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It?s really complicated

EDITORIAL

SOMETHING UNPRECEDENTED happened in Ottawa this week.

Caught between commitments to improve relations with Canada's indigenous communities and an obvious need to gain favour in western Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau invited the leaders of three opposition parties to help him find a solution.

The leaders of the New Democratic, Green and Bloc Québecois all accepted the invitation and may or may not have given the PM good advice on dealing with the conundrum posed by a blockade of Canada's busiest rail line in support of hereditary chiefs in northern British Columbia who oppose a new natural gas line.

Absent from the meeting was Conservative leader Andrew Scheer, who earlier in the day called on the government to force an end to the blockade near Belleville that has caused Via Rail to cancel all service between Toronto and both Montreal and Ottawa and at one point led CN Rail to suspend all freight traffic in Eastern Canada.

In what NDP?leader Jagmeet Singh called racist remarks and Mr. Trudeau said was unacceptsable, Mr. Scheer contended that the PM's response to the blockade was ?the weakest response to a national crisis in Canadian history.?

Mr. Singh also called the Scheer speech ?reprehensible? and ?divisive,? saying his comments were ?designed to pit some groups against another.?

Proof positive that the matter is exceedingly complex could be seen by the opinions found in Wednesday's Globe and Mail editorial and the lead column on the opposite page.

In the editorial, the Globe maintained that in dealing with protests, ?Justin Trudeau must be clear about what's negotiable, and what isn't.

?The Prime Minister is in his comfort zone when he's delivering the kind of speech that's become his hallmark: light on substance, heavy on platitudes, and with more than a hint of lecturing folks from the other side of the political spectrum on their failings.

?Unfortunately, the issue Justin Trudeau rose to address on Tuesday in the House of Commons does not lend itself to any of that. The government is instead faced with practical questions about the legalities of a gas pipeline in British Columbia, and the pressing fact of a blockaded arterial rail line in Eastern Ontario.

?This is nuts-and-bolts stuff about the country's economic and legal plumbing. It's going to take more than political clichés to unblock the national pipes.?

So how, apart from ?unblocking? the rail line, can the government act in the nation's best interest?

On the page opposite, columnist Andrew Coyne agreed that such blockades are illegal but contended that they should not be met with force, which he maintained would not be in Canada's best interests in the long run.

The Globe editorial did acknowledge that the story isn't one ?of First Nations defending their land, their rights and the planet against rapacious outsiders. It's rather more complicated than that.?

In B.C., all 21 elected Wet'suwet'en chiefs back the pipeline and have signed agreements bringing significant benefits to their communities, while some hereditary chiefs oppose the line. And at a press conference on Tuesday, Mohawk Council of Kanesatake

Grand Chief Serge Otsi Simon said it was time for the blockades to come down.

In apparent response to Mr. Scheer, the editorial agreed that Mr. Trudeau could not order police to arrest certain people, or break up a particular demonstration. ?That's not how the relationship between politicians and police works in Canada; be thankful for that. But neither can Mr. Trudeau and his government allow Canadians to feel that they are powerless, or that the rule of law is something they are overly willing to bend.?

So what should the PM do? The Globe said the indefinite rail blockade ?involves legal questions not in dispute. There is nothing to negotiate.?

But the best the editorial writer could offer was this conclusion: ?It would be helpful if the Trudeau government could clearly express where it, and Canada, stand. That wouldn't be the end, but it would at least be a start.?

As we see it, one thing the government can and should do is point out that, unlike the Trans Mountain oil pipeline, the gas pipeline will permit massive production of liquified natural gas that will help China and India reduce greenhouse gas from coal-fired power plants. As such, this pipeline will likely accomplish more in the battle against climate change than any measures taken inside Canada.