

BEYOND KYOTO AND KEYSTONE

Robin V. Sears

It's time for Canada's absolutists on energy, the economy and the environment to lay down their rhetorical arms. It's time to find a path forward that works for all Canadians, argues Contributing Writer Robin Sears, in a look back at the journey from Kyoto to the Keystone XL pipeline and a preview of the issues that lie ahead.

Il est temps pour nos absolutistes des questions énergétiques, économiques et environnementales de ranger leur arsenal rhétorique, tout comme il nous faut sans délai tracer une voie qui rassemblera tous les Canadiens, plaide notre collaborateur Robin Sears, qui refait le parcours de Kyoto au projet de pipeline Keystone XL et donne un aperçu des enjeux à venir.



When political rhetoric reduces complex policy decisions to light switch choices, the outcome is usually poisonous or paralyzing. Good/bad choices in government are always rare, and in times of fiscal austerity the choices are always more nuanced. There is no good or bad choice in deciding whether to cut spending on nurses, soldiers or highway maintenance. If partisanship makes it painful to do the right thing, most governments simply move on and leave the issue for the next budget, election or mandate.

The best politicians have always survived being trapped by their sloganeering by the short memories and perennial weakness of voters for comforting political fictions. The powerful red, white and blue hues of a New Jerusalem or a Strong New America are, after all, so much more compelling than the sombre pastels of our own lives. Who wouldn't be excited by the promise of "secure jobs in a strong Canada" when your private choices are whether to pay the cable bill or the credit card this month?

Slogans have rallied partisans since they were carved onto chariot fronts. Shouting "Ethical oil!" and "Ban tankers!" moves votes today just as effectively as "The Old Flag, the Old Policy, the Old Leader!"—the party slogan for John A. Macdonald's last campaign in 1891. Slogans create compelling heroes and villains, reducing complexity to a battle cry. Effective political leaders know the difference between campaigning and governing. They don't confuse bumper stickers for policy, instead building the logical, or at least the rhetorical, bridge between overheated campaign rhetoric and governing.

For several decades in most of the Western democracies we have been making that path from rough politics to good policy on some issues exceedingly slippery for

even the most distinguished statesmen. This set of issues, often grouped under the umbrella of culture wars, has pushed politicians to govern as if the slogan were policy — or worse, to be paralyzed by fear of voter retribution into permanent inaction. Health care reform, the war on drugs and religious schools are on the Canadian list. Americans would add abortion, gun ownership, immigration, taxes and constitutional fundamentalism.

Now we are adding energy and environmental policy to the list.

There are no partisan virgins in this demonization game. To every left eco-activist's bellow that "tar sands kill," there is matching nonsense by propagandists on the other side making the nonsensical claim that "my bitumen has greater ethical virtue than yours!"

This rhetorical tyranny of threat and insult has two predictable outcomes: governments are more tempted to kick the can down the road on tough issues as a next mandate priority, viz. the Keystone XL postponement by the Obama administration, putting off a decision until after the presidential election in November. And in today's tough budget climate, they can claim that fiscal priorities mean that addressing any divisive issue will need to be postponed a while longer. The second impact is that covering your back requires escalating the demonizing rhetoric, with the right and left each denouncing the radicalism of their opponents. The Canadian government's somewhat bizarre claim of "foreign radicals" interfering in the Northern Gateway pipeline debate is only the most recent example. Given that Liberals and New Democrats regularly accuse the government of a variety of equally dubious radicalisms

as well, one can understand the widening circle of disillusioned voters who dismiss all politicians' abusive language and stop listening or voting.

If a policy choice has a long-term horizon and the impact of failing to act is not visible before the next election, the temptation for advisers in this political culture of insult and caricature is to say, "Next mandate, I think, sir." So unmaintained bridges eventually do fall down, and long-ignored First Nations poverty finally

Climate change politicians strain credulity in claiming that a government's promise to give up carbon addiction is the same as doing it. They slide further in public credibility when they mask the failure of the Kyoto, Copenhagen and Durban conferences to achieve real reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions with new deadlines, new deliverables and diplomatic double-talk.

does explode on the evening news, and the fish stocks do collapse, etc. With the insiders gambling that it will erupt on the next guys' watch...

A keen advocate of the "if-it-ain't-gonna-bite-us-do-nothing" thesis in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's office, with all the cheek and self-assurance of a successful young political staffer, offered the following defence. A summary of his argument when he was challenged about the then new government's apostasy and determined inaction on the issue of climate change was this:

Look, to us it's really quite simple. You can't see it, you can't taste it and you can't smell it. You don't know whether it is happening or not, whether it's going to hit us here or only somewhere else...Nothing will be visible for years, whether you agree with us or not. If it's invisible, it's meaningless politically. We're going to focus on clean air, water and food safety that people can see.

Five years later, from the vantage point of Canada enduring only

one week of bad press for having finally abandoned Kyoto, he was probably right. Add the usual collapse that environmental concerns endure in the middle of a recession and it probably is true that Canadians have at least parked their climate change anxieties.

But it is the environmental movement that has once again badly flubbed the politics of an issue. Pascal's eternal *bon mot* about absolutists — *les extrêmes se touchent* — echoes powerfully here. But the absolutists on the

right are winning this battle by successfully raising fears of an economic Armageddon if the world were to do the sensible capitalist thing — that is, to put a price on carbon.

Many conservatives around the world have developed an absurdly absolutist posture on climate change: "It isn't happening, and the numbers have been torqued... And anyway, if it is happening there is nothing we can do about it. Besides, the climate has heated and cooled many times over the millennia and we have survived." In fact, serious fluctuations of the type now being reported have not been seen since the last Ice Age, a period when human civilization was only on the horizon.

Again, in this mirror world of competing Manichean visions, the zealous certitude of some environmentalists is a given. They do their credibility little good in claiming to be able to predict the future on the basis of early and sometimes ambiguous data, just as conservative deniers do themselves the same damage in claiming that all the scientific climate data collected over two decades on five continents is a con.

A Canadian scientist who should have known better said in response to a reporter's question last year that it was "absolutely certain" that climate change will obliterate ice floes from the Ungava Bay in Canada's North, destroying the habitat of the polar bears who now inhabit the region, "within 30 years." Really? When meteorologists cannot precisely predict weather patterns 30 hours into the future, let alone days, climate scientists can offer certitude over decades! It is small wonder that

the reaction of too many Canadians to these competing dogmas is to say, "Sorry, not interested..."

Then there is the hypocrisy of national politicians and international bureaucrats about binding agreements. Smokers know that promising to give up smoking is easy; doing it, not so much. Climate change politicians strain credulity in claiming that a government's promise to give up carbon addiction is the same as doing it. They slide further in public credibility when they mask the failure of the Kyoto, Copenhagen and Durban conferences to achieve real reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions with new deadlines, new deliverables and diplomatic double-talk.

Canadian Conservatives fall into the same trap in failing to acknowledge that emissions have exploded by more than one-third on their watch, instead blaming Liberal sins now a decade past. Journalist Peter Kent, an accomplished communicator and broadcaster, would have sneered on air at his stumbling attempts as a minister to play such silly political prestidigitational games.

A sign of Kent's discomposure was his sarcastic attack on Commons critics for not being with him in Durban — when his department had expressly forbidden them from joining the delegation. Again, as a journalist, he would have been bemused by the sight of Canadian taxpayers

paying the many thousands of dollars it cost to send a minder from the PMO to oversee the delegation, even as their elected representatives were forbidden to attend.

One MP, Elizabeth May, the Green Party leader, did manage to get there — as a result of a courtesy by her friends in Papua New Guinea, as a member of their delegation. It

The guilt-driven message of traditional green orthodoxy — eat less, fly less and wear a sweater — is not only dead on arrival politically, it is wrong environmentally. A green economy and secure green jobs as part of the response to carbon emissions will require economic development, not simply taxes and exhortation.

was, according to several Canadians at Durban in other roles, a humiliation for Canada to be seen to have treated its own Green Party leader so churlishly.

In *Break Through* (2007), an impressive but little-noticed book analyzing the political stalemate on environmental policy, two American communication and environmental activists, Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, analyzed the political stalemate on environmental policy and made the foolishness of this blockade painfully clear.

Overcoming the climate change stalemate, they argue, “demands unleashing human power, creating a new economy and remaking nature ...[T]he right models come not from sewage, acid rain, or the ozone hole but from the very thing environmentalists have long imagined [as the problem]...economic development.”

In other words, the guilt-driven message of traditional green orthodoxy — eat less, fly less and wear a sweater — is not only dead on arrival politically, it is wrong environmentally. A green economy and secure green jobs as part of the response to carbon emissions will require economic development, not simply taxes and exhortation.

It is hard to understand why a market-based approach to pricing car-

bon such as some American and European conservative governments have implemented would not be appealing to not only politically savvy environmentalists but also to the Canadian Conservative government, as an alternative to being continually savaged by opponents for inaction.

The next momentous political battle in energy and environment pol-

icy, however, is not going to be fought on the reduced energy consumption and emission front; it is on the production side.

Over the next two years, Canadians will hear less about their leaky doorframes and their car’s deadly emissions and a great deal more about the Canadian humiliation of “dirty tar sands oil” and the dangerous pipelines and tankers used to transport it.

The production and export of these heavy oils is shaping up to be this decade’s equivalent of the seal hunt battles of the 1970s or the battles over logging in the 1980s, with just the same mix of hysterical rhetoric, nonsensical statistical games and huge fundraising potential for propagandists of all stripes.

If one braces a hard-line environmentalist, standing on his toe in a corner and staring him in the eye, and asks, “Do you really think you are going to be able to prohibit oil sands production or the pipelines required to ship it to market?” the response is inevitably a sneer, followed by, “Of course not, but that’s not the point.” Depending on whether the activist is a partisan Liberal or New Democrat or simply a professional environmentalist, the point is either to hammer the Tories

and their oil patch friends or to educate Canadians about the damage our petroleum addiction does to the planet.

Similarly, if one beards a Fraser Institute young fogey with the query “Do you really think that our oil sands have ethical qualities that oil pumped from the Sahara or the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula lack?” you get the same response: “That’s not the point...”

The zealots on each side know that oil sands petroleum will be produced and shipped to Asia and America, either by pipe, rail, truck or all three. They also know that oil is oil, and that pretending that you can choose to fill your gas tank with “good oil” is a fairy tale. We will discover this year, as we appropriately tighten sanctions on Iran, their “unethical oil,” currently destined for Japan, will simply be diverted to Vietnam or elsewhere, nations that will pay Iran a higher price for it as confrontation raises world oil prices.

Who owns an oil well or profits from its production is ethically meaningless in a global oil market. Less Saudi oil shipped to Nova Scotia simply means the same tanker lands in New England, with some of the product later trucked north again as gasoline.

So, stripped of the comfort of slippery slogans as policy, where should we find the right balance of environmental protection, economic benefit and export priorities where our enormous petroleum assets are concerned? A good place to start is to examine the experience of the forestry sector 20 years ago. There are surprising parallels in the players, politics and propaganda between the two industries.

“Murderous multinational logging companies are raping virgin Canadian forests daily, destroying our ecosystem, polluting our lands and rivers, killing fish and wildlife habitat, all with the connivance of their political allies in BC and Ottawa” was



CP Photo

Actress Daryl Hannah, centre, and others, take part in a demonstration in front of the White House in Washington, on August 30, 2011, to protest the Keystone XL oil pipeline.

one narrative back then. “Irresponsible eco-terrorists are spiking trees and placing lethal triplines threatening the lives of Canadian loggers, slandering Canada’s reputation around the world, killing jobs and a way of life” was the other.

Clayquot Sound and Meares Island became rallying cries with as much emotional power as Selma and

Saigon had to an earlier generation of activists. The battle advanced to hundreds of arrests, significant economic and political damage to Canadian forest companies and Canada’s global reputation, and mercifully few injuries or deaths.

Given how easy it is to disrupt a pipeline — Egypt’s heavily guarded gas pipeline through the Sinai has

been bombed six times in less than a year — one cannot be as sanguine about an escalation of the battle over the oil sands. The difference between a spiked Douglas fir or a wrecked logging truck and an exploding oil sands plant is monumental. The importance of scaling down the incendiary rhetoric of both sides is clear.

In the case of the BC logging battle, the cooler heads of a very small group of industry executives — led, ironically, by Tom Stephens, a quintessentially Southern gentleman imported to Canada by McMillan Bloedel to run one of the forestry giants in the midst of this epic struggle — found a path to peace. Inviting green activists, First Nations leaders and trade unionists in ones and twos for private conversation, he built a dialogue of trust in a series of lunches and dinners, often at his Vancouver home. “I cooked a lot of barbecue that year!” he laughed in recalling his campaign.

Slowly the invited players were able to outline an agenda, define their own red lines and begin to develop relationships based on candid private debate. Out of that process grew a new commitment from industry to stronger environmental practice, economic development agreements with First Nations on whose land most of the forests stood, and finally a set of legislative and regulatory changes providing a much tougher and more transparent framework for an industry often known for its buccaneering history.

It is tempting to look at today’s multi-stakeholder shared forestry councils and their joint statements, and the calm that surrounds forestry policy today, and dismiss it as inevitable. That would be insulting to those who risked reputations and careers in the long complex months of debate that led to today’s harmony.

This is not a new debate. Canada has drawn resources from the ground with sometimes devastating environmental legacies for nearly two centuries. We have also learned how to run resource industries more responsibly and how to clean up those messes.

Those tempted to claim our habitat has been forever sullied by the vast filthy tailings ponds from

the early oil sands production methods might want to visit Cape Breton, where tar ponds from primitive mining practices are on their way to becoming a country park on the boundaries of Sydney. Or they might visit the bucolic parklands around Sudbury, which a generation ago could have been used to train astronauts preparing for a moonwalk, so complete was the devastation left by early mining there. (In fact, Apollo astronauts *did* visit Sudbury before their flights, not because of the grim after-effects of mining, but because the geology of the area was shaped by a massive impact crater of the sort the astronauts were planning to explore on the moon.)

Along with the rest of the developed world, we do have a long history

Who owns an oil well or profits from its production is ethically meaningless in a global oil market. Less Saudi oil shipped to Nova Scotia simply means the same tanker lands in New England, with some of the product later trucked north again as gasoline.

of exploiting profit from the land crudely and wastefully. We also have a more recent history of restoring the damage done and forcing more respectful processes on the resource sector as a whole.

The business of rock and log production is a tough, dirty, and until recently an environmentally damaging business — and it generates about one-third of every Canadian’s wealth. It has made Canada a rich country since beaver hats faded as an export product. So let’s drop some of the hypocrisy and hysterical rhetoric and begin to find paths to peaceful and environmentally respectful production similar to those achieved by the forestry sector only a few years ago.

The more visionary leaders in the oil patch are quietly pressing their

peers to step up to tougher standards of production, emission control and clean-up. If some don’t want to make those commitments, fine. The market will reward the pioneers, and government will back pioneering industry agreements with new rules for the recalcitrant soon after.

Every Canadian’s home and car is fed by petroleum products delivered at some stage of production by pipelines. My gas furnace and your commuter train are the taps at the end of a massive network of 700,000 kilometres of pipelines that snake across every corner of North America. They could be replaced by thousands of new oil-tanker trucks and trains, at considerable cost to every consumer, greater risk of oil spills and accidents, and higher emission levels in moving the oil from the production site to the end user.

Obviously, that’s a foolish trade-off on every level, so the issue is not whether to build and maintain our growing pipeline network. It is how to ensure that its construction does minimal environmental damage and that it can operate to the highest standards of safety. These are policy or engineering issues that we have faced for generations. Canadians know how to build complex engineering projects in the harshest terrains in the world.

Richard Gwyn’s magnificent second volume of his biography of Sir John A. Macdonald paints a compelling portrait of our ancestors’ ambition and project skill. In the 1880s, we set a world’s record for railway construction across some of the most difficult terrain on the planet.

Let us hope that on a ranch somewhere between Calgary and the Rockies a quiet visionary oilman is preparing to “cook a lot of barbecue,” inviting some of the more courageous leaders of the green community and First Nations and labour to talk seriously. It’s about time that

the oil patch and its antagonists looked to the pioneers in the forestry sector and began their own peace process.

At the political level, it is probably too much to hope that the antagonists will give up the blood sport of demonizing each other over

Brian Mulroney, David Cameron, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sweden's Carl Bildt are among conservatives who have benefited internationally from being seen as both market and planet defenders.

environmental policy. After all, it generates headlines and fills party coffers on all sides. Perhaps the prod to developing a Canadian environmental peace plan, one covering carbon pricing and with a national energy and emissions strategy at its core, will have to come from thoughtful outsiders.

It doesn't seem to matter to the Harper government that it is seen to have not a green gene in its political DNA. But it does seem that an obviously potential political asset is being unnecessarily wasted because the Harperites are not making a greater effort. Brian Mulroney, David Cameron, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sweden's Carl Bildt are among conservatives who have benefited internationally from being seen as both market and planet defenders. As many external critics have observed, there is an obvious connection between conservation and conservatism that is both philosophic and etymologic.

As Roger Scruton, the British conservative and environmental writer, argues in his recent book, *Green Philosophy*, an environmentally conscious conservatism is possible, and any genuine environmentalism needs to be conservative if it is to be coherent and effective. He makes a compelling case for each thesis, describing a variety of approaches that might actually move people of all stripes to accept tougher policies that protect the environment.

By the same token, environmentalists who are interested in really

changing policy and behaviour might want to drop the claim that with enough noise they will bring the Alberta oil and gas sector to its knees. Courageous leaders in that movement could acknowledge that there is no prospect of Alberta or Canada giving up the wealth and energy inde-

pendence guaranteed by 150 billion barrels of oil. Instead, they might focus on demanding the types of environmental protections, inspections and clean-up and liability guarantees that the nuclear industry was built on. And yes, a price and a tax on carbon and emissions.

If each side were to suspend the demonization games, the large swathe of common ground would become obvious. As Pat Daniel, the sagacious Enbridge CEO observes with mild irritation in speeches, we travel by transit, air and car using fuel his pipelines deliver. We heat and operate our houses, schools and factories on their gas or the electricity it generates. Nor was it a coincidence that Daniel was named Canada's CEO of the Year in 2011, after the way he stepped up to take responsibility for the 2010 pipeline spill in Kalamazoo in the middle of Michigan cottage country. He immediately flew into the state and announced that it was "our mess" and he wasn't leaving until it was cleaned up. He remained on the scene more than a month.

The Hartwell Group, named after a UK castle where a group of academics met to ponder ways of breaking the climate change impasse, offered potentially useful counsel to governments of all stripes in a 2010 paper. It dismissed demands that governments should be required to "solve climate change," saying that, as with the war on drugs, citizens were smart enough to understand that victory in

stopping climate change was impossible. It also endorsed different strokes for different high-emitting folks. Universal solutions would not be enforceable; market and culturally sensitive ones chosen at the local level would inevitably fare better.

The Harper government's determination to avoid the trap of a National Energy Policy, or for that matter a national emissions strategy, reflects its unusual respect for a less coercive federalism. Offering market and tax expenditure incentives to cities and provinces — thereby helping to reduce emissions — using whatever policy instruments they chose would hardly offend such a philosophy.

Partisans on each side will refuse to disarm unilaterally, to abandon their rhetorical heavy artillery, without any sign that their antagonists would respond peacefully. Given two generations of scaremongering and confrontation, it may be harder for environmentalists to take the first step, fearful of attack from their own activists.

For conservatives, however, the arguments in favour of a more proactive green agenda are surely both politically and philosophically compelling. It is ironic that clarion calls such as "[Environmental] frugality is founded on the principle that all riches have limits," and that society "is a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are to be born" sound as if they had come from a Greenpeace press release. They are actually the wisdom of one of the English-speaking world's greatest conservative thinkers, Edmund Burke.

Contributing Writer Robin V. Sears is a principal of Ensign Canada. He is a former national director of the national New Democratic Party.
rsears@navltd.com