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DAMIANCARRINGTON'S ENVIRONMENTBLOG



Even Canada doesn't believe its own spin on tar sands

In public, Canada's environment minister says tar sands are "sustainable", in private the government says there is no "credible scientific information" to support this



Syncrude Canada's tar sands operation (foreground) and the Suncor site (background) near Fort McMurray, Alberta, pictured in 2008. Photograph: Larry MacDougal/Rex Features

It's time to pitch back into the controversy over Canada's lobbying offensive against proposed European penalties on fuels from tar sands. But this time we're going through the looking glass, with Canada secretly admitting it has no "credible scientific information on [the tar sands industry's] environmental performance" and the British government, which has bent over backwards to help Canada protect its highly polluting fuels, giving funding to anti-tar sands campaigners.

In addition, we have further confirmation that statements made by Canadian diplomats to UK counterparts are contradicted by reality, and that in promoting tar sands, the Canadians are keeping some pretty unpleasant company.

In the midst of all this, the Canadian lobbying effort to block European Union rules that would discriminate against fuels derived from tar sands continues unabated. A key vote in Europe was postponed until early next year, but the issue remains very much on the agenda, and was discussed on Monday by the European Commission's environment committee.

To recap, the EU argues that fuels from tar sands - also known as oil sands - should be designated as producing 22% more greenhouse gas emissions than regular crude oil. Canada, whose vast tar sands are the second largest reserve of carbon in the world after Saudi Arabia, don't like this for two reasons. Firstly, it will make the fuels less attractive

for European importers and secondly, it will be an official labelling of tar sands fuels as dirty in terms of driving global warming, as well as destroying forests and causing air and water pollution.

Canada's environment minister Peter Kent said at the UN climate change summit in Durban, where Canada won the "colossal fossil" accolade from outraged campaigners, that: "There is a disproportionate amount of criticism of the oil sands which is a responsibly and sustainably developed resource, of which we are proud." In that light, the recent revelation by Canada's Postmedia News of [briefing notes prepared in June for Kent and his team](#) is particularly embarrassing. They stated:

Implementing this new monitoring system [of the impact of tar sand exploitation on land, air and water] is an urgent priority to head off threats to the industry, which needs credible scientific information on its environmental performance as soon as possible.

Environment Canada also advised that the absence of scientific evidence supporting their claims was affecting the industry's ability to raise capital from and sell into (the) foreign market.

So, in private, it seems even the Canadians don't believe their own spin. The UK government, however, seems to have swallowed it whole, which makes another revelation even stranger. Despite the UK having given secret help to Canada to block the European proposals, it has also given [almost \\$60,000 to the anti-tar sands Pembina Institute](#). That looks very much like a double standard to me.

British ministers and officials have been, in the words of Chris Davies, the Liberal Democrat environment spokesman in the European parliament, "[extraordinarily naive ... to take the special pleading by Canada](#) as though it were gospel truth, rather than what it is - an attempt to protect narrow financial interests." That was over a claim made by a London-based Canadian diplomat called Sushma Gera to her UK counterparts on 21 October, that "the US consideration of similar [tar sands] measures had just failed, as it was 'unimplementable'."

On Friday, the US body Gera was referring to, California's Air Resources Board, showed again just how implementable such measures are in fact by [voting unanimously to move forward with its low carbon fuel standard](#).

Finally, for now, let's see if the old adage that "a man can be known by the company he keeps" rings true for Canada and its tar sands.

Here's Mark Milke, at Canada's Fraser Institute, [writing in the European Voice](#) newspaper, in November:

The European Commission was wrongheaded when, in October, it singled out oil extracted from Canada's 'tar sands' by proposing a higher carbon-emissions value for it than for other sources of fossil fuel.

Milke is the former [research director for the Frontier Centre for Public Policy](#). Here's the [FCPP on climate change](#):

As Frederick W. Robertson said: "There are three things in the world that deserve no mercy, hypocrisy, fraud, and tyranny." We have all three in abundance in climate science.

In the US, another right-wing think tank, the [Heritage Foundation](#), is keen on tar sands:

President Obama was elected by appealing to global warming alarmists, among other groups on the left. Will he cave in to their demands to leave untouched the vast oil sand deposits in Alberta that could provide millions of barrels of oil to fuel economic growth in both countries for decades to

come? Development of Alberta's energy sector would be led by US companies, too, thereby boosting growth on both sides of the border.

But the Heritage Foundation is not so keen on tackling climate change, despite every nation and science academy on the planet accepting the need for action:

The only consensus over the threat of climate change that seems to exist these days is that there is no consensus.

There's plenty more of this from, for example the Cato Institute, the Heartland Institute and Italy's Istituto Brunon Leoni, but you get the picture: promoting tar sands fits very snugly with denying the need for action on global warming.

Bearing all that in mind, will the British government persist in blocking those European nations who want to brand tar sands fuels as dirty? Will its condemnation of Canada for pulling out of the Kyoto treaty - "deeply regrettable" - inform its thinking on tar sands? I hear whispers that the UK position is shifting but, having asked the department for transport, nothing has changed officially.

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