

## Fracking Down Under

### An open letter to New Zealand.



I was privileged recently to visit your country. As Canadians usually are, I was struck by the similarities: the snowcapped peaks, the pristine lakes, the national park system that protects these gifts. Our Pacific coastlines are still relatively rich in sea life. Your Marlborough wines and our Okanagan ones, once derided, are now respected. We both have large neighbours that dominate our thinking more than they should.

But, enough. There is no sense cataloguing the samenesses, for they are well known. What I really want to talk about is the relationship between our countries. In 2011 Canada sent \$241,264,857 worth of stuff to NZ and received \$424,486,599 back. Primarily, said goods were meat (lamb and beef), edible meat offal (same, sort of) and fertilizers. But I submit that our mutual influence is bigger than those numbers suggest. We were both British Empire colonies. As nations, we supported Britain in several wars. Globally, we are solid, sensible, small players, traditionally on the side of diplomacy and peacekeeping. Because of those similarities, we tend to trust one another, and I'm here to suggest that perhaps we should not.

Canada isn't the place it used to be. Our current Prime Minister imagines Canada as a growing world power with military pretensions. He is spending us into oblivion buying fighter jets. He fancies he can afford this because our chartered banking system (which he opposed and promised to deregulate when in Opposition) protected us during the 2008 world financial collapse. As for the environment, the PM has declared open war on environmentalists, casting them as enemies of the nation. I'm not kidding. Sadly, I'm not even exaggerating.

While I was in your country, I read two newspaper articles about fracking. It seems that international oil companies have applied to hydraulically frack your north island's east coast. For those who might not know what fracking is, it's the pumping of mystery fluids into petroleum wells at extreme pressure to crack underground rocks, forming channels into which oil and gas flow. The industry describes it as a safe way to make borderline plays profitable. Opponents claim that the cracks opened by fracking can break into aquifers and render groundwater poisonous. The argument in your country is very like the one in ours: the fracking team brandishes science and fact and dismisses its opponents as anti-progress hippies who would have you living in a pit house, huddled around a manure fire.

In your newspaper was a report that a New Zealand delegation from Hawke's Bay and Gisborne had travelled to Canada and spent 10 days "increasing their knowledge." They returned home buoyed by knowledge that thousands of Canadian wells have been fracked with "no evidence of groundwater

contamination." Meanwhile, Canada's environmental lobby was predicting the sky's collapse based on unusual crop circles and the size of pig spleens.

New Zealand, I'm begging you to ignore what my province is telling you about fracking. A woman in Alberta, a long-time oilfield employee trying to live in a rural area, has a water well that went from sweet to undrinkable (and flammable) on either side of the date when gas wells in her area were fracked. Despite her having mountains of evidence to support her claim, industry insists she has proven nothing. Our government accepts this. If criminal courts ran this way, convictions would be a thing of the past.

I read in your newspapers an article by an industrial consultant who described "fracking-induced seismicity" as being at "background levels." In English, this means earthquakes caused by fracking are nothing to worry about. Maybe the folks in Christchurch would question the notion that deliberately causing an earthquake can be a rational act.

I'm reminded of the 1990s, when Alberta sought to retire its public debt and looked to New Zealand's debt-slaying as a model. For years, the Klein government starved healthcare and education and built up an infrastructure deficit from which we still suffer. We shouldn't have patterned ourselves on you then; you shouldn't pattern fracking policy on us now.

Any advice you get from a Canadian government source comes from an industry source. As for the weirdo environmentalists against fracking, you might look up the opinion of well-known scientist David Suzuki or the well-respected Pembina Institute. They will likely tell you that 40 per cent of the fracking fluids remain in the ground; that groundwater pollution is a fact; that seismicity up to 4 on the Richter scale is significant; that groundwater used in fracking is permanently unfit for human use; that the notion of "controlled fracking" is oxymoronic. One such "controlled" frack recently caused a geyser of fracking fluid to shoot from another oil well—an unintended event, I suspect.

As for trade, let's stick to things we know. We'll send you beef; you send us lamb. ■

**Fracking advocates  
dismiss their  
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*Known for his trio of historical novels The Trade, Lightning and The Great Karoo, Fred Stenson has two new books on the way.*