

Editorial

Stephen Harper and the Issue of the Quebec Nation

On November 22 Prime Minister Stephen Harper introduced a motion to the House of Commons: “That this house recognize that the Quebecois form a nation within a united Canada.” According to Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice the motion was presented by the Conservative government in order to preempt and undermine a Bloc Quebecois motion seeking official recognition of Quebec as a nation. Prentice claimed that the Bloc motion was an attempt to divide Canadians, while the Conservative motion was a unifying motion, presumably because it refers to a “united Canada”. Prentice went on to clarify that the Conservative motion does not recognize the province of Quebec as a nation, but rather only the Quebecois, that is French-speaking Quebecers. Harper also emphasized that: “Our position is clear: do the

Quebecois form a nation within Canada? The answer is ‘Yes’. Do the Quebecois form an independent nation? The answer is ‘No’, and the answer will always be ‘No’”.

Since the basic right of every nation is the right to self-determination, it is clear from the statements of Harper and Prentice that the Conservatives do not actually recognize any entity in Quebec as a nation. They are merely dragging out the old Liberal concept of “distinct society” and giving it a new name. However, in doing so they have gone further than even the Liberals in their attempts to divide the Quebec nation by stripping the concept of nation of territoriality and reducing it to a linguistic or ethnic entity. Others, such as Liberal leadership candidate Stephane Dion, do the same by talking about Quebec

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The Alberta Economic Boom Part Three

Until the mid-1990s, development of the tar sands, the original name for oil sands, was still considered risky and unprofitable. Then, in 1993, the Alberta Chamber of Resources convened the National Oil Sands Task Force, a collective of oil industry and government representatives, to draft a framework for making the oil sands an economically attractive resource. In its 1995 report, entitled *The Oil Sands: A New Energy Vision for Canada*, the Task Force laid out a 25-year strategy that envisioned tar sands production doubling or tripling by the year 2020. The strategy also called for efforts to improve public perception of the dirty sounding

“tar sands.” The term “oil sands” was selected as the new brand name, and they were framed as “a national prize.”

While the oil companies, and provincial and federal governments have cleaned up the name and image of the “tar sands”, they have not done the same with respect to the natural environment. Even though they acknowledge that it is possible to develop the oil sands in a safer, cleaner manner, the oil industry and the governments are clearly only interested in the natural environment to the extent that it brings them maximum profits. As a result, they are exploiting these

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resources in a way that is harmful to the regional and surrounding environment. This is already affecting the health and livelihoods of the Native peoples who live in closest proximity to the oil sands developments. Furthermore, the damage being done to the natural environment poses a wider danger to the lives of people all around the world.

The Pembina Institute, an environmental policy research and education organization, published a report in November 2005 entitled *Oil Sands Fever: The Environmental Implications of Canada's Oil Sands Rush*. This describes in great detail the damage that is being done to the air, water and land in the region. The following is a summary of the main environmental implications addressed in this report.

The process of extracting oil from the tar sands results in significant greenhouse gas emissions which contribute to global warming and climate change. The natural gas that is used to extract and upgrade the bitumen in the oil sands turning it into synthetic crude oil is the single largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions growth in Canada. While the intensity of emissions from oil extraction from the oil sands has decreased substantially through the introduction of new technology, the rapid rate of new development has more than cancelled out these gains. Therefore, as increasing production of synthetic crude oil from the oil sands offsets the decline of conventional oil, the net greenhouse gas emissions from the oil industry are set to rise dramatically. While a variety of end-of-pipe solutions to this problem are under evaluation - such as carbon capture and storage, and alternative energy sources, such as deep geothermal - they are years, if not decades, away from full-scale implementation.

In 2001, Canada was one of the world's leading carbon emitting countries. The greatest source in 2001 was from the electricity and petroleum industries, which accounted for 38 percent of total national emissions, followed by the transportation sector with 25 percent. Overall, the energy sector (including stationary and transportation combustion sources and energy used during the extraction of fossil fuels) accounted for over 80 percent of Canada's total greenhouse emissions in 2001. Of the provinces, Alberta accounted for 31.2 percent of total greenhouse emissions, followed by Ontario (27.9 percent) and Quebec (12.5 percent). To address the negative consequences of such emissions, reductions are required far beyond the targets set by the Kyoto Protocol. However, the federal government and the oil

industry are opposed to even the Kyoto targets.

The predominant technologies for extracting bitumen from the oil sands all require large amounts of fresh water; this is withdrawn from both groundwater and surface water bodies (rivers and lakes). The Athabasca River is the longest river in Alberta, winding 1,538 kilometres from its source. It enters Lake Athabasca at the Peace-Athabasca Delta, the largest boreal delta in the world, and one of the most important waterfowl nesting and staging areas in North America. Oil sands surface mining operations upstream of the delta have been listed as one of the threats to its integrity because large amounts of water are withdrawn from the Athabasca River for use in the extraction process. Between two to five barrels of water are withdrawn from the Athabasca River for each barrel of bitumen extracted. Approved oil sands mining operations are already licensed to divert 349 million cubic metres of water per year from the Athabasca River. This is approximately twice the volume of water required annually to meet the municipal needs of Calgary, a city of almost one million people. Less than 10 percent of the water approved for withdrawal is returned to the river. In order to justify their current practices, the oil industry asserts that alternatives to water-based extraction technology will likely not emerge for 20 years.

Water used for extraction at oil sands mines ends up in tailings – a slurry of bitumen, water, sand, silt and fine clay particles – that is pumped into tailings ponds. While commonly referred to as ponds, these enormous bodies of water and the dykes that contain them are some of the largest human-made structures in the world. Collectively, they cover an area of land greater than 50 square kilometres. In these ponds, the sand, silt and fine clays slowly settle on the bottom. Then as much water as possible is pumped back to the extraction plant and reused in the extraction process. Because of the bitumen that remains in the tailings, the ponds pose a number of environmental risks including the migration of pollutants into the groundwater system and leakage into the surrounding soil and surface water. The water in tailings ponds is also acutely toxic to aquatic life. Although recent studies indicate that acute toxicity in wild mammals is unlikely under worst-case exposure conditions, repeated exposure may have adverse health effects. In addition, the presence of the bitumen in the tailings ponds means that migratory birds that might be tempted to land must be scared away by propane

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cannons (a noise deterrent) and floating scarecrows.

The ultimate objective is to wait for the fine clay particles to settle in the tailings and become what is known as fluid fine tailings. This can take anywhere from a few decades to 150 years depending on the technology employed. These fluid fine tailings pose a reclamation challenge because they are simply too wet and toxic to incorporate into a reclaimed landscape. The National Energy Board characterizes the problem of managing fluid fine tailings as “daunting” – the volume of fluid fine tailings produced by Suncor and Syncrude alone will exceed one billion cubic metres by the year 2020 – that is, enough to fill 400,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

Oil sands mining operations can also impact freshwater aquifers - the underground layer of water-bearing permeable rock or unconsolidated materials (gravel, sand, silt, or clay) from which groundwater can be usefully extracted using a water well - by lowering their levels and creating a similar decrease in water levels in streams, ponds, lakes and wetlands that are connected to groundwater. The study of the hydrogeology of the region has only just begun. Consequently the flow of water between aquifers of varying depths is not well understood but this has not slowed down the oil industry or the federal or provincial governments.

Further environmental damage is also caused by the wastes from desalinization and other treatment processes involved in oil sands extraction. These are landfilled or injected into disposal wells that are drilled in deep, porous rock formations. Given the substantial volumes of water used by these operations, the amount of solid waste produced is significant. For example, between 2005 and 2025 EnCana's Foster Creek operation will dispose of 48 million cubic metres of sludge into deep wells and send almost 260,000 tonnes of waste to landfill. To minimize the cost of transporting waste to regional landfills, many operators are constructing their own landfills and disposal wells. This has led to a proliferation of waste disposal facilities, another long-term environmental concern. The predominant use of landfills is also a serious issue because disposing of concentrates and effluent sludge in landfills could have significant environmental and ecological impact on the nearby soil and groundwater due to the high concentration of acids, hydrocarbon residues, trace metals and other contaminants.

The rapid expansion of the oil sands is also driving

up the air pollution emitted in Alberta. It is estimated that companies in Alberta emitted more than one billion kilograms of air pollutants in 2003, which puts Alberta first in the country for air releases from industrial sources. In 2003, Syncrude and Suncor's facilities were ranked number one and two respectively as Alberta's largest emitters of criteria air contaminants (CACs). Similarly, their facilities ranked fifth and eleventh among the most polluting facilities in Canada. The anticipated growth of air pollution from oil sands development promises to keep Alberta ranked number one in Canada for air pollution for decades, with more oil sands facilities likely to join the national top 20 list of polluting facilities.

The oil sands are a provincial resource, and therefore the government of Alberta is the primary regulator of their development. The regulatory authority of the government of Canada is limited to instances in which a proposed project requires a federal approval or permit. This is most often related to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans' (DFO) jurisdiction over fisheries. Provincial regulatory agencies evaluate the environmental impacts of oil sands development on a project-by-project basis. *The Pembina Institute's* report pointed out that as the second wave of development began in the mid-1990s, regional Aboriginal and Métis, community members and environmental groups noted that the project-by-project review of proposed oil sands development ignored the cumulative environmental impacts.

Rather than altering its regulatory approach, in 1999 the government of Alberta crafted a Regional Sustainable Development Strategy (RSDS) for the Athabasca Oil Sands. The 72 environmental issues identified in the RSDS were prioritized, and it was anticipated that the highest priority issues (Category A) would be addressed within two years. In 2001, the government of Alberta released a progress report on the RSDS, in which it noted that, contrary to the RSDS plan that had stated that management objectives for Category A themes would be completed in two years, no management objectives had been completed.

The indifference of the oil industry and the provincial and federal governments to the question of the environment and its impact on people's health was further illustrated by two news reports on the *CBC News* on March 10, 2006 and May 5, 2006. These reported that Northern Alberta's medical examiner had requested an investigation by Health Canada into the unusually high rate of cancer and immune diseases in

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Fort Chipewyan, a community about 300 kilometres north of Fort McMurray. Dr. John O'Connor, a physician and medical examiner for the remote northern community, says the population of 1,200 has been disproportionately affected by a high number of both rare and common cancers including leukemia, lymphomas, lupus, and autoimmune diseases. He said "I'm having increasing difficulty explaining to myself and to my patients why," noting the cancer rate in Fort Chipewyan exceeds that of many communities with larger populations. Elders in the community said they had not seen these kinds of diseases until the oil industry started production near their homes on the southwestern tip of Lake Athabasca. O'Connor said he suspects oil and gas activity may be playing a role.

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as a "sociological nation" as opposed to a "legal nation". In the name of "unity" they are attempting to further divide the nation of Quebec and in the name of "clarity" they are attempting to obscure the modern concept of a nation.

A nation is a nation by virtue of a people sharing a common territory, language, economy, history and psychology. A nation may or may not have its own state and constitute itself as a country, just as a nation may or may not be independent. However, the existence of a nation is a historical fact which lives in the hearts and minds of its people, whether or not it is recognized as a nation by other nations or states.

In every sense, Quebec is a nation. The Quebecois constitute the majority population within the nation of Quebec, but the Quebecois are not synonymous with the nation of Quebec, which also includes the people of Quebec of various other ethnic backgrounds. The concept of a nation being synonymous with a specific ethnic group is actually an anti-national, tribal and medieval concept which aims to divide people rather than unite them. Therefore, far from representing a concession to the Quebecois, Harper's "recognition" of the Quebecois as a nation is an attack on the nation of Quebec and, hence, on the Quebecois as well.

It is not surprising that the Liberals and the NDP

Syncrude and Suncor extract and process hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil a day in their oil sands projects near the community. Despite a seven-year-old study calling for action, Alberta Health Minister Iris Evans seemed surprised by the information. But in 1999, a report, which was part of a multi-million dollar study on water in the region, called for more monitoring of pollution and illness in the area. David Schindler, the scientific adviser on the report, said it is clear to him that there has been a lack of will to look into the problems. He believes both federal and provincial governments are to blame. "There hasn't been really much done," Schindler said. "They are really not allocating the resources or the staff that we need to act in the public interest in this case."

have declared their intentions to vote for the Harper motion. Neither party has ever recognized the nation of Quebec or its right to self-determination and both parties fully understand the anti-Quebec nature of the motion, despite what they may say to the contrary. It is surprising, however, that the Bloc Quebecois, after initially denouncing the Conservative motion, has now declared that it, too, will vote for it. This is an indication that the Bloc, just as the Conservatives, Liberals and NDP, is more interested in its own fortunes in the next federal election that it is in defending principled positions and the interests of the nation and people of Quebec.

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**To contact the Manitoba Branch of CPC(M-L):
Fax: 477-6741
Email: mrc-cpcml@mts.net
Internet: www.modern-communism.ca
Produced by volunteer labour**