



U.S. Fossil Defenders Influencing Canadian Resource Development

July 28th, 2022

The outsized presence of American libertarian groups—pushing fossil interests in Canada at the expense of Indigenous energy rights and a free press—has been revealed in two recent reports by one intrepid journalist.

In an op-ed for the Guardian, veteran Canadian climate reporter Geoff Dembicki describes how the Atlas Network—a United States-based libertarian organization with global reach—“spent years pressuring the Canadian government” to discourage official efforts to align Canadian law with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), fearing it would codify Indigenous rights to reject natural resource development—especially of oil and gas—within their territories.

And in a post for the Tyee published the same day, Dembicki reveals how a U.S. crisis management team, whose avowed mission is to defend its clients against “predatory” journalists, is now working for the Canadian Energy Centre, aka Alberta premier Jason Kenney’s “Energy War Room.”

In his exposé of the immense role the Atlas Network played in trying to ensure Canada never implements the UNDRIP, Dembicki writes that group calls itself a “worldwide freedom movement.” Nearly 500 partners have taken up the Atlas banner, including the Koch Industries-funded Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation, both notorious and extremely well-funded engines of climate denial.

The organization “should make people nervous,” Bob Neubauer, a researcher with the Corporate Mapping Project, told Dembicki. He said Atlas includes “a very significant number of the most influential right wing think tanks and advocacy organizations on the planet.” And amongst its roughly dozen Canadian partners is the Ottawa-based Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI).

Atlas’ own records show that MLI availed itself of one of their Poverty & Freedom grants to launch “a sophisticated communications and outreach strategy to persuade the government, businesses, and Aboriginal communities on the dangers involved with fully adopting UNDRIP.”

A central component of the MLI’s strategy, writes Dembicki, was to recruit Indigenous representatives supportive of oil and gas development. Describing these recruits as “a shield

against opponents,” Atlas also spoke of the need to safeguard Canada’s “monumental reserves of natural gas, hydroelectricity, potash, uranium, oil, and other natural resources” from UNDRIP.

Dembicki writes that Hayden King, executive director of the Yellowhead Institute, a Toronto-based Indigenous public policy think tank, described MLI’s campaign as “a contemporary expression of the type of imperialism that Indigenous peoples have been dealing with here for many, many years.”

While Ottawa did pass the legislation necessary to begin implementing UNDRIP last June, further progress has been glacial, and MLI has been very much on the scene, ensuring that Indigenous voices in favour of oil and gas development are heard.

One such voice is the Indian Resource Council (IRC). Speaking before a senate committee last year, IRC President Stephen Buffalo said there should be language in the legislation preventing “special interest groups” from being able to “weaponize” UNDRIP to block new pipelines.

“Whether or not you support the oil and gas industry, it is the right of the 131 nations of the Indian Resource Council of Canada to develop their resources as they see fit,” he added.

Atlas also identified the First Nations Major Projects Coalition as an ally “working directly” on the MLI campaign. But Dembicki, says a Major Projects Coalition spokesperson described that phrasing as “inaccurate,” pointing to the organization’s 2018 testimony in support of UNDRIP.

Meanwhile, in Alberta, the Canadian Energy Centre—created to push back journalists and activists who are critical of Canada’s oil and gas industry—has hired the U.S. crisis management firm Counterpoint Strategies to advise on communications related to energy issues south of the border.

In the Tyee, Dembicki quotes directly from Counterpoint’s promotional materials (password protected ever since he asked it for comment, but still available through the [Wayback Machine archive](#)). He describes a company prepared to tackle what it calls a “modern news media” that is “hostile, aggressive, and willing to disregard standards and collude with almost any antagonist.”

To “counter-attack” such hostility, Counterpoint promises to “leverage digital ads, expose the ulterior motives of adversaries, rally specialized allies, [and] discredit attacks.”

It also pledges to create websites that will “dismantle print articles,” and to launch legal proceedings before a story “is ever published or broadcast.”

As for how a journalist, or those with which they are “colluding” might avoid such attacks, Counterpoint writes that “opponents in the discourse are confronted with a choice—adhere to principles or face being discredited.”