



A TENPEAT AND CHANGE — LET’S START WITH THAT OTHER TAR SANDS CONSULTATION

By Dr. Ian Urquhart, AWA Board Member

“Environment takes precedence over the economy.”

— Premier Ed Stelmach
February 25, 2008

In early March, a disappointingly small number of Albertans re-elected Premier Ed Stelmach’s Conservatives. Our first-past-the-post electoral system turned an impressive victory in the popular vote for the Conservatives (53% of those who voted) into a landslide in terms of seats. The 72 seats captured by the Conservatives on March 3 amounted to 87 percent of the seats in the legislature. For the Conservatives, this was their “tenpeat” — their tenth successive re-election since Peter Lougheed led the party out of the political wilderness in 1971.

During the campaign the Conservative mantra was all about “change” — “change that works for Albertans” was what the Premier promised. As his new Cabinet thinks about what that promise means specifically for our province, I hope they will remember that the Royalty Review Panel was not the Conservative government’s only tar sands consultation. Between September 2006 and summer 2007, hundreds of Albertans spoke out about the future of the tar sands to another government-appointed review panel. The Oil Sands Consultation Multi-stakeholder Committee traveled to eight cities and towns to hear what values, principles, and actions people thought the government should embrace with respect to the greatest resource boom in Canadian history. That consultation, unlike the Royalty Review Panel, had a very broad mandate: the “consideration of economic, environmental and social issues in an integrated manner.”

Don’t feel bad if you’ve forgotten about this other tar sands consultation. Your government seems to have forgotten about it as well. It is now going on eight months since the Committee reported. So far, the Committee’s hard work has



The McClelland Lake watershed contains one of the world’s most spectacular patterned fens. Open-pit oilsands mining, which will destroy the fen and surrounding wetlands, has been approved for this area. PHOTO: I. URQUHART

not sparked a meaningful response from government — other than to thank the Committee for its valuable work.

Consultation Background

The catalyst for this consultation came from one of the most honest, yet chilling, government documents on the tar sands I have seen — the Mineable Oil Sands Strategy (MOSS), released for public comment in October 2005. There was no pretence that ecological sustainability mattered to the government.

For at least a generation, MOSS proposed to turn the Athabasca Oil Sands region north of Fort McMurray into an industrial free-fire zone. Throughout approximately 2,900 km² of northeastern Alberta, tar sands mining would get “the highest priority”; wildlife habitat protection would “not be implemented prior to or during oil sands mining.” This meant that wildlife issues (not to mention biodiversity or ecological sustainability) would not be entertained at all for at least the next 30, 40, or more years.

The strategy would abandon any interest in preserving even a fraction of

this landscape in its natural state. Instead, it offered grand promises of a better “reclaimed” future. The hubris of these promises was palpable. After mining’s “temporary impact,” future generations will benefit from “a new valuable landscape.” It would not be today’s ecosystem. Instead, reclamation would “create an ecosystem that fits within the region.” Any remaining concerns for “seamless reclamation to a self-sustaining boreal forest ecosystem” were to be soothed by the promise that Alberta’s new, improved boreal would have “a natural look.”

MOSS’s proposed public consultation process was duplicitous and cunning in the extreme. Consultation would only take place in Fort McMurray in balmy January weather. Its public open house would open its doors for only 150 minutes; in addition, four identical workshops were promised.

Public reaction to the substance and proposed consultation process of MOSS was as frigid as Fort McMurray’s weather on the day scheduled for the open house. Surprisingly, the government respected



Oilsands mining north of Fort McMurray. PHOTO: I. URQUHART

this reaction and abandoned the MOSS consultation model. The Oil Sands Multi-stakeholder Committee was instead created to undertake a more honest and accessible public consultation.

Is Consensus as Good as It Sounds?

In June 2007 the Committee submitted its final report to the Ministers of Energy, Environment, and Sustainable Resource Development. As befitted the breadth of the Committee's mandate, the report contained 120 recommendations to government. The 19-member committee produced 96 consensus recommendations; consensus could not be reached on 24 action-requests. Fifteen of the 24 non-consensus items concerned the vision to ensure a healthy environment.

When it came to this environmental vision, the Committee developed 11 strategies and proposed 50 actions to implement those strategies. Consensus was reached most often when proposed actions were general or abstract, were voluntary, and were not calling for significant changes to government legislation and/or industry behaviour. Consensus also emerged when proposed actions spoke to motherhood concepts such as "good information," "comprehensive planning," "better management systems," or "cumulative environmental impact assessment." Consensus broke down when deciding what specific wardrobe these ideas should wear.

An example of this enthusiasm for the general and abhorrence of the specific appears with respect to the strategy called "Improve cumulative environmental impact assessment process for oil sands." There was no disagreement on the desirability of gathering comprehensive environmental baseline data or on the value of doing regional cumulative environmental impact assessments. But the Committee could not define the relevant baseline or assessment "in more specific terms." It could not reach consensus on the merit of establishing a baseline generated by historical data, modeling, and traditional environmental knowledge. Government objected to this proposed "specific prescriptive definition." This meant that government, as well as industry, refused to entertain the idea that the condition of the boreal forest before this black gold rush began was a suitable yardstick for environmental assessments or reclamation.

The ultimate emptiness and poverty of the Committee's environmental health vision is best seen in the section discussing the strategy entitled "Minimize the impact of oil sands development on the biodiversity of boreal forests." Is my eyesight jaundiced when I see the following statement, ostensibly written to demonstrate the Committee's commitment to establishing protected areas, as essentially meaningless? "The committee also reached consensus on establishing new protected areas ...

but could not achieve consensus on limiting the total amount of land that could be disturbed, on establishing an interconnected network, or on setting aside four specific protected areas."

Everyone on the committee was prepared to say that new protected areas made sense. But when it came to walking that talk, government and industry refused to regard any of the ENGO-designated candidate protected areas – McClelland Lake Wetland Complex, Gypsy Gordon, Athabasca Rapids, or the Richardson Backcountry – as worthy of protection.

What Should Come Next?

None of the above is meant to say the possible environmental actions outlined by the Committee have no value. The intention instead is to suggest that ecological merit most often rested with the actions the Committee could not build a consensus for. In many cases these non-consensus recommendations were those enjoying the most support among those citizens who appeared before the Committee. To consider seriously these non-consensus recommendations would be to follow the guidance provided by Vance MacNichol, the retired senior public servant who chaired the Committee's work. He wrote: "It is my view that it would be beneficial for the Government of Alberta to look at not only the consensus actions but consider and deal with the non-consensus issues expeditiously as well... Frankly, I believe there are positive opportunities for moving forward on them with some additional time and effort"

If the Stelmach government really wants to implement "change that works for Albertans," it could do much worse than start its new mandate with action on many of the non-consensus recommendations found in the Oil Sands Multi-stakeholder Committee final report.

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