



Darwin – Louise Becker

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05 February 2018

Darwin Convention Centre, Darwin

Speaker: Louise Becker

Louise Becker: My name is Louise Becker and I've been an active member of Frack-Free NT, as it's now known, since 2013. In fact, I was asked to come here because I'm probably the longest standing member in that activist group, probably the oldest too, but I've been with them since the inception.

Hon. Justice Pepper: The wisest, I think, is the word you're looking for.

Louise Becker: In fact, I attended the first meeting of Don't Frack the Territory as it was then known. Since that time I have amongst other things attended countless subsequent meetings, helped on numerous information stalls, and attended rallies and collected hundreds of signatures for petitions. I'm a maths teacher at a senior high school. I spend most of my working hours reminding my students how to use mathematical theorems and principles and sound methodology to support arguments to solve problems. I also own and have skippered a yacht across oceans and participated in numerous international races. Both of these activities define me as a practical, pragmatic problem solver who deals with reality and also has an appreciation of the natural environment.

I certainly do not see myself as a hairy-armed idealist imported from down south who is far too emotional, makes exaggerated claims and is ignorant of the facts. That was a quote from our previous chief minister. In the past five years I've witnessed the great lengths that lobbyists ...

Hon. Justice Pepper: Thank you.

Louise Becker: ... against hydraulic fracturing have sought expert advice from engineers, geologists, hydrologists, chemists, and lawyers. Recently as you well know we worked hard to raise \$5,000 to engage an expert economist to inform people of this issue because we are interested in the facts about the economic benefits or lack of from fracking. I'm very pleased to see the 2017/18, sorry, that in 2017 and '18 this inquiry or community engagement is taking place. I would like to remind the panel however that the first community engagement took place back in mid-2013. It was not organised by the government even though 90% of the territory was under application for mining licences. It was organised by Don't Frack the Territory at the Old Timers' hall in Bees Creek.



People from the mining companies, the state and local governments were all invited, and I might add attended to present their point of view and ask questions. A similar meeting was also held at Humpty Doo. Both meetings were well attended and it was not long after these meetings that the exclusion zone for mining applications was extended beyond the immediate rural area, suggesting that even then it was acknowledged that there was a risk factor to this form of extracting gas. I've read the 120 recommendations although I do not claim to remember them all. I do not have to be a maths teacher to recognise that 120 is quite a large number and certainly conveys the message that hydraulic fracturing contains a lot of risks to the environment, livelihood, and sociocultural lives of the people in the NT.

120 recommendations is asking for a lot of guarantees from the government in terms of regulation and the companies in terms of ethics and integrity. I think it comes down to whether the people of the NT trust both the government and the companies to fulfil these recommendations. Personally I doubt it will be the case, but let me as a maths teacher take you to some figures. Back in 2013 I conducted a survey along with another member of our lobby group. We interviewed people from Adelaide River, Coolalinga, Marrara, Nightcliff and Casuarina shopping centres. We did not claim to be against fracking and asked four simple questions. Do you know what fracking means? Do you think fracking should go ahead in the territory? Do you have confidence in the regulatory framework for mining in the NT? Would you consider this issue when voting in the next election?

50% did not know what fracking was. This clearly showed at the time that the government had no effective plan for informing the public about what could be happening to potentially 90% of the territory. Of those who knew about fracking, 84% did not want it to go ahead. 70% did not have confidence in the regulatory framework, and 77% considered it a voting issue, which is probably why it eventually became one in the next election. Now, in those days I must admit it took a lot of effort to engage and inform people about fracking at the information stalls. However, last year I assisted both at Freds Pass and Darwin Show stalls, and on these occasions there were times when people were queuing up to sign our petition. I've got photographs to prove it.

Let me say this, that when you go to a rally or talk to people at stores or even door knock, you'll find that the sentiment against fracking is not just restricted to a small but growing green movement. It has the support of a much broader base than this: tourist operators, horticulturalists, recreational fishermen, cattlemen, health workers, tradespeople, other professionals, and most interesting of all people who actually work in the mining industry.

I would like to draw your attention to two recommendations, and briefly. First of all, and this is my mathematical, logical mind working, I would like to draw your attention to the recommendation 5.3 which talks about establishing a code of practise for setting minimal standards for the integrity of onshore gas wells. During a recent discussion I had with an expert geologist that had worked in the area currently under licence he said to me,



"Forget any debate that centres around the integrity of wells, Louise. The real skill that separates a good geologist from an average one is his imagination." I looked at him quizzically, and he continued. "As all we ever have to go on are core samples and from there we use extrapolation and a good imagination to describe what the profile below the ground might look like. No one can make 100% guarantee that there will be no risk of hitting a fault or aquifer. We just don't know for sure."

I'd also like to comment on recommendation 7.4 which requires baseline assessments prior to licences being granted. Thinking logically I asked myself what purpose does baseline data serve? Of course, it is to establish that if, for example, a measurable increase of methane in aquifers or surface water or water contamination from chemicals is recorded then we can most likely attribute it to mining activity. However, as we saw with the PFAS chemical contamination of Katherine it doesn't matter who is to blame. The problem is there, and no adequate solution can be found. Just how far does compensation go?

Once again, I stress that 120 recommendations highlights a huge risk with this industry, and most importantly of all we don't need the gas product. A recently released report from a group commissioned by the government to investigate NT's sourcing 50% of its energy from renewables by 2030 has clearly stated that yes it can be done and has industry support. It is time this government also understands the implications and public cost of these recommendations, listens to the public, and changes its direction in the search for energy in the NT. Thank you.

Hon. Justice Pepper: Thank you very much, Miss Becker. Any questions? Yes. Professor Hart.

Prof. Barry Hart: I just had an observation about recommendation 7.4, that's our strategic regional assessment. You focused on baseline information and had some concerns about that. Fair enough, but I would point out that the other very important component of that is, and you've obviously read the report and you've seen that we do have uncertainties, considerable uncertainties about the actual groundwater in Beetaloo, but elsewhere in NT too, particularly with regard to how much is recharged, what's the annual recharge and the movement and various things. That assessment is going to do that too, by way of a lot more analysis, a lot more modelling, groundwater modelling, so it's a bit more than just baseline.

Louise Becker: I appreciate that. I think I was looking for the recommendation that referred to baselines, because I know for a long time we had asked for baseline data, and then I started thinking, "Well, yeah, but if it's only telling us that somebody's responsible for some change then is that going to really make all that much difference?" Thank you.

Prof. Barry Hart: Sure.

Louise Becker: Thank you for the point.



Hon. Justice Pepper: Just, again, I guess picking up what Professor Hart was saying, is your point, perhaps I'm going too far, is your point, well, I think you said what is the baseline data for. Is it really your point that once you're recording a change that indicates that something's gone wrong and it's too late? Is that it in a nutshell?

Louise Becker: I'm saying that there was concern at one stage that people whose properties had been contaminated weren't able to prove that the contamination had come from the mining companies. We all say we need baseline data to show that there is a before and after effect. That's what I'm referring to, but then I'm saying, well, if there is an after effect, we've already seen that it's very difficult. The damage is done and it's very difficult to rectify that damage. I think that's the point I'm making there.

Hon. Justice Pepper: That's what I thought you were saying. Thank you. Well again, Miss Becker, thank you very much for coming today, taking the time to present your submission. We very much appreciate it. Thank you.