A Different Future Is Possible

BY PHILLIP MEINTZER

Living in Alberta, it seems like we are constantly bombarded by claims that the continued extraction of natural resources — typically oil and gas — is necessary to maintain some notion of the "good life." Recent ad campaigns from both the Alberta government and Cenovus further emphasize this narrative by attempting to paint a picture of life without fossil fuels as dark, cold, and expensive.

These institutions want us to believe that a reduced standard of living is the only possible future in a world without further extraction, despite a growing body of evidence that suggests otherwise. But if we want to build an alternative future for this province and the people who live here, it can be helpful to imagine what that future may look like if we decide to take the path of least extraction.

Alberta's settler colonial history may have been propelled by resource extraction, but that wasn't always the case. The first oil well to be drilled in what is now Alberta (formerly the Northwest Territories) wasn't until 1902, and the first commercial oilsands mine wasn't until 1967. Our history with oil and gas is barely more than 120 years old, yet before colonization, Indigenous Peoples lived on this land for millennia in relative harmony with the natural world. Things weren't always this way, and things don't have to stay this way forever.

It's important to recognize that humans, like other species, will always use nature in some way to meet our needs. However, our relationship with nature can be more or less sustainable depending on the economic system. Right now, everything is geared towards turning nature into money and we are running out of nature. That's why sustainability is only possible if we can respect that the Earth has ecological limits and that all human activities need to equitably meet our needs without stepping beyond those boundaries.

A recent study published by Jason Hickel and Dylan Sullivan found that we could provide decent living standards for 8.5 billion people (more than Earth's current population) using only 30 percent of our current resource and energy consumption if we shifted away from profit growth and toward a needs-based economy. Decent living standards would include universal access to nutritious food, modern housing, public education, internet, and healthcare, among other essentials.

This research demonstrates that the problem here isn't a lack of resources. Hickel and Sullivan showed that we are wasting 70 percent of our energy and resources while many are still struggling to feed themselves and find secure housing. We have more than enough to meet everyone's needs, and we certainly don't need to expand our extractive footprint. The real problem is how those resources are distributed and whether people have access to the things they need to survive. Meeting human needs and protecting the environment must go hand in hand.

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Let's use the problem of oil and gas cleanup in Alberta as an example. The cleanup and reclamation costs of oil and gas disturbance in Alberta might be as high as $230 billion according to internal estimates from the Alberta Energy Regulator. Doing some quick math, if we divide $230 billion by a reasonable salary of $80,000 per year, that could employ roughly 290,000 Albertans across 10 years' worth of cleanup work.

By contrast, there are around 130,000 people employed by the oil and gas industry in Alberta today. That's less than half of the people we could employ for cleanup and restoration work. Reclaiming ecosystems could be a sensible way to provide good-paying jobs for more workers while repairing the harms caused by extraction — a win for people and a win for the environment.

Unfortunately, funding restoration work is only possible if the Alberta government and the Alberta Energy Regulator collect the money companies owe to the province to cover cleanup costs, which they are refusing to do. Focusing on the oilsands specifically, Alberta has only collected $912 million — less than one percent — towards $130 billion in estimated cleanup costs.

While this may be an oversimplification, I think it's illustrative of the opportunities available to pursue

alternative economies that prioritize the protection of Alberta's landscape, without negatively impacting working people and their ability to support themselves. Expanding oil and gas production isn't the only path forward for Alberta. We have other options, like renewable energy, if only our leaders weren't held captive by corporate interests.

In response to the recently announced emissions cap for the oil and gas industry, the Alberta government launched a new ad campaign under the banner of "Scrap the Cap." The premier claims that we will lose 150,000 jobs because of the emissions cap, but a conflicting report from Clean Energy Canada shows that a net-zero Canada would create 700,000 more energy jobs due to growth in renewables. Just because we lose jobs in one sector doesn't mean we can't create new jobs in sustainable industries and support workers through the transition with subsidized retraining programs or other incentives.

What's more, evidence shows that switching to renewables also comes with the added benefit of reducing household costs. Research from the Canada Electricity Advisory Council found that switching to a net-zero electricity grid will save Canadian households an average of $1,500 per year. Renewables can provide more jobs, save people money, and help us reduce fossil fuel emissions. It's a win across the board, and yet the Alberta government has decided to prop up the oil and gas industry by imposing restrictions on its main competitor. Meanwhile, other jurisdictions are leading the way.



A wind turbine in southern Alberta in 2023.

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While not without its flaws, China's leadership on renewable energy shows what's possible when you have the political will to take environmental issues seriously and dedicate the resources needed to deal with the problem.

In 2023 alone, China added more solar energy capacity than the United States and Canada have constructed in their entire history. This past July, it was reported that almost two-thirds of global wind and solar projects currently under construction were being built in China, more than the rest of the world combined. The same story showed that China was on track to reach 1,200 gigawatts of wind and solar capacity by the end of 2024, six years ahead of its 2030 target. Canada, by contrast, has installed roughly 22 gigawatts.

China's move to renewables has been driven by a commitment by the Chinese government to build an "ecological civilization" as part of its political strategy back in 2007. The intent is to pursue economic development that occurs within planetary boundaries and ensures the harmonious existence between humanity and nature. As a result, China has become a world leader not only in renewable energy, but also the expansion of railways, the production of electric vehicles, and the reforestation of desert areas.

Alberta could be a world leader in renewables and sustainable development, but our government is choosing not to do so. This locks us into a future that's worse for the environment, worse for working people, but great for fossil fuel companies

Despite what our leaders say, the alternative future is a brighter one. Evidence shows that we can protect the environment and meet human needs while using less resources, spending less money, and maybe even having more free time for ourselves. Even the United Nations recently stated that: "sustainable wellbeing for all cannot be achieved by an economic system that focuses solely on economic growth." The path of least extraction is open to us, but it will take a massive, organized, and sustained effort on behalf of all of us to force our leaders to change ways. A greener future awaits us if we are ready to demand it.