

Pipelines approved. Now hard work begins for Trudeau

MARTHA HALL FINDLAY AND TREVOR MCLEOD

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Martha Hall Findlay is the president and CEO and Trevor McLeod is the director of the Centre for Natural Resources Policy at the Canada West Foundation

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has shown Canadians that he is willing to make and defend tough decisions. Approving Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain project in the face of staunch opposition falls squarely in that category.

Yet things are about to get tougher as the pipeline saga enters the next phase. The Trudeau government has been warned by climate activists and some community and indigenous leaders that we can expect vigorous opposition in the form of protests, litigation and direct action. We've seen some of this already. And, no doubt, we will see more.

For the most part, this is as it should be. Canadians are staunch defenders of freedom of speech and freedom of association. We vigorously support the right of people to disagree about the direction of the country. We have the right to protest.

But, here's the thing: Canadians also believe firmly in the rule of law. We respect the results of elections and the decisions of Parliament, courts and regulatory bodies. Sure, we recognize that these institutions are not perfect and they need to be modernized from time to time to reflect the changing priorities of our society. Yet, in the end, we respect that laws should govern the nation.

What happens next will test the Prime Minister. Having decided that Line 3 and Trans Mountain will go ahead while Northern Gateway will not, Mr. Trudeau will be forced to demonstrate he is serious. He can show he will follow through and see to it that these pipelines are built. The Canadian economy needs the stimulus and the energy sector needs the boost.

There is another, less obvious opportunity available to the Prime Minister. This one will be harder to seize but it is crucial.

This week's announcement is an opportunity to break the false connection between pipelines and climate change.

Climate activists launched the anti-pipeline campaign close to a decade ago. The goal was simple: Apply pressure to pipelines to stop the oil sands and force climate action. The campaign has been a raging success in linking pipelines to climate change – the entire Canadian pipeline debate reinforces the link.

The Trudeau government's "thread the needle strategy" holds that we can build energy infrastructure if we take aggressive action on climate change. The essential line is that pipelines are only possible because of climate action. Mr. Trudeau said as much when praising the Notley government's Alberta climate strategy on Tuesday.

Ottawa and all of the provinces are serious about addressing climate change – even if they have different approaches to address the issue.

Ottawa has taken aggressive action by imposing a carbon-price backstop while accelerating the retirement of coal facilities. Ontario has retired coal. Quebec has a cap-and-trade system. British Columbia has a revenue-neutral carbon tax. Alberta is eliminating coal and has capped oil-sands emissions at 100 megatonnes. Saskatchewan's electricity capacity will be 50-per-cent non-emitting by 2030. These policies demand the dramatic reshaping of Canada's energy systems – it is going to be a rough ride.

So, with every Canadian jurisdiction tackling climate change, can we drop the charade about pipelines driving climate change? Pipelines are not a proxy for climate action. The narrative is false and has outlived its usefulness.

If the goal is to reduce global greenhouse-gas emissions and to keep temperatures well below 2C above pre-industrial levels, can we please refocus the debate on consumption of, and demand for, carbon? Without demand for carbon-intensive energy, the production and transportation of such energy will stop.

Meanwhile, when we finally delink the climate discussion from the pipeline debate, our regulators will be able to focus on the issues that matter most to communities – indigenous and otherwise – including pipeline and marine safety, community benefit and involvement in decision-making processes.

Local and indigenous issues have been leveraged ruthlessly to drive the climate agenda. It is time for local issues and engagement to become the primary focus of our energy regulator system.

That's the hard part.