

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Rex Murphy

Don't turn up the heat on the West

By making Western provinces pay for adventures in global warming policy we will be playing with Confederation



[Rex Murphy](#)

Published on Friday, Oct. 30, 2009 6:34PM EDT Last updated on Saturday, Oct. 31, 2009 10:13AM EDT

An article on The Globe's front page carrying the headline “Canada can meet its climate goals, but the West will write the cheques” raises, among many others, two very interesting points. The article is about a study, conducted by two ardent environmental advocacy groups – the Pembina Institute and the David Suzuki Foundation – and was sponsored by the Toronto Dominion Bank.

The headline has the virtue of capturing the first point I want to underline. In our new green-genuflecting age any substantial, purely Canadian effort to curb greenhouse gases – any policy, economic or otherwise – will have a massive and negative impact on Alberta and Saskatchewan.

If there are taxes on oil development, if we introduce carbon penalties on industry, if there is a deliberate brake put on the oil sands, or an effort to shut them down altogether – this latter not an unthinkable proposition in certain quarters – whatever is done will, sooner or later, take revenues and jobs, take enterprise, out of Alberta in particular. For purely projected and speculative benefits to the world's climate a century hence – and, despite the unctuous insistence of many to the contrary, speculative they remain – people are seriously considering policies that will penalize the West for its success as an energy producer now.

This is reckless. The oil industry of some Western provinces has been Canada's dynamo these past few years. It has been our major shield during this recession. It has given the dignity of jobs to tens of thousands of Canadians. It is all that. But if “Central” Canada, as the political and economic axis of Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal is still known in some quarters out West, now – under the impetus of the green craze – is seen to be setting limits, placing penalties, or bleeding disproportionate taxes, particularly in Alberta's case, it will churn a backlash that will make regional hostilities set loose by the national energy program a few decades ago seem like warm-ups for a yoga class.

It will shape a whirlwind of political discontent, set the West against East, and far from incidentally have deep repercussions in the many other provinces that have their citizens working in one capacity or another in the oil patch. The fury over the national energy program may be spent, but its memory – pardon the word – is green. That fury, I reiterate, will be as nothing compared with the political fury of a second attempt to “stall the West.” Should some global warming action plan attempt to put the oil sands and Western energy development at significant disadvantage, or draw taxes out of the economies of the Western provinces to pay for adventures in global warming policy, we will be playing with Confederation.

That is a prediction it takes no computer modelling to make. If Alberta in particular, and the Western provinces more generally, come to be portrayed as villains in the global warming morality play, more than the climate a century hence is at stake.

Secondly, I would urge a caution to all people working in the oil sands in particular. The TD study – farmed out to the economic specialists of the David Suzuki Foundation and the Pembina Institute – should be seen as a loud, low shot across the bow. The oil sands project, already castigated by every green-blooded organization on the planet, featured in a full-blown National Geographic hit-job some months back, is going to be *the* great emblem of a world “toxifying” itself, and paving the way for global warming Armageddon. It is now boilerplate in news stories as the “dirtiest project on the planet.” It photographs vividly – as National Geographic's glossy toss-off demonstrates – because of its scale and makes for wonderful anti-energy posters. The oil sands are a target.

Environmentalists are very good at what they do. They play the news media better than Glenn Gould doing a Bach prelude. They know how to sell their point of view, how to build a villain, how to shortcut an argument. Big Green – and there is a Big Green as much as there is a Big Oil – knows the game. Find a symbol. Find one project that, superficially, can stand for all others. The oil sands, despite the hundreds or thousands of less scrupulous and governed energy projects all over the world, despite China's spectacular use of coal, or the accelerated developments all over the Third World, will be the emblem of choice for the eco-warriors. The media-smart apostles of Al Gore, the Sierra Club and hundreds of other NGOs and eco-lobbies will turn the oil sands into the blight of our time.

It's only a number of weeks ago, remember, that the great crisis in the auto industry called forth billions to rescue the great manufacturing base of Central Canada. The West will note the contradiction. Spend billions to save an industry that runs on petroleum – it's here in Ontario – hit the source industry to “save the planet” – that's in the West.

Pursue this course and things will get warm. And I'm not talking about the climate.

Rex Murphy is a commentator with The National and host of CBC Radio's Cross-Country Checkup.

