

Yes to both carbon taxes and pipelines

Canada can cut greenhouse gas emissions while building pipelines. Canada can lower greenhouse gas emissions while allowing the oil industry to grow. And Canada can enjoy a vibrant economy, while cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

Canadians can choose both. Pardon the pun, but it's not a pipe dream. It shouldn't even be all that difficult. We know what to do. But politics, on the left and the right, keeps getting in the way.

A lot of voices on both sides have been telling you that these are either/or choices. "Both," they insist, is not on the menu. The result may be that Canada ends up with neither.

A toothless carbon-reduction plan, paired with pipeline paralysis. More greenhouse gas emissions, paired with a hamstrung oil industry. Less environmental progress, paired with less economic prosperity. From an easy win-win to a frustrating everybody-loses. Hooray.

The business of governing is supposed to be a practical matter. But politics is often a game of symbols. And symbols have taken over our debates on the environment and the economy.

On the left, pipelines have become a favourite symbolic target and a litmus test of environmental commitment. A false test. And for the block of right-leaning provincial governments, from the Rockies to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, opposition to carbon pricing has been turned into a symbol of support for the economy. The fact that carbon pricing started life as a conservative, pro-market idea has been thrown down a memory hole.

Take British Columbia. It has Canada's first and best carbon tax, which in lots of small ways is having a real effect on the use of oil, gasoline and other carbon-based fuels in the province. It's a practical, economically sensible solution to a real environmental issue.

But the BC New Democratic government, which through carbon pricing is doing something practical for the environment without harming the economy, is also working hard to block the Trans Mountain expansion. Why? It's certainly not a carbon-reduction strategy.

Even if not one drop of Alberta oil crossed the Rockies, people in B.C.'s Lower Mainland and the rest of the province would still be driving millions of gasoline-powered vehicles. B.C. is not some kind of oil-free zone; those who have parked their SUV at an anti-pipeline protest can attest to this.

If the province didn't import oil and gasoline from Alberta, it could and would import from the United States or overseas – as it already does. In other words, Trans Mountain's long imprisonment in limbo is doing nothing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in B.C., or across the planet.

Opposition to pipelines gets falsely invoked as a symbol of carbon-reduction enlightenment. But because oil blocked from one source ends up being replaced by another, it's an entirely symbolic gesture.

And in an oil-producing country such as Canada, stopping a needed pipeline is not just an empty gesture, but counterproductive. It does nothing for the environment, while placing a big fat minus sign on the economic side of the ledger. Yet for many on the left, the fight against pipelines, Trans Mountain in particular, is seen as a core environmental issue.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the political spectrum, new Alberta Premier Jason Kenney – who is entirely correct about the insanity of the current pipeline roadblock – is part of a group of conservative leaders peddling the idea that the carbon tax is also a pointless form of economic self-harm.

They are doing so because the carbon tax has become a symbol that furthers a lazy narrative: that the federal Liberals, and the left in general, are bent on taxing the economy into the ground. The carbon tax has unfairly become not just a chapter of that story, but pretty much the entire plot line.

The Trudeau government originally tried to hitch carbon pricing to pipeline approvals, as part of a grand bargain. Unfortunately, that only reinforced the idea that this is a zero-sum game, where somebody has to lose.

But the truth is that each of these ideas is good on its own, independent of the other. This isn't a trade-off – the negative of carbon taxes for the positive of pipelines; the negative of a pipeline for the positive of the carbon tax. They're both positive, and necessary.

We can and should have both. We risk ending up with neither.

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