

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Catering to anti-oil zealots

Ah, how the worms turn.

In the late 1970s, when Ontario was still the engine that made Canada run and Alberta was the new kid just beginning to flex its new-found oil muscles, a bitter internecine dispute between three leading Tories kept the country spellbound and had a major impact on the defeat of the hapless Joe Clark as prime minister and the triumphant return from a walk in the snow of Pierre Trudeau.

At the time, Ontario's Bill Davis and Alberta's Peter Lougheed were locked in mortal combat over the domestic price of oil. Ontario, as the main user, wanted to keep prices down. Alberta, as the supplier, wanted to jack them up.

In those days, however, Ontario, given its economic clout, had considerable muscle, and although Davis ultimately didn't get everything he wanted, neither did Lougheed. But the subsequent growth of Alberta's oil industry has been a boon not only to them but to the entire country.

Fast forward to today.

Alberta, far from being the brash newbie it was three decades ago, has displaced Ontario as Canada's main economic engine.

As for Ontario, well, after years of profligate spending by the Liberals combined with tepid revenue ? and the diminishing importance of the auto and steel industries ? we've been relegated to a ?have-not? province, joining Quebec in looking to Ottawa, caps-in-hand, to bail us out from our own fiscal incompetence.

So we have the spectre of both Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne and Quebec Premier Phillippe Couillard attempting to muscle their way into a federal matter, i.e. approval of the proposed repurposing of an Energy East pipeline to carry Alberta oil 4,600 kilometres to a terminal at Cacouna, N.B., on the St. Lawrence River.

Never mind that the \$12 billion project would also be an economic boon to Ontario and Quebec ? Alberta Premier Jim Prentice points out, for example, that 1,100 Ontario firms already do oilsands-related business and the pipeline refit (from natural gas to oil) would create many more Ontario and Quebec jobs in both construction and related industries.

No, no, just because both provinces are starving for jobs and increased economic activity doesn't stop them from grandstanding with the seven ?conditions? they say must be met before they approve the project.

Never mind that the Constitution is quite clear ? and the Supreme Court has upheld it ? that provinces cannot interfere with interprovincial pipelines. (It's a good thing that neither Wynne nor Couillard were around in Canada's fledgling days when Ottawa built a national railway, thus making sure the west would not be swallowed up by the United States. Had such short-sighted NIMBYism prevailed, Canada today would be a much diminished country.)

But we digress.

Back to the grandstanding of the two Liberal premiers and their empty blathering about involving Aboriginals (as if Ottawa and Alberta wouldn't, for heaven's sake) and wringing their collective hands about environmental damage (ignoring the reality that pipelines are far, far safer and have a much smaller footprint than rail and/or truck deliveries).

To hear these two whiners talk, you'd think we already don't have hundreds of thousands of miles of pipelines running through Ontario and Quebec and, with rare exceptions, safely delivering their products.

Couillard in particular need only look to the tragic result of last year's horrible crash in Lac-Mégantic of a runaway train loaded with crude oil, killing 47 people and destroying much of the town.

Instead of playing to the few zealots out there who are against virtually any economic activity ? particularly if it involves oil (as if, magically, we can live without it, when we can't) ? both premiers should welcome the economic opportunities the project affords their respective provinces.

While Alberta's Prentice is playing the conciliatory card (unlike both Peter Lougheed and Ralph Klein in the Davis era), Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall is ticked at the gall of Ontario and Quebec attempting to bite the hand that feeds them. And he should be.

To wild applause, Wall recently told the Regina Chamber of Commerce that he wouldn't play ?boy scouts? to the ?protectionism? from central Canada.

Both western premiers have met with Wynne and Couillard to explain the benefits to their respective provinces (and to Canada) of the project and the two malcontents have softened their ?demands? a bit.

But they're still grouching. Instead of standing for what's best for the country ? and by extension, their own provinces ? Wynne and Couillard seem more interested in pleasing a small band of anti-oil zealots who, by the way, can never be placated so long as one drop of oil is extracted from anywhere, anytime, by anyone.

As premiers of our two most populous provinces, they should rise above such petty, obstructionist politicking and applaud

responsible economic growth, which is exactly what the pipeline project would be

