

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Inquiry into unconventional gas in Victoria

Torquay — 13 August 2015

Members

Mr David Davis — Chair

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Richard Dalla-Riva

Ms Samantha Dunn

Mr Shaun Leane

Mr Adem Somyurek

Mr Daniel Young

Participating Members

Mr Jeff Bourman

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr James Purcell

Mr Simon Ramsay

Staff

Secretary: Mr Keir Delaney

Research assistants: Ms Annemarie Burt and Ms Kim Martinow

Witnesses

Mr Anthony Gleeson (affirmed), Frack Free Geelong, and

Ms Elizabeth Packett (affirmed), Gasfield Free Torquay.

The CHAIR — We welcome Anthony Gleeson from Frack Free Geelong and — —

Ms PACKETT — Elizabeth Packett.

The CHAIR — From the same organisation?

Ms PACKETT — I am from Gasfield Free Torquay, which is an offshoot from Frack Free Geelong.

The CHAIR — If I can ask both of you to give a brief presentation, then we will ask some questions.

Mr GLEESON — Before I start I would like to acknowledge that the traditional custodians of the land we are on are the Wathaurong people of the Kulin nation. I just hope we learn to look after the land half as well as they did. We have a way to go. Where do I start? A little bit about me?

The CHAIR — Succinct and clear. Yes.

Mr GLEESON — I am a full-time climate activist, and I work a little bit as an English tutor. I should add: a full-time unpaid climate activist, such is my passion about this topic. It is hard to sit back and contemplate why the hell we are even discussing this when the latest science is saying, ‘Don’t go anywhere near fossil fuels if you want to stay below 2 degrees’. Currently we are heading, trending, for 4 degrees at least, so please, for your kids’ sake, for your grandkids’ sake, become aware of the latest climate science. Forget about this; that is more important. But this is what we are facing right now.

I cannot just take people’s word for things. I went to northern India and talked to people there who were trying to reduce their carbon emissions. I do not know how many of you have been there, in the foothills of the Himalayas. There are a group of young people there reducing their carbon emissions, working in their communities to reduce their carbon emissions, because they were concerned. I said, ‘Why would you bother? Because as a Western developed country our emissions are so much greater than yours’. They pointed up — and I will never forget this — to a glacier and said, ‘When that goes, we go’. When you experience that, you do not really have a choice after that. Not long after that I went to Bangladesh, which has got the biggest river delta in the world. It is probably one of the poorest countries in the world and one of the most vulnerable countries in the world. There is no doubt about climate change there, absolutely. Lord Monckton — some of you may have heard of him — would not dare go near either of those countries because he would get ripped to pieces. There is no doubt in either of those countries about climate change. I guess I will leave it there. You have seen it; ask me some questions.

The CHAIR — My question is a very simple one — that is, accepting the argument, there are some views that you have express in your submission around the one planet and the zero carbon approaches. This is one step removed from the question of how you get the gas, but is gas not an interim fuel that is lower in its carbon intensity than the current fuel that is the dominant fuel in Victoria?

Mr GLEESON — Well, the jury is still out on that. You have heard evidence yesterday and today about the work that is happening at Stanford. Anthony Ingraffea and a guy, Howard I think it is, have serious doubts. It seems the break-even point is about 3 per cent. If it is less than 3 per cent, it is better than coal in terms of emissions. If it is greater, it is worse. Their evidence is showing that it is much greater than 3 per cent. That was not paid for, it was independent from Stanford University. It is good enough for me. I have also read a report from CSIRO, which you would hope would be fairly independent, by a branch that is funded by the coal seam gas industry, and they did not find any. You guys have got to ask yourself that question: who do I believe?

I have no doubts, absolutely no doubts. I have three grandkids. One was born two weeks ago. I have no doubts. They motivate me every day to get it through to people’s minds that we are heading for a climate crisis. That is not to scare people, but we have got so many opportunities through that — so many opportunities. A post-carbon world could be really exciting. It will be really exciting. But for some reason here we are still asking questions when the rest of the world is moving on. I thought Victoria would be smarter than that.

Ms SHING — Firstly, before I ask my question, I would just like to invite you — it is Catherine, isn’t it?

Ms PACKETT — Elizabeth.

Ms SHING — I am so sorry, my apologies. Did you have anything that you wished to add to build on the earlier contribution made?

Ms PACKETT — No, I think that is fine.

Ms SHING — My question then goes to the nature of the organisations and the groups that you represent. To the extent to which there has been any consideration about whether there is a point at which coexistence might be possible — —

Mr GLEESON — Impossible.

Ms SHING — Just let me finish my question. Whether there is a point at which coexistence might be possible, and if there is not a point at which coexistence is possible, to what extent is that based on conversations that you have had with industry, specifically the proponents of an onshore gas exploration or extraction sector?

Mr GLEESON — My experience with that industry — we asked them to attend a meeting and were told that they were told by the state government they were not to be there, which is wrong. We followed that up. We are not stupid. Okay?

Ms SHING — When you say — —

Mr GLEESON — Yes, can I keep going, please?

Ms SHING — Just to pick you up on that. When you say that you were told by the state government — —

Mr GLEESON — By Lakes Oil, the secretary there.

Ms SHING — If you could provide additional information about that.

Mr GLEESON — Well, my word. It was a phone conversation.

Ms SHING — You said you followed that up, so just in terms of that additional information.

Mr GLEESON — Another phone call, and they said the same thing. We contacted the government department and they said, 'That's rubbish'.

Ms SHING — Which government department?

Mr GLEESON — I have got no idea. Whichever one they said; I guess resources. I do not know. They change their names fairly regularly. I do not know. I just know what I heard.

Ms BATH — I am looking at 'Listen to this CD in your car', this piece of information. Just for clarity, Kieran Kennedy is not the mayor of South Gippsland Shire Council, but he probably was once, so it may have been when he was mayor but he is not the current mayor at the minute.

Mr GLEESON — We do not have a high budget. Liz, take a note of that one.

Ms BATH — There is a lovely lady called Jeanette Harding.

Mr GLEESON — I am really pleased that that is what you got out of the whole thing. But keep reading, please.

Ms SHING — We are trying to be constructive here.

Mr GLEESON — Yes, that is good. It is years of frustration you might be getting.

Ms SHING — I understand that, but we are trying to be constructive.

Ms BATH — I would assume that based on sitting here today and yesterday you have seen the intensity and I would say the integrity of the way we listen and the way we try to ask our questions.

Mr GLEESON — No worries.

Ms BATH — And I guess the manner and open mind and broadness about which we do ask questions. My question for you is in terms of public health and your grandchildren and their wellbeing in the long term. What do you see as being the major issues around this industry?

Mr GLEESON — All the stuff that you have heard, they are the major problems. I cannot see anything right with it, apart from the fact that some people will make some money out of it. The health problems with it, you have got Doctors for the Environment and you had Mike Forrester talking to you yesterday about his concerns. That is not my area of expertise. I guess I have an overall synthesis of it. But it is the chemicals that the workers are exposed to every day and the people who live nearby. I would be very surprised if there were any executives of those companies that live anywhere near the chemicals. They would never pour them. They would sit back in their boardrooms and make a decision based on the amount of money. But they have got to realise that at the other end there is collateral damage, and that is people. I do not want my grandkids to be a part of that, or anyone's kids to be a part of that. I cannot see anything right with it.

The science is saying we have got to transition from fossil fuels. It is a fossil fuel. If you look at independent studies, it is no cleaner in emission terms than coal. We have just got to face facts; we need to transition. Every dollar that is spent on pursuing this hopeless case is a dollar we do not spend getting where we need to be, and the clock is ticking all the time. It is just delaying. We are delaying what we need to do.

I have drawn the line in the sand, and tens of thousands of other people have drawn their lines already. One day you are going to have to decide whether you are politicians or whether you are caring parents or grandparents. All of you are going to have to make that decision. That is the reality.

The CHAIR — Or both.

Mr GLEESON — That is the reality, because there is a thing called party loyalty. You have got to go along with what the party says. You cannot say too much outside of that, which restricts what people can say.

Ms PACKETT — Can I just say something quickly here too.

The CHAIR — Yes, go.

Ms PACKETT — Unlike Tony, I am not a climate activist. I work in television as a scriptwriter. I would not even say I am an environmentalist —

Mr GLEESON — I would.

Ms PACKETT — in any way prior to coming in touch with this issue. The extent of my environmentalism was making sure I got my recycling in the right bin; that was about the extent of it really. But something about this issue really touched me when it came along. I felt that it was morally wrong, but I also questioned; I did not just take it on blind value.

In Easter last year I drove up to New South Wales. I drove around the Bentley blockade that was taking place up there. I went up there and spoke to people there. Yes, there were a lot of rainbow tie-dyed pants going on, but there were also some farmers, a lot of Indigenous people and a lot of concerned citizens there, and that really brought it home to me, and the fact that they were prepared to bring in I think it was at one stage 800 police to come and clear that area, but they got 3000 people there, and that protest was stopped.

After that I went up to Queensland and I drove out through the Surat Basin, around Chinchilla and Roma and around there. I was not there long enough. I was there on a Good Friday, and it was like an industrial zone. There were trucks going everywhere. If you had a farm there, I cannot imagine it coexisting in that environment. The trucks on those back roads were incredible. That was just a general impression of driving around in my little campervan.

Then I went into the towns and spoke to people there. Most of the workers were FIFO — fly in, fly out — so they were not from those communities. Obviously some of the businesses there were doing well, but again a lot of the people I spoke to, like the woman who ran the motel, had come in from Brisbane to cash in on it. Again, a lot of people were cashing in, and from what I understand too in that region, now that that initial construction

phase is over, a lot of that has dropped off and for a lot of those people who came in to help with those subsidiary businesses it has not been as fruitful as they thought.

I went and explored, and that was just my personal experience of this issue. Climate change is an issue; I agree with that. When there are other alternatives, like renewable energy, I do not understand why we are bothering with fossil fuel. It just does not make any common sense or moral sense to me.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I think you have covered everything. I feel the passion. I understand your concerns, but you have got to understand that some of us have not ever had to deal with this or understand it, so for us it is a learning experience as well.

Mr GLEESON — I do. I know it is.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — You often seen us on the phone. Sometimes we are looking to find out some further evidence so that we can put that to the witnesses, but I feel your passion. Thank you for taking the effort to drive up. You obviously feel passionate enough to do that, so that gives us an indication of where it is all at.

Ms DUNN — I have a couple of issues I would like you to cover. One is for the committee to get a sense of the momentum and size of Frack Free Geelong. How many people is it, from what backgrounds are they — that demographic slice. My second point is in relation to a submission that we had from Dr Carman earlier. He talked about opponents of the industry using stunts and misinformation and did cite Frack Free Geelong as one of those opponents. Do you have any commentary in relation to that allegation?

Mr GLEESON — Guilty probably about media stunts, but how else do you get your message across? I do not think I am all that persuasive. I do not think I can persuade 1200 people who did not want to sign our petition or the 447 people who put in submissions to the Greater Geelong City Council. We heard that they were going to get information about fracking so they could make an informed decision. We asked where they were going to get that information from. They said government departments and the CSIRO. I have already said about the CSIRO department that they were going to get information from, so we thought that maybe they are not going to get the whole picture.

I co-host a radio show on community radio in Geelong weekly, so over the two or three weeks — I think they had a month — we found people who were independent experts on the topic and we made this CD. Council ended up unanimously choosing to go against; the motion was passed to be against fracking. I guess that is the extent of the backing. We never ever had any problem in anyone we asked to be interviewed. They were more than happy because they knew what was going to happen with it. Apart from some of the messages earlier, I will leave the CD with each of you. Have a listen to it in your car. Essentially, you weigh it up. These guys are not being paid for this. A few hours went into it unpaid. Do you believe them or do you believe people who have been paid by an industry that does not have a future? They are desperately trying to prolong that future, but at the cost of people. People will die as a result of that.

Ms DUNN — I can see Elizabeth is champing at the bit there.

Ms PACKETT — You were just asking about the demographic of the group. Gasfield Free Torquay is the group I represent. In this area on the surf coast a lot of people are very environmentally minded. Obviously there are a lot of surfers who feel a natural affinity. I would say there are quite a lot of young people here too, probably more so than in some other groups. We have a lot of passionate people in their twenties, which is fantastic, but ranging all the way up. That is just a brief glimpse of our group down here.

Mr GLEESON — Geelong was just every cross-section, every age.

Mr RAMSAY — Anthony, I perhaps take umbrage at your comments —

Mr GLEESON — I am not surprised at that, Simon.

Mr RAMSAY — about politicians not caring. I know you are pretty hard core, but I note in your photograph some friendly faces whom I know very well and who have been very supportive of the issue just around fracking, not to complicate the whole climate change argument. We are here listening.

Mr GLEESON — That is good.

Mr RAMSAY — In fact this inquiry is being done on the basis that there was concern within the community and to make sure you had the opportunity to express those concerns.

Mr GLEESON — I do not think I said otherwise.

Mr RAMSAY — No, but you sort of suggested that we were not caring because we are politicians.

Mr GLEESON — No, that is not what I said.

Mr RAMSAY — I do not want to get into that argument now, but I am just saying — —

The CHAIR — Move on.

Mr RAMSAY — We are very aware of the community —

Mr GLEESON — That is good.

Mr RAMSAY — concerns around this issue and take on board —

Mr GLEESON — I am pleased.

Mr RAMSAY — seriously the comments that you make here before the inquiry.

Mr GLEESON — I am pleased to hear that. I would hate to think I was wasting my time.

The CHAIR — Thank you both for your submission, both written and verbal. The secretariat may want to talk in the next little while.

Mr GLEESON — No problem. I will leave these. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.