

Gas pains

Harper refuses to recognize the urgent need for action to reduce greenhouse gases

BY JANET BAGNALL, THE GAZETTE JULY 10, 2009

It is getting so that it's embarrassing to let Prime Minister Stephen Harper appear in public.

This has nothing to do with his inability to show up on time for group photos or not knowing as a Protestant that he shouldn't have gone anywhere near a Catholic communion wafer.

It's his stubborn refusal to accept in any meaningful way that if action is not taken quickly, the worst effects of global warming will be triggered and it will be too late to save the planet from them.

Harper rejected the two-degree C limit all the way to the G8 meeting this week in Italy. He agreed to what is now considered the outside limit only under pressure from fellow leaders.

And he is still playing for time, insisting on 2006 as our base year for greenhouse-gas- emission reductions - even though Canada agreed to 1990 when it signed the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

Since Kyoto was signed, Germany and Britain have made substantial cuts, but Canada's emissions increased an astonishing 26 per cent.

No wonder Canada ended up in last place among G8 members on climate change on the World Wildlife Fund's scorecard.

But if the Harper government seems prepared to blow off international criticism, it's going to find it harder to ignore when the British come over here and put money down to draw the world's attention to our hypocrisy.

Britain's Co-operative Bank, a consumer co-operative whose code of ethics forbids investment in companies that violate human rights, the environment and harm animal welfare, has so far donated about \$200,000 to help fund a legal challenge to the Alberta tar sands.

The challenge, by the Beaver Lake Cree Nation, was filed last year against the federal and Alberta governments. The suit is aimed at stopping or substantially reducing the tar-sands development in Alberta.

In their lawsuit, the Beaver Lake Cree say that the tar- sands projects are destroying their constitutionally protected right to their traditional way of life, citing evidence of disease among animals and fish and damage to vegetation.

Jack Woodward, an expert on aboriginal land claims, represents the Beaver Lake Cree. He is bemused that it has taken the involvement of outsiders - a British bank accompanied by British media - to make Canadians pay attention to a lawsuit that could have serious consequences for Canada's future.

The Beaver Lake Cree Nation will win the lawsuit, said Woodward, who is based in Victoria. Since 1982, the Cree have had a constitutionally protected right in perpetuity, under Treaty 6, to sufficient

preservation of their habitat to maintain their traditional way of life. "That is a potent environmental right," said Woodward, "the most potent in Canada."

Yet in the past 10 years or more, the federal and provincial governments have granted more than 17,000 tar sands permits, projects that if allowed to proceed would make meaningless the Crees' right to hunt and fish.

Woodward is convinced that the lawsuit will help Canadians realize how much of a battering our international reputation is taking: "Canada as a nation will realize that the expansion of the tar sands is morally and economically untenable," Woodward said.

People in Europe are making expensive readjustments, said Woodward, while Canada continues to "brazenly" ignore the need to rein in its greenhouse-gas emissions.

"If someone in Holland denies himself something to do the right thing and Canada carries on with its resource-extraction mentality, Canada's image as a nice guy is going to evaporate very fast," said Woodward. "Canada will become more and more a pariah state."

The lawyer said Harper will ultimately change course. "He'll change because he can't stand the withering contempt of world opinion."

Woodward said the federal and Alberta governments could even end up embracing the Cree lawsuit as a way of getting out of their promises to oil companies without paying cancellation penalties.

A ruling in favour of the Cree would let the governments off the hook. Companies would have no recourse against a constitutionally protected and legally reaffirmed right.

"We're going to win," said Woodward, "but we need to win in time for it to be meaningful, not 20 years from now when the tar sands have destroyed the environment."

In the meantime, Canada has the attention of ethical

financiers around the world, the Co-operative Bank told the Edmonton Journal.

So far, the bank said, institutions with "\$25 trillion worth of investors," are on board.

Harper can ignore that if he wants. Canada shouldn't.

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