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Canada's First Nations Leaders Pledge to Block Trans-Mountain Pipeline Expansion

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At the 2015 Paris COP 21 climate conference Justin Trudeau pledged his newly-elected government would help "to limit global average temperature rise to well below 2 degrees Celsius as well as pursue efforts to limit the increase to 1.5 degrees."

The strategy adopted was two-pronged and contradictory on its face: implementing gradual carbon price increases through carbon taxes or cap-and-trade mechanisms while building more pipeline capacity to boost exports of fossil-fuel resources, especially the products of Alberta's tar sands.

As environmentalists noted, the approach was inherently futile. Carbon taxes – contingent on provincial government consent – assumed higher costs would induce businesses to introduce less climate-destroying technology and practices. And provincial consent was dependent on the federal commitment to pipeline development, which inevitably would promote further fossil fuel exploration and production.

From the outset, Ottawa has faced opposition to carbon taxes from some provinces, which fear such market-based mechanisms will discourage private business investment. And mass popular opposition accompanied by the global downturn in resource prices has already led to TransCanada's cancellation of its $15.7-billion Energy East project and Ottawa's nixing of Enbridge's Northern Gateway pipeline. Although U.S. President Donald Trump has now reversed Obama's stop to Keystone XL, its future is still in doubt in the face of opposition from U.S. environmental activists.

Doubling Pipeline Output

That leaves Kinder Morgan's plan to duplicate its existing Trans Mountain pipeline. It entails a $7.4-billion duplication of an existing pipeline from Alberta, with a three-fold increase in capacity, that would carry tar sands bitumen to a refinery in the Vancouver suburb of Burnaby. From there tanker traffic to hoped-for Asian markets would increase from a current five boats per month to an estimated 34 threading their way through coastal tidal straits. The plan has become the linchpin of the Trudeau government's hope to win support for its approach from an Alberta government eager to get its petroleum to tidewater, and which has hinged its carbon tax on completion of the Trans Mountain project.[1]

The economic prospects behind the Kinder Morgan project are suspect, given the declining prospects globally for new fossil-fuel export markets.[2] More importantly, it is facing mounting protests from environmental and First Nations activists. In recent weeks, dozens of demonstrators at the Burnaby refinery have been arrested on trespassing charges. The newly-elected minority NDP government, dependent on support from the Green party, which opposes Kinder Morgan, has joined in legal challenges to the project. This has brought the B.C. government into conflict with Alberta's, likewise held by the New Democratic Party.

Burnaby protest March 10 against Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain pipeline project.

However, both governments have been boosting fossil-fuel exports.

B.C. premier John Horgan says he will limit the province's carbon tax rules applying to a $40-billion Shell Canada-led LNG project in Kitimat. He prepared the way for that project when he recently gave the go-ahead to completion of the $10.7-billion Site C dam in northern B.C., which the NDP had campaigned against prior to its election last year. The dam will provide electricity to the Kitimat project.

Alberta premier Rachel Notley has been negotiating with Ottawa to exempt tar-sands projects from federal climate reviews. B.C.'s support of the Kitimat LNG project while opposing Trans Mountain as environmentally unsafe is "hypocrisy," she notes, because it will be processing shale gas extracted in Alberta.

Meanwhile, the OECD warned in December that "without a drastic decrease in the emissions intensity of the oilsands industry, the projected increase in oil production may seriously risk the achievement of Canada's climate mitigation targets." The report noted that Canada has the fourth largest greenhouse gas emissions of the OECD's 35 developed national economies. As for carbon taxes, it said, Canada's regime "is far below that of other OECD member countries."

Then, on April 8 Texas-based Kinder Morgan announced it was suspending "non-essential" spending on the Trans Mountain project and would cancel it altogether if by May 31 it was not "guaranteed" the project could proceed despite the B.C. opposition.

The announcement produced a flurry of panic-stricken reaction from Canadian business elites, their media, and the Alberta and federal governments. Surely, it was exclaimed, Ottawa has the constitutional authority to override B.C.'s opposition – especially in a matter so eminently in the "national interest," as Trudeau and Notley constantly reiterate. To ensure the project proceeds, both governments have even indicated interest in buying a stake in Kinder Morgan, if not the entire company, investing billions of taxpayer dollars in this climate-destroying enterprise.

However, their dilemma is that even federal "guarantees" of the project will not insulate it from popular protest. In fact, it will only generate more opposition. The fight over Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain project is far from over.

And there are some huge stakes involved, much greater than the fate of governments and their supposed "climate change" strategies. The broader issues are eloquently set out in a powerful statement authored by two First Nations chiefs and reproduced below. Their promise of militant direct action is redolent of the "blockadia" advocated by Naomi Klein in her best-selling book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. And it echoes the *Leap Manifesto*, co-authored by Klein, which proclaims: This leap to "a country powered entirely by renewable energy… must begin by respecting the inherent rights and title of the original caretakers of this land," the Indigenous communities that "have been at the forefront of protecting rivers, coasts, forests and lands from out-of-control industrial activity."

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Notes

1. Rachel Notley's government has imposed a $30 per ton tax on carbon emissions, the revenue going mainly to consumer rebates and phasing out (not until 2030!) the province's coal production, while its cap on tar-sands emissions would still allow a 47.5% increase above 2014 levels. See "What if the Trans Mountain pipeline is never built?"

2. See, for example, "Only Fantasies, Desperation and Wishful Thinking Keep Pipeline Plans Alive," and "Forget Trans Mountain, here's the sustainable way forward for Canada's energy sector."