

COMMENT

“Access to information is a cornerstone of democracy”

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No pipelines? Then no life as we know it

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and JAMIE LAMB

With one terrific sentence, a *Times Colonist* editorial on a Victoria neighbourhood issue highlights what's missing from any rational discussion of a much bigger issue in B.C. — oil and gas pipelines.

The Jan. 4 editorial (“A shuttle over troubled waters”) concerns the proposal for a marine shuttle service from Ogden Point to downtown Victoria. The editorial notes that the residents of James Bay must endure the commotion, fumes and noise “from engines of cruise ships berthed at the Ogden Point terminal, and from the buses that pass through James Bay on their way to and from other points on the Island.”

Says the editorial: “In a

way, it's a microcosm of the pipeline debate — the entities at either end get all the benefits while those between get all the problems.”

The editorial writer's intention is to provide understanding of the neighbourhood issue by comparing it to the more widely known and presumably better-grasped issue of oil and gas pipelines, believing everyone knows that pipelines benefit producers, builders, buyers and nobody else.

Is this true, though? Do existing oil pipelines provide us with benefits today? Of course they do. We just don't know how much. Nobody does, because the B.C. pipeline debate has been dominated by interests that speak to emotion, not understanding.

It has been Jobs! Economic Growth! versus Too Risky! Environmental Armageddon!

Nobody has provided us with the information that will allow us to know what existing oil pipelines mean to our lives, or reason what they will mean tomorrow.

Just as James Bay residents, like all Victorians, derive a portion of the benefits from Victoria's tourism industry, what flows through existing oil pipelines provides all of us with a portion of what we use to fund, preserve and care for our lives.

Payments from the federal government to the B.C. government fund myriad programs and initiatives. But none of us can say the extent to which the contents of existing pipelines pay for things we all like to have, we rely upon and sometimes we desperately need.

This is an unforgivable failure by the organizations, companies, business groups, media and, above all, governments that neg-

lected to make sure we in B.C. — and Canadians all across Canada — know the link between the life we know today and what flows through existing pipelines. It's this failure to educate us that leaves us without the essential information required if we are to make an informed decision on the choice that confronts us.

What's needed is something we'll call the petroleum-impact index, a measure that pinpoints, by province, by region and by demographic group, the benefits in our lives from what flows through existing pipelines.

Our place in the index exists, irrespective of whether it's high or low, because of one customer: the United States. With the U.S. becoming petroleum self-sufficient and no longer needing our product, the future for continuing bene-

fits is fuzzy at best, disastrous at worst.

To properly engage in the pipeline discourse, we need a fuller understanding of “risk.” We need to know what's at stake for us personally, i.e., the risk inherent in doing nothing as our only customer demands bigger discounts or disappears entirely.

Only when we know that can we safely assess the risks in new pipelines built to reach new customers.

The truth is, we are not in a position to weigh the risks associated with new pipelines if we do not know what's at risk if we say no to them.

This requires leadership, so it falls to the two people whose skills rest in listening and acting on difficult issues: the prime minister and the B.C. premier. This issue demands they find a way to work together and

produce a petroleum-impact index that will allow each of us to determine not only what we'll lose when our single customer no longer wants our product, and what we stand to preserve, perhaps even gain, if pipeline development proceeds.

We need this petroleum-impact index if we are to make an informed decision about pipelines. Not just for those who derive obvious direct benefit from the industry as suggested by the *Times Colonist* editorial, but for each of us, whether employed, unemployed, or pensioned; sick or healthy; whether we live in a Tofino cabin, a Qualicum condo or a James Bay home.

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