



Bogs and Booze in Bellanaboy and Belmullet

by Village 17 December, 2013, 3:34 pm 0 Comments

Risteard Ó Domhnaill

“Shell was using OSSL to win hearts and minds in Mayo to progress the project but suddenly things changed, and tracks needed covering”

Desmond Kane, OSSL

Seventeen years ago this month, the Petrolia drilling rig hit a natural gas field 50 miles off the west coast of Mayo. According to Briain Ó Catháin, MD of Enterprise Energy, who made the find, “It was one of the biggest well-tests that Enterprise had ever done”. For Ó Catháin and other Irish people working in oil and gas around the world, it represented great hope that finally they could come home to work in the emerging Irish industry.

Ó Catháin, now heading the successful oil company, Petroceltic, did not get to see the Corrib project to fruition. Following Shell’s takeover of Enterprise and planning difficulties with Corrib, Ó Catháin moved on. With hindsight, it was a good move.

Shell might now feel a little unfortunate to have inherited the project in 2002. It came as part of the larger Enterprise portfolio, and by this time it was already encountering difficulties. Following a lengthy oral hearing, An Bord Pleanála inspector Kevin Moore recommended that permission to build a gas refinery on a bog be refused: “From a strategic planning perspective, this is the wrong site; from the perspective of Government policy which seeks to foster balanced regional development, this is the wrong site; from the perspective of minimising environmental impact, this is the wrong site; and consequently, from the perspective of sustainable development, this is the wrong site”.

Shell sought and was granted a meeting with Taoiseach Bertie Ahern in Government Buildings on the 19 September 2003. At the meeting Tom Botts, CEO of Shell E&P Europe, received assurances that the Government would seek to facilitate the project, and that a re-submitted application would be processed “with all possible speed”. After amending proposals relating to the disposal of peat, planning permission was granted for the Bellanaboy gas refinery on the original site. Corrib was back on track – or so it thought!



Gardaí outside the gates of Bellanaboy Gas refinery. Picture by John Monaghan

A decade later and still no gas is flowing from Corrib into the now-complete Bellanaboy refinery. The project is set to eventually cost quadruple the original \$800 million estimate, but the reputational damage internationally for the oil giants Shell and Statoil may be much higher.

Corrib has been beset by problems and controversies over the last ten years and, most notably, the jailing of five landowners in 2005, who came to be known as ‘The Rossport 5’. As of the time of writing, Shell’s onshore tunnelling operations are suspended, following the death of a German maintenance engineer on the ‘Fionnuala’ tunnel-boring machine, some 15 metres below Sruwadaconn estuary.

As if Shell had insufficient headaches at the moment, the latest controversy in the long running Corrib saga has come from a most unlikely source. OSSL, a small services provider in the oil and gas industry, was taken on early in the project to provide personal protective safety equipment and “to perform and coordinate small-scale contracting works”. On 10 September 2012, however, OSSL began to release emails and information in which it claimed that its services extended beyond just site-construction-related activities, to dealing directly with key members of the receiving community.

In the first email published on the anti-Shell whistleblower website, royaldutchshellplc.com, OSSL alleges that a Shell contracts manager for Corrib “used OSSL to make payments of cash and gifts to various parties in Erris and beyond” and “gave instructions regarding the purchase of various items to be gifted to local householders with a view to advancing the project in a particularly difficult part of the construction program”.

The email, from OSSL and addressed to the ‘contracts manager’ is dated 23 August 2012. It goes on to claim that another member of Shell Ireland subsequently “disguised” the nature of these purchases, and demanded that the relevant invoices be “falsified and diverted to Roadbridge [the main contractor on Corrib] so as to avoid any connection with Shell directly”. Some of these items are stated by OSSL to be ^
cookers and televisions, and OSSL claims that it was ordered to transform the contents of the invoices to instead represent ‘safety wear’. The identities of ‘Project co-operators’, ie local landowners who were engaging or who had reached agreements with Shell regarding the use of their land for the pipeline, were to be disguised also. Finally, OSSL claim that it was threatened by the Shell employee who ordered the falsification of invoices. OSSL claims it was told that if this activity was ever disclosed, it “will result in

OSSL never working in the oil and gas industry again”. The email is signed off on by the three main members of OSSL – Neil Rooney, Des Kane and his daughter Amanda.

The origins of this dispute go back to late 2009/ 2010, when OSSL was informed by Shell that its services were no longer required because construction on the Corrib Gas project was nearing completion. According to communications manager with Shell E&P Ireland, John Egan, “OSSL subsequently raised a court action against SEPIL (Shell E&P Ireland) and Roadbridge, claiming that there had been excessive tax withholding on invoices from 2007”. Then, in early 2010, Desmond Kane of OSSL contacted An Garda Síochána; not to report a crime, but to seek help in recovering payment from Shell for goods delivered to Belmullet Garda Station in 2007. In a letter to the Chief Superintendent in Belmullet, Kane asked the Superintendent to confirm the “safe receipt” of “festival gifts” from the 2007 Christmas period.

According to Shell it was only in 2011, as the dispute dragged on, that OSSL pursued allegations against Shell regarding non-construction-related activities. According to John Egan, “OSSL alleged falsification of invoices and further, alleged delivery of alcohol to the Gardaí, as well as non business-related works and gifts for some local residents”.



A lone Erris farmer looks out over Broadhaven Bay, landfall of the Corrib gas pipeline. Picture by John Monaghan

Despite these very serious allegations, no action was taken by either Shell or An Garda Síochána. On 2 August 2012, Shell reached a settlement with OSSL. According to Shell’s John Egan, “a full and final settlement was entered into by the parties”. Des Kane of OSSL agreed to discontinue court proceedings against Shell Ireland and Roadbridge.

The terms of the settlement remain confidential but OSSL received a glowing reference from Shell in order to help OSSL secure further contracts in the oil and gas industry. Shell felt it had finally ended the affair.

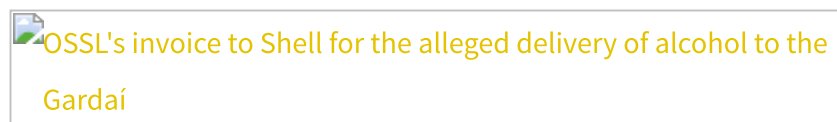
But as has been the case with much that happens in Corrib, the end is only ever a new beginning. Just a month later, OSSL decided to take its campaign public and posted its allegations on the anti-Shell website, royaldutchshellplc.com. Six months later John Donovan, who runs royaldutchshellplc.com, received an invoice from OSSL. The invoice, drawn up five years after the event, outlines how two consignments of alcohol costing €29,500 were purchased in Northern Ireland by OSSL. They were then allegedly brought across the border in a commercial vehicle on the instruction of a Shell E&P Ireland employee and stored in OSSL premises in Bangor Erris.

According to the invoice, two thirds of the alcohol was then removed and delivered by OSSL to Belmullet Garda station and the remainder to a member of the Garda sub-aqua division in Athlone. Curiously, Garda figures prominent in the policing of Corrib including two Superintendents are named as the contacts and recipients of the alcohol. If this invoice does represent a genuine transaction, it raises serious questions regarding the undeclared importation of large quantities of alcohol into the state. By bringing this to the attention of the Gardaí, albeit by asking them directly to clarify that they were the recipient of these 'festive goods', there must surely be an onus on the Gardaí to launch a criminal investigation, or prosecute OSSL for wasting Garda time.

According to Shell: "The production of this invoice coincided with the commencement of a campaign by OSSL demanding further monies from SEPIL associated with their former contract despite having signed a full and final settlement agreement on 2 August, 2012".

John Donovan of royaldutchshellplc.com who, along with his father, Alfred, worked with Shell up until the early 1990s, has pointed to the reluctance of Shell to take court proceedings against OSSL and of An

Garda Síochána to investigate as very curious: “It would follow that if the allegations are false and the items on the invoice false then, bearing in mind that OSSL has been pressing Shell for payment on false grounds, Shell must surely be legally bound as a public company to call in the Garda and/or the UK police to immediately investigate the relevant Irish or UK citizens responsible for what would undoubtedly be a very serious criminal act”.



OSSL's invoice to Shell for the alleged delivery of alcohol to the Gardaí

It also puts OSSL in a very difficult position, where a claim it is making cannot be backed up by hard evidence. There may, however, be logic in Shell not taking action against OSSL: even if the allegations were untrue, a court case against OSSL would still bring much unwanted bad publicity on the oil giant at a very delicate time in the final phase of the project. Being seen to take action against these allegations might give the impression that there is some truth in them, and Shell wants as little publicity at the moment as possible. Surely, however, the Gardaí were not constrained by such dilemmas? If what is being claimed by OSSL appears to constitute a criminal offence, were they not obliged to take action on these very serious allegations that OSSL has levelled at their members?

Indeed, there is a precedent: one of the Gardaí named on the OSSL alcohol invoice of 24 August 2012 took very swift legal action against a fisherman who, within earshot of only a handful of Gardaí, accused the Garda in question of stealing diesel from a local pier. Despite no further publication or dissemination of this claim, the Garda in question instituted defamation proceedings against fisherman Pat O'Donnell. Within two weeks Mr O'Donnell had received a solicitor's letter demanding an apology for the alleged remark. When the apology was not forthcoming from Mr O'Donnell, the Garda secured a judgment of €30,000 plus costs against Mr O'Donnell. Neither he nor any of the Gardaí accused by OSSL of accepting delivery of the consignment of alcohol has taken any action against OSSL to date.

In early June 2013, Shell agreed to sit down once again with Desmond Kane of OSSL.

According to Shell no new information was supplied by Mr Kane and Shell remained “satisfied that the contractual dispute between the two companies had been closed”. The following month, and despite a continuous barrage of damaging public accusations against Shell, Neil Rooney of OSSL sent Shell an email detailing their demands. In the email Mr Rooney demands “€223,000 of our own money” along with €50,000 for stock in Shell’s possession, €120,000 for himself and €80,000 for Amanda Kane, described as “ex-gratia”, as well as a payment to Des Kane at Shell’s ‘discretion’ but including the “disguised” alcohol money owed (calculated by OSSL to be €43,634.25). While the text of the email is a little ambiguous, the total demand is €516,634.25, excluding Des Kane’s ‘discretion’ payment.

Neil Rooney of OSSL feels extremely aggrieved by its treatment at the hands of Shell since late 2009. He claims that Shell dropped it as Shell wanted to distance itself from those who carried out its instructions “to pay for favours you [Shell] now deem to be corrupt”.

Shell taking such a risk as neglecting to pay off its ‘Mr Fixit’ may make sense if one can understand the very fractured nature of the management structure within Shell Ireland. A breakdown in communications or understanding is always likely between various personnel with their own separate views on how best to further the project.

The alternative is that Shell is refusing to give in to OSSL demands simply because they are unfounded, and OSSL is involved in what can only be described as extortion. If this is the case, and there is no reason to think that OSSL has behaved anything other than honestly, one would be left questioning why both Shell and An Garda Síochána have not taken strong and decisive action against such aggression. Why the reluctance to call the bluff of the tiny ‘Mr Fixit’ contractor who has dragged the reputation of the Corrib project and its policing operation through a bog of murky questions?

It is now a matter of record that there are many residents in the villages surrounding the project – Bellanaboy, Glengad, Rossport and Aughooose, who received ‘gifts’ because of their non-opposition to the project. One wonders what the long-term impact of these specific ‘local benefits’ is and ultimately

whether they have helped Shell's attempts to present Corrib as a good neighbour, a local employer and an economic saviour in times of severe financial stress.

In her book on the Corrib Controversy 'Once Upon a Time in the West', Irish Times journalist Lorna Siggins recounts the attitude of Enterprise Oil, under Briain Ó Catháin, to "financial inducements" in the locality. When the project was first mooted, a local Fianna Fáil county councillor suggested that the oil company should pay for and build a 50-metre swimming pool for the local people. This, the councillor felt, would help to diffuse local opposition, while providing an amenity to the locality. The response from Enterprise at the time was clearly disapproving – "the company had demurred, believing it would give the wrong signal".

Whatever the credibility of OSSL's claims, the practice of 'inducements' for certain sections of the Erris community did not solve Shell's PR problem.

Shell's toughest battle is, and always has been, for the souls and minds of the receiving community. The lure of 'inducements' for certain sections of the Erris community has helped smooth the path of the Corrib pipeline. Now, with the project nearly complete, and landowner assistance no longer important, the flow of 'inducements' has been shut off just as surely as the flow of gas opens up. With Shell public relations already moving to a new battlefield over their taxation and offshore licensing, this latest Corrib debacle will have to be dealt with by Shell at the lowest level. As the small OSSL business acrimoniously slugs it out with the Gardaí and local residents, the Shell PR machine will be far over the horizon to further battles and further fields.

Risteard Ó Domhnaill is the director of the award-winning documentary 'The Pipe'

9/9/2016

Bogs and Booze in Bellanaboy and Belmullet | Village Magazine

128 total views, 1 view today

0 Comments www.villagemagazine.ie

 Login ▾

 Recommend  Share

Sort by Best ▾



Start the discussion...

Be the first to comment.

ALSO ON WWW.VILLAGEMAGAZINE.IE

Dublin a total mess

1 comment • 2 months ago

Judicial disappointments

2 comments • 2 months ago