

Dominic Cardy, Brian Gallant challenge shale gas approach

Opposition politicians say premier ignoring concerns with no new consultations in wake of protests

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The Alward government's stay-the-course approach to shale gas exploration despite ongoing protests from citizens is drawing fire from opposition politicians.

But a political science professor says the government doesn't have anything to gain politically by backing away from potential development of the industry in New Brunswick.

In Tuesday's Speech from the Throne, the government stated its intent to see that responsible exploration for shale gas deposits continue, pointing to natural resources like shale gas potentially providing revenue needed for the government to deliver health care, education and other government programs.

New Democratic Party Leader Dominic Cardy said the governing Conservatives are ignoring the concerns of First Nations people and other opponents of shale gas development.

"This government has decided that the best thing to do is to ignore the people who have clearly indicated they don't feel the government has the social licence to go ahead with shale gas," said Cardy.

"Rather than engaging in discussions with some of the folks, including First Nations leaders who said they are ready and willing to sit down and talk, instead the government has chosen to ignore these overtures," said Cardy.

A traditional Maliseet longhouse was erected across the street from the legislature and First Nation leaders invited the premier to visit the longhouse and hear their concerns. Alward refused, saying the protesters were so entrenched in their position, it was unlikely anything would be accomplished.

"I think that this is really unfortunate and says something about a government that clearly is going into an election not listening to anyone except for perhaps some very limited numbers of its own base," said Cardy.

Members of the St. Mary's First Nation dismantled the longhouse and teepees on Wednesday.

It had been set up on Oct. 26, following a violent clash between protesters and RCMP near Rexton on Oct. 17.

Six police vehicles were destroyed by fire and 40 people were arrested. Explosive devices, firearms, knives and ammunition were seized.

Liberal Leader Brian Gallant said the Conservatives have lost the trust of New Brunswickers on the shale gas file.

"They just came out with the royalties scheme [on Monday]," said Gallant. "How could they have wanted to go forward full throttle for the last three years on shale gas and they didn't even know what our royalty scheme would be?"

The day before the throne speech, the government unveiled a new royalties schedule that would see companies pay a much lower royalty to the province until such time that its capital expenses associated with production have been paid for. The royalty would initially be 4 per cent, escalating to 25 per cent once capital expenses have been paid.

In a news conference about the throne speech Monday, Alward said the Gallant was sitting on the fence with respect to shale gas development.

"His party ran on a platform that they would expedite development, not seek a moratorium, and for political expediency, he's trying to ride the fence," said Alward.

Gallant challenged Alward's assertion.

"If you look at every time I've talked about shale gas, I've been very clear about a moratorium," said Gallant. "The caucus, before I became leader, was talking about a moratorium. So we've made it very clear to New Brunswickers that we think that there are incredible health risks, there are important environmental risks, and the economic benefits are unclear," said Gallant.

"There are many unanswered questions, many legitimate preoccupations and that's why we want to press pause and that's why we're proposing for a moratorium."

'A lot of political capital invested'

Tom Bateman, a political science professor at St. Thomas University, says he doesn't expect the government to back away from the issue because that would send a message to industry that New Brunswick doesn't support development.

The government is counting on natural resources, including shale gas, to provide much needed revenue to the province.

"Shale gas has become a bit of a marker of this government's commitment to reversing this province's economic fortunes, so I think it's got a lot of political capital invested in moving forward on this one," he said.

Bateman says the government has to do a better job of persuading New Brunswickers of the benefits of shale gas development if it wants to get more people on side.

He says the issue has been complicated by many factors, including reports from other areas where fracking has gone ahead, and the fact that exploration was given the go-ahead before regulations were drafted.

"I think if the provincial government can start to really get more concrete about the kind of revenues the provincial government can expect, the kind of jobs this resource might create. That would be much to its benefit."

With Tuesday's throne speech being the last for the Alward government before the provincial election on Sept. 22, 2014, both Gallant and Cardy painted it as an election speech.

"We're getting ready for an election and this government is going into it without any clothes on at all, as far as I can tell," said Cardy.

"You can see throughout the throne speech they're trying to give something to everyone," said Gallant. "When you have too many priorities, that means you don't have any priorities."