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The Federal Budget – An Opportunity for Environmentalists?

As Samuel Johnson wrote several centuries ago, "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

The measures announced in the recent federal budget dealing with environmental assessments -- to reduce duplication and impose a two-year time limit for large, particularly resource-based projects -- have many environmentalists expecting the worst. But although this is indeed a time for concentrating minds, it should not be due to some predicted demise. On the contrary, despite the cries of calamity and ruin from some quarters, there is an opportunity here to be seized.

Clearly, those who advocate zero-impact, who would shut down the oil sands and prevent any new major projects will not agree. But with that attitude, Canada would never have built the CPR, the TransCanada Highway or the St. Lawrence Seaway. Those environmentalists who also understand the importance of growth and prosperity are needed, now -- to help build a process that, in the context of these new measures, does even better at ensuring the environmental sustainability of these proposed major projects.

First, we need to acknowledge that there are indeed problems with the current system. Duplication of effort and multiple years of inefficiency are not synonymous with environmental protection. Too often, reviews have been burdened by unnecessary duplication and redundancies. Sometimes, particularly with public hearings, the process gets caught up in other community or legal issues. These may be equally important, but an environmental assessment review is not the right forum for those grievances to be heard. To make the most of a maximum two-year environmental assessment process, focus will be key. (The question of federal versus provincial assessments is complex and warrants its own analysis and commentary.)

Moving forward, however, will, however, take a different approach. Insults and partisan shots won't get us there. We need to bridge the divides that have been created, and find the common ground that I'm convinced is there.

And there IS common ground to work with. There are people on both "sides" who want greater environmental sustainability -- including, contrary to popular assumptions, many people who live and work in the oil patch. But we've created such a divide, such antagonism, such "us"

versus “them” attitudes that it will take some effort to get to the same table. Thanks in large measure to the media, the public has focussed on the more extreme views – the zero-impact advocates, celebrities and others advocating shut-downs and tanker bans. In turn, Joe Oliver’s January 9th “open letter to Canadians”, alleging that “environmental and other radical groups...threaten to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda”, was appalling. It was antagonistic, divisive – and clearly taunting. Then, having taken the bait, post-budget attacks from both NGOs and politicians that portrayed all Conservatives and business people as environmental villains (some of which were at least as vitriolic as Oliver was) weren’t helpful.

Environmentalists on both “sides” – environmentalist groups as well as sympathetic, environment-oriented government and business people, need to pull back on the extremist rhetoric and start opening doors to cooperation.

This is not a naïve suggestion. (Believe me, I’m anything but naïve about working with the Harper government.) But just as not all environmentalists want zero growth and zero impact, not all members of the government or the business community ignore environmental degradation. Sure, it’s true that some members of the current Conservative government are climate change deniers. But many do understand. And even among the climate change deniers, most, if not all, want to prevent or reduce other forms of water, land and air pollution as much as possible. Indeed, many members of the government are ardent conservationists and supporters of strong environmental regulation. These are the ones to focus on and work with.

The same is true for many corporate leaders in Canada – among them, some of the proponents of the very projects that are so vilified by certain environmental groups. Many support strong environmental regulation, but the communication gap between the two groups is immense. I have spent a lot of time in Calgary over the years, and am lucky to be doing so again now -- it’s amazing how wrong some popular assumptions can be. A fact that is little known (and certainly not mentioned by the critics), is that many of those ‘awful’ business people from the oil patch – are themselves environmentalists, who personally put a great deal of effort into conservation and other environmental causes. A large number of corporate leaders in the energy sector actually supported a carbon tax (although the Harper government effectively destroyed any chance of that). And many of these business men and women recognize that environmental sustainability is not just better for the environment, it’s also good business.

For their part, these same government and business people also have a big opportunity here, by using these new legislative measures as a catalyst for changing attitudes and negative public perceptions. Now is the time to step forward, and ask members of the environmentalist community for help in making sure (i) that the environmental regulations that apply to these projects are both strong and appropriate for the project; and (ii) that new streamlined

environmental assessment processes are as efficient and effective as possible, focussed solely on potential environmental effects, proposals for prevention, mitigation and remediation, as well as contingency plans for clean-up if needed.

We have to deal with reduced environmental assessments and shorter time frames. Those concerned about the environment will accomplish more by working cooperatively, and showing some needed compromise, to get the right regulations in place , and in streamlining the process, work to ensure a more complete focus on key environmental issues – all while encouraging the development important to Canada’s prosperity.