests that its consequences may be very much longer than that.

So you are charged with no small decision, and I firmly trust that as objective representatives you will not gamble on you conclusions. Thankyou once again for considering this submission.

Roger Thorrowgood