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Please stop calling it “Ethical Oil”.

Ironically, this is a plea from someone who **supports** the oilsands, the Northern Gateway, the Keystone XL pipeline. Someone from **Ontario**, no less. Someone who wants to help others understand the importance of these activities and projects to Canadian prosperity. Someone who is confident that they can become increasingly environmentally sustainable. Someone who believes that we need to achieve a balance between environmental concerns and economic prosperity. We’re not there yet, but I’m convinced that with cooperation between environmentalists, government and the corporate sector, we can do much better.

But calling it “ethical oil” is completely counterproductive, and only serves to make the job harder for those of us trying to get more people onside.

The original effort was to counteract the naysayers -- primarily environmentalists in Canada, the US and Europe who have advocated the shutting down of the oil sands, withholding US approval for the Keystone Pipeline, EU labelling oil sands oil as dirty. The point is a simple one -- that people shouldn’t focus just on environmental concerns -- if they also considered human rights, political freedom and other socio-economic issues when deciding whether to criticize a particular source of oil, they wouldn’t be so quick to criticize the oil sands -- indeed, they should embrace the Canadian alternative.

But it has backfired -- indeed, been counterproductive, on two levels. First, claiming that Canadian oil is “ethical” declares that oil from all other sources is **un**ethical -- the international relations equivalent of slapping several countries in the face. This simplistic and superficial statement has unnecessarily insulted a variety of other countries -- all of which are trading partners, some of which are military or at least political allies. We may disagree with the political systems in other places; we may feel that our democracy, with our stable government, human rights and rule of law is better. I certainly do. And of course we have huge problems with, to single one out, Iran. Every country’s citizens have a right to their views, but to so publicly claim that we are more ‘ethical’ shows the kind of arrogance that has rendered the US one of the most disliked (and targeted) countries in the world. This is the kind of unnecessarily alienating behaviour that Canada’s foreign policy has, for decades, worked to avoid. We accomplish more with effective diplomacy than by throwing stones.

The second issue is far more problematic here at home. Trying to counteract allegations of environmental degradation by saying the oil is “ethical” not only fails to address the main complaint about environmental damage, it makes it even worse by suggesting that, because the oil is “ethical”, environmental problems are irrelevant. Another slap in the face, this time to all those who have legitimate concerns about the environmental sustainability of the oil sands.

Joe Oliver’s recent “open letter” alleging that “environmental and other radical groups...threaten to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda” only put oil on the fire. Of course there are some environmentalists who hold extreme views (as there are on all sides of an issue). But many Canadians have real, substantive concerns about environmental degradation caused by some of these activities – and they would respond far better if the government and the proponents of the oil sands acknowledged the concerns and showed respect for those trying to effect improvement.

Here’s some advice to the proponents of the oil sands (and, indeed, of other resource-extraction and transport projects that are criticized by environmentalists):

- Understand that there are some extreme views, opinions and behaviours that can cloud the efforts, but that there are serious, substantive environmental concerns that should, and can, be addressed.
- Show respect for the legitimate environmental concerns being raised – and for those who are trying to address them;
- Engage some of the critics to help establish better monitoring and analysis, and do so in an open and transparent way. This will be critical for establishing greater credibility.
- Develop the technologies and processes to better prevent or mitigate environmental degradation, and for remediation and clean-up where needed (again, engaging some of the critics to help).
- Communicate all of these efforts more effectively to the public. Understand that there is now a great deal of skepticism in the mind of the public about what information is provided, and that extra work is needed to gain trust.

There are a great number of Canadians, all across the country, who want to protect the environment, who at the same time understand the importance of capitalizing on Canada’s incredible natural resource wealth, and who believe that with some cooperation, we can do so in an environmentally sustainable way.