



The hottest places in hell

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"The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who, in time of great moral crises, maintain their neutrality." The Inferno, Dante Alighieri (1265 - 1321).

With oil hovering at \$100 a barrel, various countries have hatched schemes to reduce their dependency on imported oil, natural gas and coal. Their politicians have resorted to beating their chests, trying to implore their best brains to invent new energy schemes to boost domestic production, or create alternatives. The results have been interesting.

One whiz kid, peripherally trained in geology, suggested extracting energy from the earth's core to heat suburban furnaces. Critics panned the idea claiming the temperature of the inner core was 6 000 C, creating hard-to-manage health and safety issues in high-density neighbourhoods. Indeed, a hot place in hell.

Another, implausibly proposed a mass cutting, mulching, and burying of his regions' forests, in subterranean lakes, to speed up decomposition into decayed organic matter. "In 10,000 years, future generations could harvest the fossil fuels from these oil farms," he said proudly.

Sensible Albertans are taking a different approach.

Canada has huge reserves -- oilsands deposits of 175 billion barrels, conventional and unconventional natural gas reserves of 217 trillion cubic feet and more than eight billion tonnes of coal ore. That's enough to supply our domestic needs for a millennium (or two) with lots of unconventional leftover for export to the highest bidder.

Surely we are the envy of the world. Or not.

Energy, the heart of Alberta's economy, is under threat. Ignore, for a moment, this industry contributes almost one-tenth of Canada's GDP (gross domestic product) and more than 40 per cent of Alberta's. Overlook, for another second, its 500,000 high-paying jobs added to the Canadian economy. Fail to notice, for a further instant, the oil and gas industry spends \$41 billion in capital investments, the highest of any Canadian sector and nearly double manufacturing's outlay of \$21 billion.

What started as scattered whispers against our local energy industry has grown into a global public relations juggernaut, labelling resource development projects as "environmental catastrophes," to quote Greenpeace or bad-mouthing oilsands development as the "biggest environmental crime in history," according to The Independent (a British daily).

The eco-extremists are preaching environmental degradation. Their confessed aim is to shut all or most carbon-based energy projects and they are using cunning means to turn the tide of public opinion:



- Ensure the Rest of Canada (ROC) believes Alberta's greenhouse gas emissions and air pollutants are giving Canada a black reputation in the international community so they pressure the federal government to pass a punitive regulatory regime.
- Create uncertainty in the capital markets by lobbying for a complex set of regulatory requirements, managed by multiple regulators, to create long lead times for new mines or installations so investment goes elsewhere.
- Stir up local sentiment to resist and delay projects and prevent transmission lines and infrastructure from being built.
- Negate the contributions made by professional and trades employees to mining, drilling and oilsands developments until they feel pressured to quit.

These tactics are both unconstructive and unhelpful. As an alternative, the Calgary Chamber of Commerce offers several recommendations to industry and governments:

- Fund a hard-hitting, fact-based national (if not international) campaign that promotes the economic advantages of our resource-based economy, addresses the public's environmental and land access concerns, eliminates wide-spread misinformation and builds solid, long-term knowledge and support for energy development and production. A well-informed public makes wise choices.
- Reform the regulatory processes by eliminating governmental duplication and contradictory legislation and instead use co-jurisdictional panels to make the process efficient and fair to industry and the public.
- Establish practical and transparent principles for industry to follow as they work with local landowners and interest groups to ensure everyone is treated fairly.

Alberta's brightest can invest their talents into inventing new technologies to capture and store carbon and produce clean coal. Industry can partner to benchmark and effectively communicate its environmental impacts, stewardship objectives and issue progress report cards.

Forget extracting energy from the earth's core or mulching of forests. Albertans are fortunate to own such vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and coal. Overlook the special places in Hell for those who remain neutral. It's our moral duty to defend energy, the heart of Alberta's economy and something the entire world needs and depends upon.