

The Other National Sport: Pipeline Debates

Candice Bergen

The debate over the construction of pipelines in Canada combines the politically combustible elements of geography, regional economic disparity, environmentalism and aboriginal rights. Conservative natural resources critic Candice Bergen argues that our current conversation on the issue is as politicized as the issue was in the 1950s, while making a few points of her own.

When Mark Twain said “Whisky is for drinking and water is for fighting over,” it was long before the political posturing, loaded rhetoric and division that pipelines in Canada conjure.

Canada needs more pipelines, especially pipelines to tidewater. But there has been undermining, half-truth and cloudiness injected into the argument against building a national pipeline. Although important, unclear terms like “community consultation”, “acceptable” upstream greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), or—one of my favourites—“social licence,” seem to be the flavour of the day. Terms that the Liberal government, when presenting their transition plan for the approval of pipelines, have failed to quantify or provide a frame of reference for to the applicants.

Even when the Liberals defined what they would be considering when evaluating “upstream emissions” they didn’t disclose what the acceptable limit would be. The terms and conditions present an unclear and ever-moving goal post, never quite reachable, for those who want to build pipelines, and for those whose hopes of a job depend on them. Although some oil executives either have a bad case of Stockholm syndrome, or they are just trying to get along so as not to upset or

anger anyone in the new government, the frustration and uncertainty among workers in Alberta is palpable.

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Here are some facts to consider when talking about energy infrastructure:

FACT # 1. Canadian oil is some of the most responsibly extracted in the world. In terms of emissions, Canadian oil extractors have been given an undeserved bad rap. In fact, the “dirtiest oil in North America” is produced just outside of Los Angeles, California in the Placerita oil field. This field generates about twice the level of up-

stream emissions per-barrel than the Canadian oil sands produce. There are over a dozen other fields in the U.S. alone that have a higher per-barrel GHG emission rate than the entire Canadian oil sands. And that’s just oil. The state of Illinois alone (President Obama’s home state) with its coal-fired electricity, produces twice the amount of GHGs than all of Alberta’s oil sands. In terms of human rights and labour laws, Canada stands head and shoulders above most of its oil producing competitors. Canada is a free, democratic society where the rule of law, minority rights and gender equality is entrenched into our Constitution. Among other impressive indexes, Canada is ranked sixth in the 2015 Human Freedom Index. This in comparison to countries like Saudi Arabia, where women are not allowed to drive and dissidents are executed, which was 141st, or Venezuela which ranks 144th.

FACT #2. Canadian pipelines are the safest and most efficient way to transport oil. Railways move 280,000 barrels per day, and have an accident rate of 0.227 per million barrels of oil equivalents (MBOE), over four times higher than the incident rate for pipelines of 0.049 per MBOE. The other option for transporting oil is by truck, however trucks emit approximately seven times more GHGs than pipelines when it comes to moving oil. Coupled with the fact that 99.999 per cent of crude shipped through Canadian federally regulated pipelines reaches its destination safely, pipelines clearly should be the preferred method of transporting oil.

FACT #3. The National Energy Board (NEB), although not a perfect regulator, has worked. The NEB was originally created because the construction

of pipelines had become so politicized under the St. Laurent Liberals in the early 1950s. Accusations of political interference and wasting of taxpayers' dollars was commonplace. In 1959 the process was removed from Parliament and the NEB was created. The Liberal government's defeat and the election of John Diefenbaker's Conservatives in 1957 are often attributed to the intense politicization of the 1956 pipeline debate. It appears that we have come full circle. Prime Minister Trudeau and Natural Resources Minister Jim Carr have affirmed that the decision on pipeline approval will be political once more. While in government, Conservatives nuanced the way that Cabinet approved projects in order to create a safeguard for cases that were of demonstrable national importance. Despite this change, and contrary to the assertion of the current Liberals, the Conservative government consistently accepted the recommendations of the NEB and their conditions. In fact, between 2006 and 2012 pipelines have been approved, constructed and put into service. Twenty-three pipeline projects have been approved by the NEB; consisting of 3595 kms of new pipeline. These are Canadian pipelines that cross both provincial borders, with some going directly into the U.S. You didn't hear about those in the media, because the NEB process under the previous Conservative government was working. The former government was clear; it wanted to support Alberta and Canada's energy sector. It wanted to see responsibly built pipelines move forward. Admittedly it didn't see the Big Four (Keystone XL, Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain, Northern Gateway and Energy East) constructed or even approved, but it quietly and responsibly oversaw the construction of 17 of 23 proposed pipelines.

These facts are important in the discussion around pipelines and natural resources infrastructure, because the Liberals have been repeating a narrative that undermines all of these facts. Trudeau and Carr have been saying there isn't confidence in the system. The facts tell a different story. By their silence and refusal to cham-



Opposition Natural Resources Critic Candice Bergen writes that Indigenous communities must "share in the economic benefit" of pipeline projects. House of Commons photo

pion Canadian oil and pipelines, they are reinforcing the anti-oil, environmental activists (some of whom are in their cabinet, with many more staffing and advising them) and their misplaced ideology.

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Admittedly there have been challenges along the way; one particular area where ongoing improvement needs to be seen is in understanding, appreciating and mitigating the concerns of Aboriginal people. By their very nature, major pipelines often intersect with many

First Nations territories. The more indigenous communities share in the economic benefit and witness how the risks are mitigated and given serious consideration, the greater the probability there is of having a constructive and mutually beneficial relationship between industry and the Aboriginal communities.

Despite the Liberals' best effort to offer a solution to a problem that didn't exist, provincial governments like Quebec's have indicated that they don't have faith in the Liberals' "process", as shown by their opposition and legal actions against Energy East. That may have been for political advantage, considering that just over a year ago the Quebec government made legislative changes so that a cement plant being built in the Gaspé region would not have to undergo an environmental assessment in order to ensure that the project went ahead. And the city of Montreal, whose mayor is concerned about Energy East crossing the St. Lawrence River, dumped nearly 8 billion litres of raw sewage into the St. Lawrence last November. And this with the approval of Environment Minister Catherine McKenna and the new Liberal government in Ottawa. These governments' actions do not match their words.

To say that the NEB approval system is broken is evidentially false, as shown by the number of projects approved, constructed and the exemplary safety record of Canadian pipelines already in use. Mark Twain may not have encountered a Canadian pipeline debate when he was talking about water and whisky but he certainly summed up the economic plight of Canadians in the oil patch when he said "All good things arrive unto them who wait—and don't die in the meantime." Let's just hope the Liberals don't see the Canadian oil industry wither on their watch, while we all wait for a national pipeline to be built. **P**

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