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Should we frack? (Emotions need not apply)

By: [Paula Graham](#) | December 6, 2014

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Institutional discrimination at its best: The 'old boys club' reviews fracking



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Members of the Bay St. George/Port au Port Fracking Awareness Group began posting signs in west coast communities on Friday advocating for a "frack-free" province. The question of whether to frack should incorporate "local knowledge, ethical concerns about future generations, social and cultural bonds to the land and sea, and plenty of emotion," says Paula Graham. Photo by Aiden Mahoney.

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador [appointed](#) five upper-middle class, university educated white men to decide whether [hydraulic-fracturing](#) ("fracking") should happen here in the province.

Though the final decision is up to the [Minister of Natural Resources](#), this homogenous group of men will have a major influence on whether fracking will happen in the province. The mandate of the review panel, as chairperson Ray Gosine adamantly [points out](#), is to advise on "the socio-economic and environmental implications of the hydraulic fracturing process."

In appointing an all-'expert' panel, the government seems to interpret the mandate as a technical problem. But questions about society, the economy, and the environment encompass a range of ethical dilemmas and considerations.

Yet the men who hold the power in the fracking review process ardently discount anything other than purely 'scientific' data.

Last year, then Natural Resources Minister Tom Marshall [told hundreds of concerned residents](#) who packed into a hall in Port au Port East to hear him speak that the government would "do the right thing for the people of this province, based on evidence, not on raw emotion."

When his successor, Derrick Dalley, announced the external review panel last August, [Dalley referred to fracking](#) as a "very complex and sensitive issue for a lot of people," and said the government needs to "separate some emotion [from] this and really focus on the science."

Likewise, according to an [account in the Western Star](#) of a talk panel member Wade Locke gave at the 9th International Symposium on the Oil and Gas Resources of Western Newfoundland in Corner Brook last September, Locke is worried that "emotion" and "subjectivity"—a person's own perspective informed by their experiences—will 'tragically' jeopardize the possibility of fracking in Newfoundland.

It seems there is confusion over what questions ought to be asked if we are to make the right decision on fracking. The question of *how* to frack is a scientific question. The question of *whether* to frack is a much broader and more complex question that should incorporate local knowledge, ethical concerns about future generations, social and cultural bonds to the land and sea, and plenty of emotion.

Clarifying the question

The process of oil and gas extraction ("how should we frack?") must be designed by experts in engineering, geology, and similar fields. But deciding whether we want fracking at all is a political question.

Political questions are about people's lives, experiences, feelings, health, kinships, and how we organize and manage our societies knowing that it is our children who will inherit the societies we create. Political questions are about what we do, knowing that things like oil development impact different people in different ways.

Technical questions about how to extract oil should certainly be left to scientists, engineers, experts. On this point [Maurice Dusseault](#) and I agree completely. The question at hand, however, is not a technical one.

The question of whether to frack asks us to grapple with all the aspects of fracking, from wastewater toxicity levels to the [physical](#)

“ Science tells us how to do things. But deciding what

things to do means hearing from different people and perspectives... ”

and mental health effects of living close to fracking wells (see also [this study](#)).

To do this, we need a panel and a decision-making process that recognizes the [psychological effects of climate change](#), contemplates the ethics of allowing large corporations to [disrupt natural areas near local communities](#), and considers the [long-term effects of fracking](#) and the [social inequalities perpetuated by fossil](#)

[fuel-based economies](#).

Science tells us *how* to do things. But deciding *what things to do* means hearing from different people and perspectives that ["bring unique information and experiences to bear on the task at hand."](#)

Representation, or not

Recently, [Hans Rollmann asked](#): how can such a homogenous group deal with such a complex question? How can these 'experts' understand the nuanced impacts of fracking on local animal populations? Or how the construction process will affect local women, children, and First Nations people? Or how nature-tourism operators will adjust to a landscape of drills and methane flares?

Despite the fact that there is an [Environmental Policy Institute](#) at MUN's Grenfell Campus in Corner Brook, there is no one from the west coast of the island on the panel. Not even an 'expert.'

Rollmann and others ([here](#) and [here](#), for example) have concerns about the lack of diversity and lack of local representation on the panel, never mind proportional representation in terms of gender, race, and economic status.

Representation is important because the [inclusion of minorities and marginalized groups](#) at the very beginning of the policy-making process is the first step in creating environmental policies that respect the [precautionary principle](#) or, at the very least, consider who will benefit from disrupting the environment and who will bear the risk. (Hint: corporations will benefit a lot, a few workers will benefit a little, and local communities will bear every risk.)

Institutional discrimination

[Institutional discrimination](#) ('systemic' or 'structural' discrimination) refers to how organizations like our education system, legal system, and health care system serve some people better than others.

The [decision not to criminally charge a white police officer](#) for killing an unarmed black man contributes to institutionalized racism in the US court system. [Chants about raping teenage girls](#) during UBC's 'frosh week' is institutionalized sexism. So is the fact that Canadian women [continue to earn less than men](#) for doing the same work. Which is why about a quarter of the countries in the world have electoral gender quotas — to compensate for ["structural discrimination and barriers against women in politics."](#)

[Canada](#) does not have a legislated electoral gender quota, but the Liberals and the NDP have adopted voluntary quotas. The Liberals aim to elect 25 per cent women and the NDP aim for 50 per cent female candidates. The Conservatives do not have any gender quota aspirations.

Institutional discrimination keeps many people out of public decision-making processes. It leads to situations where big decisions about society, such as whether to frack in Newfoundland, are put in the hands of a few [privileged men](#).

Once again, it is up to the 'old boys club', the same club that has been making big decisions on behalf of the rest of us for centuries.

B'ys, isn't this getting old?

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