



Best way to forge unity is to get Canada to post-carbon future

By Gordon Laxer

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney warned that the worst election result would be a Liberal minority backed by the NDP. On Oct. 21, his nightmare came to pass.

Rather than accept the will of the 63 per cent of Canadians who voted, Liberal, NDP, Bloc and Green for climate action, Kenney fans the flames of Western separatism to try to overturn the election results.

Canadians feel sympathy for the plight of Albertans who are hurting from the 2014 oil price bust.

But be careful not to fall for Kenney's emotional blackmail.

The high Conservative vote in Alberta was normal, not a blow to Canadian unity. Conservatives got 69 per cent of the vote, 5.5 per cent above their average in the five previous federal elections, when their vote ranged from 60-67 per cent. Federal Tory dominance in Alberta dates from John Diefenbaker in the 1950s.

Many Albertans have lost their jobs, their homes, fear for the future and are angry. But, many misdirect the object of their anger. Big Oil hasn't been their friend.

Kenney portrays himself as Albertans' champion. He isn't. His government is spending \$32 million on a war room

and public inquiry to combat what he calls a "foreign environmentalist conspiracy" against Alberta. Kenney is right about a foreign campaign, if not quite a conspiracy. And it harms Albertans.

But Kenney gets the culprits wrong. Big Foreign Oil, not foreign environmentalists, have harmed Albertans by locking Alberta into narrowly exporting oil derived from oilsands bitumen, one of the world's most toxic, high carbon-emitting resources.

Since the 1970s and 1980s, Shell and Exxon knew their business plan caused climate change. Yet they and other Big Oil corporations talked Alberta and Ottawa in the 1990s into giving them a sweetheart, next-to-zero royalty regime and low corporate taxes. It left Alberta's finances in a lurch and an undiversified economy.

Alberta's oilsands (also known as tar sands) are a very poor job creator. \$1.3 million in investment in the oilsands produce one job. The oil industry across Canada directly employs only 63,000 workers, 0.3 per cent of all Canadian jobs. Indirect jobs from the oil industry are double that number. Thus the oil industry accounts for about one per cent of all Canadian employment.

Now Big Oil corporations are shedding workers to maximize profits. Cenovus

Energy executive vice-president Kiron McFadyen wants to "de-man" the entire industry to achieve "zero manning."

Alberta's oilsands have no future. Big Foreign Oil knows it. In 2016, they began to cut-and-run. Norway's Statoil and U.S.-based Devon Oil fully pulled out. Other foreign corporations partly pulled out: France's Total S.A., Holland's Shell Oil and U.S.-based ConocoPhillips, Koch and Murphy Oil.

Divestment from the oilsands and many conventional oil sites and pipelines within Alberta have stuck Albertans with over \$250 billion in environmental liabilities, orphaned wells and toxic tailing lakes. If they fail to make Big Oil polluters pick up the tab for the mess they created, Albertans and other Canadians will have to clean it up at public expense.

This year more wells were decommissioned in Alberta than new wells drilled. Companies and industries that aren't moving toward zero-carbon emissions, warned Mark Carney, Governor of the Bank of England, will be punished by investors and go bankrupt.

As the world awakens to the climate emergency and moves off fossil fuels, the Kenney government and Big Oil hold Alberta in a fossil-fuel belt. It may soon resemble the rust belt — that swath of Midwest U.S. states of abandoned factories and broken dreams.

If he truly advocates for Albertans, Kenney will embrace the future by joining with Ottawa to manage a rapid phase-out of the oilsands in ways that support oil workers and their communities' shift to new industries and jobs. Canadians everywhere would support that.

The best way to forge national unity is around a plan to get Canada to a post-carbon future, not by holding on to the fossil-fuel past.

This op-ed is reprinted with the author's permission. Gordon Laxer is a former member of the Council of Canadians' Board of Directors and author of the hard-hitting report *Billion Dollar Buyout: How Canadian taxpayers bought a climate-killing pipeline and Trump's trade deal supports it*. Laxer is the founding director of the Parkland Institute and political economy professor emeritus at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.