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To get Northern Gateway done, make it a nation-building project

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Is the Northern Gateway really dead?

Some say that despite the approval by the National Energy Board of the proposed pipeline from the oil sands to the West Coast (albeit with 209 conditions), the controversies surrounding the project, particularly the objections of First Nations, will make it impossible.

Yet Canada's own history suggests otherwise. Other major nation-building projects in Canada's history such as the CPR, the St. Lawrence Seaway and the TransCanada Pipeline were plenty controversial. What stands between Northern Gateway's success or failure? By understanding that nations aren't built by saying "no", they are built by saying "how".

Jim Prentice, former minister of both Industry and Environment, [recently wrote](#) of the "heavy lifting" that Enbridge must now undertake with First Nations to ensure their "economic participation" in Northern Gateway, to obtain the "social licence" needed for the project to proceed.

He's partly right, but also wrong – on two counts. First, he says, "The job now falls squarely on the shoulders of Enbridge." Enbridge, however, cannot do this alone. Access to the West Coast has major economic implications for countless Canadians across the country. Something this important to the prosperity of so many cannot be left to one corporation – particularly one already reputationally challenged.

Indeed, part of the reason the Northern Gateway proposal is already perceived so negatively is that too many other stakeholders left it to Enbridge, alone, to move it forward – and sat by watching as mistakes were made. (It's not just Enbridge's fault – comments by federal Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver, publicly insulting those opposed to the project, made things much worse.)

Mr. Prentice also focuses solely on the "economic participation" of First Nations, without mentioning the legitimate environmental concerns that have been raised. This is ironic, given that some of the largest concerns raised by the affected First Nations communities are not just economic, but environmental.

First Nations' economic participation *and* environmental sustainability are both critical to the social licence everyone agrees is necessary. But *all* participants must gather at the table to work it out – including the other private sector participants who stand to benefit (not just those in the oil patch but from across Canada); federal, provincial and municipal governments; affected First Nations communities; environmentalists interested in finding sustainability. It will require all parties, working together, to understand concerns as well as opportunities, and to negotiate compromises in a principled, constructive way.

In a way, the Northern Gateway concept is not new. Canada has always benefitted from exporting its natural resources abroad, but it hasn't happened by accident. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, John A. Macdonald saw the prairies as the (potential) breadbasket to the British Empire, with economic benefits for the whole country – but only if the grain could get to the sea.

To open up the opportunities of the West, the government sponsored the construction of three transcontinental railways, including the CPR. People were needed, too, so Macdonald encouraged prairie farm settlement with the Dominion Lands Act of 1872.

Here we are in the 21st century, and Canada can once again reap significantly more prosperity from our resources. But once again, we need access to the sea. The United States is our only customer for oil, which causes a significant price discount; they are also approaching energy self-sufficiency more quickly than anticipated. We must diversify our customer base, and the opportunities that resource-hungry Asia presents are huge.

The economic benefits spread country-wide, to manufacturers in Ontario and Quebec supplying the oil sands and pipelines with all manner of equipment and services, to scientists and technicians across the country developing more efficient (and environmentally-friendly) extraction processes, to Newfoundlanders earning high wages in Fort McMurray, to the federal taxes oil-related business activity sends to Ottawa, which in turn support programs across the country.

This is an extraordinary, historical opportunity for all of the stakeholders to participate in nation-building. Done well environmentally, with the support of First Nations, not only can this provide clear economic benefits for the whole country, but be something of which we can all be proud.

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