Chair, members I will be brief and deal with the main issues as I see them in relation to passing this Bill and instituting a ban on fossil fuel exploration in Ireland.

First let me say a few words on why I believe this Bill is needed. We have witnessed here in Ireland and globally the effects of rising CO₂ levels on our climate. The rise in the number of extreme weather events, of deadly heatwaves, of prolonged droughts, of record breaking rain events, are well documented. Records are broken routinely. The five warmest years in the global record have all come in the 2010’s. Globally we are one degree above the pre industrial average temperature and heading fast to 1.5 degrees. Climate change is creating millions of climate refugees globally and impacting with devastating consequences the lives of millions more, it is also threatening our earth’s biodiversity and accelerating the sixth great extinction event in the history of our planet.

I have been struck that in this debate opponents of this measure have not sought to cast any doubt on the issue of climate change.

On one level this is welcome. There are few deniers who will publicly challenge the scientific consensus on the cause and effects of climate change.

So I note that the submissions from IBEC and IOOA and others all talk of the need to take action. They all accept the fact that our climate is changing and the future of energy production must be renewable and that we must reduce our emissions.

But I can take little comfort from this widespread acceptance. There is a disconnect between accepting the science and the facts and our unwillingness to take the steps needed.

You will hear today from John Sweeney and Amanda Slevin who will put the climate emergency into some context and who will look at our licencing regime. Next week the witnesses we present will look at the feasibility of renewable energy replacing fossil fuels on the scale needed and in the time necessary. The message from these witnesses is that radical action is possible and radical action and policies are necessary.

The numbers do not add up for those advocates of continuing fossil fuel exploration. We cannot globally burn the proved reserves of oil, gas or coal and hope to reach the Paris Targets of under 2 degrees temp rises.
This Bill is the first step, but only the first; it doesn’t pretend to solve the crisis, or reduce emissions by itself but it sends a clear signal that Ireland is part of a global movement that is prepared to take action and deal with the use of fossil fuels.

So let’s look at what the provisions of the Bill seek to do.

Once CO₂ emissions globally are above 350ppm, this Bill will ensure that the Minister does not issue any Licences, Undertakings or Leases for the exploration or extraction of fossil fuels in Ireland.

This Bill would place Ireland at the front of a global movement to tackle climate change. The continued use of fossil fuels at the levels currently being used globally will mean we would use up the global carbon budget within decades and fail to limit temp increases to under 2 degrees Celsius. This is a death sentence for large parts of humanity and large sections of the earth’s biodiversity.

If this doesn’t constitute an emergency I don’t know what the definition of an emergency should be.

In acknowledging this, the Bill puts down a clear marker that the future cannot be based on fossil fuels if we wish to make the planet a habitable site for humanity and other species

Let me deal briefly with some of the criticisms and arguments against this measure.

First

It will harm energy security, undermine jobs in the industry and make us reliant on Russian gas in a volatile political climate.

I do not accept there is any security, energy-wise or otherwise in a planet that will be 2 degrees warmer than the pre industrial level and which is heading on current trajectories to 3 and 4 degrees within the next generation or two.

However let us be honest about our licencing regime as it stands and about our current and predicted use of gas and other fuels.

If there is a significant find in Irish waters (something I think is unlikely but let us pretend there was) it would be under existing licences issued under the 1992, 2007 or 2014 licencing terms. Under those terms Companies are not required to sell resources back to State, or use Ireland as a base for servicing. The State will receive no royalties on any such find and our tax regime is acknowledged by all, including the department itself as among the most generous for companies anywhere in the world.
In relation to gas and our use of it, we do not currently use Russian gas, nor will we in the future even under present demand trends.

We meet over 50% of our gas needs from indigenous resources at Corrib and Kinsale. The balance of our natural gas requirement is imported from Britain.

Our gas from Britain comes via a system of sub-sea pipelines from Scotland.

Britain has four main sources of gas – its own offshore UK North Sea natural gas (35%), Norwegian North Sea natural gas (38%), Continental natural gas (15%) and imported liquefied natural gas or LNG (12%).

The sources of our gas are secure and safe. This Bill will do nothing to change that. Energy security, is, I believe a red herring to try to justify continued exploration and use of fossil fuels.

If a large find of oil or gas was discovered we are looking at a minimum of 15 to 20 years for that find to be used. That source would last another 20 plus years. Effectively by continuing to explore for oil and gas we are saying we will lock our energy systems and electricity systems into continued domination by fossil fuels, continued high levels of emissions.

Last year Providence resources suggested they might find some 5 Billion barrels of oil in our oceans. They didn’t, but let’s suppose they had.

Those five Billion barrels when burned would have resulted in some 1.5 Billion tonnes of CO₂. The Druid/Drombeg field alone could therefore potentially have produced the equivalent of all Ireland’s greenhouse gas emissions (at 2016 levels) for at least the next quarter of a century.

That would have been a boom to the shareholders and stock holders of a few companies but it would have simply added to the total levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere, it would have undermined the switch to renewables and the needed investment's in alternative policies to achieve that.

It would not replace Russian Gas, or Norwegian or North American gas. It would simply have been added to them. Is anyone seriously suggesting that we should keep looking for new sources of carbon while expecting or hoping that those areas with already proved reserves will just leave in the ground?

That is not a serious proposition. We need to leave 80% of known reserves of fossil fuels in the ground, searching for more will not aid our energy security.
Secondly
We need and will want more gas. It is a transitional fuel, low in CO₂ emission and can help us move to a carbon neutral energy policy.

It is true that gas may emit less CO₂ than coal, however gas is not a environmental climate friendly fuel. It is a high emitting CO₂ fuel. A large scale switch to gas is not a solution to climate change, it is simply a way of the postponing the kind of radical action we need and continuing the fossil fuel infrastructure that is propelling us to catastrophic climate change. I urge committee members to give serious consideration to the submission from Dr John Broderick of Manchester University. He and his colleague Kevin Anderson who is one of world’s leading climate scientists, are quoted here:

1; Current levels of emissions will use up the EUs 2 degree carbon budget in under 9 years.
2; Fossil Fuels, including natural gas have no substantial role in an EU 2 degree energy system beyond 2035
3; Within two decades fossil fuel use including gas must have all but ceased with complete decarbonisation following soon after.

There is no room here for a substantial gas sector post 2035, yet some submissions to the committee pretend otherwise.
If we are still extracting gas post 2035, still exploring for it in the next decade, and planning for it post 2050, we are saying good bye to Paris, good-bye to any hopes of under 2 degrees temperature rises and admitting that we cannot stop catastrophic climate change.

Don’t pretend that gas is a solution to climate change when we know it is part of the problem.

Globally trickery and pretence have largely been the mark of the response to climate change. Carbon credits, off sets and capture and storage have all been used to avoid actually reducing fossil fuel use. In the words of Bob Dylan
“let us not talk falsely now for the hour is getting late”.
We can falsify accounts for CO₂ emission all we like, the ultimate and accurate measure is the global levels in the atmosphere. We cannot fool nature.

Last year the levels of CO₂ reached 411 ppm; the highest in our history on the planet and the highest in perhaps over 2 million years. Last year we emitted the largest amounts of CO₂ from human sources in history that is after 30 years of knowing the science and facts on climate and carbon. It is time to stop the pretence and the falsehoods.
I want to put it to the committee that all these arguments, energy security, gas as a bridging fuel, the possibility of new technology capturing and storing carbon, all of these and their proponents are simply attempts to put off taking the necessary action to tackle climate change.

I want to finish by saying that we in People before Profit are open to working with all deputies on that, we are open to amendments that will strengthen the provisions and will insure the Bill does what it seeks to do - to ban the exploration of fossil fuels in Ireland.

Finally, there is a small drafting error here that that will need to be addressed.
The Bill talks of Part three of the Principal Act and it should read Part two.
But we are open to and welcome discussion that will see Ireland move from been a laggard to a leader in the fight against climate change.