

**DISSENT IN RALPH KLEIN'S KINGDOM?**

Exploring oil sands discourses found in  
Alberta newspapers' editorials

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**ABSTRACT**

From the outside, Alberta politics are commonly perceived as homogenous. This is most often attributed to the electoral dominance of the Conservative Party at both the provincial and federal levels. Nowhere is this “homogeneity” more evident than in how Albertans and their government’s view oil and gas development, and the oil sands in particular. Even today, three letters, NEP, can be used to stroke public sentiment against perceived government interference. However, this study challenges this perspective. It argues that a more nuanced view of Alberta conservatism and alternative viewpoints emerge when one examines the degree of diversity found within the portrayal of oil sands in three Alberta newspapers: the *Fort McMurray Today*, the *Edmonton Journal*, and the *Calgary Herald*. Each of these papers serves a community intricately linked to oil sands development — ground zero, the capital and service centre, and the head office respectively. During the study’s time period of October 1, 2005 to October 31, 2007, there were two public reviews about the future of oil sands development and a leadership race to replace Ralph Klein as leader of the Conservative party and Premier of Alberta. Because, the very nature of oil sands development was open for debate the media were presented with a newsworthy topic.

One of the roles subscribed to the modern media in democracies is to hold the government and other powerful actors to account. One way of fulfilling this role may be through their editorials, where, freed from the journalistic expectations of “balance” and “objectivity,” newspapers can openly attack, defend, or give advice to these actors. In short, editorials are designed to *talk to* the issues raised in the hard news stories either from the perspective of the “voice of the reader” or that of the “calm authoritative voice of the editor, viewing the political scene from a detached distance” (McNair quoted in Warl-Jorgensen, 2008: 73). In either case, newspapers want governments, other policy actors, and even their own readers to *hear* their message by using it to influence decisions and/or as the basis for “their political knowledge and judgements” (Ibid). However, one should not expect that editorials would diverge too greatly from the general tone of the paper, as newspapers have a “symbiotic” relationship with these actors, heavily reliant on them to provide source material for their hard news sections (Sampert, 2005).

During most of the Klein era, both flagship Alberta papers, the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal* adopted a decidedly pro-Klein agenda (Sampert, 2005: 38). A former editor in chief<sup>1</sup> of the *Edmonton Journal* said his paper's role was not “to serve as opposition but was interested in working with the government” (Ibid). The *Fort McMurray Today* likely did not deviate from this overall Klein friendly landscape. There were several signs nearing the end of Klein's tenure, which indicated that the public and the media were in a more critical mood in general and specifically were willing to focus on problems with oil sands development.

In October 2005, the Alberta Government released the Mineable Oils Strategy (MOSS). This strategy would have elevated oil sands development over all other uses throughout a 2,900 km<sup>2</sup> area. There was no obscuration of this objective and the consultation plan was limited to Fort McMurray. Many of government's traditional opponents, especially environmental groups spoke out against it. Surprisingly, the Alberta Government abandoned the plan and instead struck a MLA-led group to design a new consultative process. Before this MLA group released its recommendation in May 2006, Klein received a disappointing leadership review and announced his decision to retire at the end of the year. Thus, it was in this context of transition away from the Klein era that a multistakeholder consultation was born. This created opportunity over the next year throughout the province for the public, the media, and other policy actors to either openly support or challenge the Klein government on its pro-oil sands development stance.

In September 2006, Klein threw fuel on the fire when he announced that his government had “no plan” to deal with the explosive growth created by the booming oil

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<sup>1</sup> Giles Gherson, editor-in-chief from 2000-2003, made the comment.

sands development.<sup>2</sup> Combined with the announcement by a couple of oil sands companies that they were looking for refinery capacity in the U.S. and the growing perception among Albertans that they were not getting a fair share of oil profits as owners of the resource, critics emerged within the upper echelons of the Conservative party and other traditional pro-industry supporters. First, among them was Peter Lougheed, an elder Conservative statesman, who was premier of Alberta when the province fought its still contentious energy wars with Ottawa over the National Energy Plan (NEP)<sup>3</sup>. Lougheed announced that the province should have controlled development by focusing on one major project at time. So convincing was his argument that many others used his comments to justify and lend support to their position. Second, despite the fact that they had all been cabinet members within the Klein government, the Conservative party's leadership candidates sought to distance themselves from Klein's "no plan" legacy and they all promised to review how oil sands development occurred.<sup>4</sup> After successfully winning the Conservative Party leadership in December 2006, Ed Stelmach followed through and launched another public review – this one tasked with examining all energy royalties including the oil sands royalty regime. Third, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, which contains Fort McMurray, announced during Alberta Energy and Utility Board (AEUB) hearings for new developments that it had simply "had enough" – new resources were desperately need to handle the growth or conversely the government should slow down the pace of growth.<sup>5</sup> Even at the federal level, the Harper Conservative government implemented fiscal policies, which negatively impacted the oil sands industry by eliminating the corporate tax exemption for income trusts and the accelerated capital cost allowance.

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<sup>2</sup> Corporate interests still enjoy this privileged position. In the latest boom, Ralf Klein's "no plan" plan could be seen as evidence of the provincial government defaulting its broad planning abilities and responsibilities to the private sector.

<sup>3</sup> Designed to enhance Canada's overall energy security in response to the OPEC crisis, many in western Canada thought Trudeau's 1980 NEP penalized the West in favour of maintaining support in central Canada. Key characteristics of the NEP were refocusing the federal government's initiatives onto projects located within federal lands (e.g., offshore and territorial assets), implementing a lower "made-in-Canada" price, and a new system which diverted more petrodollars into federal coffers (Chastko, 2004: 182). Many in Fort McMurray thought that the introduction of new price for synthetic oils was specifically aimed at Suncor (Ibid).

<sup>4</sup> Renewal in the Alberta Conservative Party often comes from campaigning against the previous leadership. Previously, Ralph Klein successfully campaigned against the former premier, Don Getty, when he assumed control (Smith, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo's submission at the Suncor Voyager hearings (RMWB, 2006).

Faced with unparalleled criticism and uncertainty, the oil sands industry responded by asserting positions that had worked so well in the past.<sup>6</sup> First, that the oil sands industry was still cost extensive, faced considerable downside risk to the price of oil, coupled with significant lead time to market and therefore deserving of a royalty regime that recognized these facts and shared the risks. Second, if one uses the industry developed numbers euphemistically referred to as “total government take”, industry appeared to be paying its fair share. Third, government — not industry — was responsible for providing the necessary physical and social infrastructure (e.g., roads, health services) to support its host communities. Lastly, the oil sands companies noted that they were being unfairly targeted as environmental laggards despite being successful at reducing water and energy use per barrel. It is important to note that at the same time, oil sands companies and energy analysts were selling the oil sands as one of the best places to invest given Canada's safe political climate and the sheer size of the reserves.

To examine whether there were dissenting views about oil sands development, this study used content and discourse methods to examine editorials in three newspapers, the *Calgary Herald*, the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Fort McMurray Today*. Analysis of the editorials found that dissent was limited to specific aspects of oil sands development — e.g., the amount of royalties paid, whether or not nuclear power should be embraced, who is responsible for solving the infrastructure crisis — but not development *per se*. However, due to a confluence of events — predominantly the change in provincial leadership and the outspokenness of traditional supporters like Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo and Peter Lougheed — critiquing Klein-era policies became the status quo. Rather than leading public opinion with thoughtful and provocative editorial pieces, the media merely echoed some of the milder critiques expressed by Alberta political actors during a period of change.

### **The Alberta Oil Sands**

With its estimated 174 billion barrels of recoverable oil, the Alberta oil sands have been fuelling the Albertan and Canadian economy. Covering an area larger than the state of Florida (Government of Alberta, 2009), the oil sands deposits are located in what some consider the northeastern corner of Alberta. The oil sands have always been a high cost producer, as they require extensive upgrading to be converted into a useable form.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> These points of positions were asserted in various presentations by representatives from oil sands companies during the royalty review hearings. For example, Syncrude stated that 60% of the RMWB total tax revenue already comes from Suncor, Albian Sands, and themselves (Syncrude, 2006: 15).

<sup>7</sup> There are two primary methods for extracting bitumen (10-12%) from its surrounding material (quartz sand (70%), water (3-5%) while the remainder consists of other inorganic material) (Urquhart, 2004: 3). For those deposits located close to the surface, open pit mining is used. For deeper deposits, producers use an in-situ process, which separates the oil from the sand underground by injecting steam. For a full description of both processes, see the pamphlet, *Canada's Oil Sands* (July 2006) produced by Canadian Centre for Energy Information. Some oil sands companies are even investigating ways to separate bitumen from limestone deposits.

Currently, the oil sands companies are producing 1.3 million barrels per day (mbd) which is scheduled to rise between 2.3 mbd to 6.3 mbd by 2035 (IHS CERA, 2009: ES-8 to ES-9).

Between 2000 and 2008, over \$150 billion Canadian was spent on oil sands development, with 80% of this expenditure occurring domestically (IHS CERA, 2009: I-5). The oil sands royalty framework, introduced in 1997 by the provincial government, was credited as one of the primary drivers of this growth. Designed in a period of low oil prices and low levels of new investment, this royalty regime only collects 1% royalty on all production until the developer has recuperated all project costs, including a return allowance. When this occurs, the royalty rate jumps to 25% of net revenues. However, with high oil prices and record-breaking profits, this system was seen as being too favourable towards industry. Facing mounting public pressure, it became an issue in the leadership race to replace Ralph Klein in 2006. As stated in the introduction, upon becoming premier Ed Stelmach launched a review. After consulting with the public, industry and other stakeholders, an expert royalty review panel recommended sweeping changes. Adopting some of the panel's recommendations in October 2007, Stelmach announced changes to royalty regime with a sliding pre-payout royalty that would rise from the 1% after oil prices surpass \$55 per barrel to a maximum of 9% when oil price surpassed \$120 per barrel (Alberta Energy, 2010). Post payout would also depend on the price of oil and would range from 25% to 40%.<sup>8</sup> It would also start accepting bitumen-in-kind. More controversial at the time was Stelmach decision to renegotiate existing contractual agreements with Suncor and Syncrude.

Prior to the recent global recession, which saw oil prices collapse from \$147 per barrel to the \$40 to \$60 range (IHS CERA, 2009: ES-6), potential brakes to this explosive growth were shortages of skilled labour and materials which drove rapid inflation in the local area. The ability to attract a skilled workforce was compounded by the severe housing shortage<sup>9</sup> and other infrastructure challenges facing the host community, Fort McMurray, resulting in the rapid increase in population from 42,837 in 1999, to surpass the 100,000 mark in 2008 (Ibid). Fort McMurray also has a significant shadow population — 53% of the population growth from 2005 to 2008 was attributed to work camps (Ibid). Despite Ralph Klein's assertion that this level of growth was unpredictable, rapid social change is a common characteristic of resource-based communities. Although the scale is unprecedented, the latest challenges are neither

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<sup>8</sup> In response to global economic slowdown, the province has reversed some of its changes affecting conventional oil and natural gas production but did not reassess the oil sands "given the province's unique position in this area and its continued success in attracting significant investment in new and expanding oil sands projects" (Alberta, 2010: 2).

<sup>9</sup> Owing the majority of undeveloped land, the province is notoriously slow in releasing its land for residential building construction.

new nor unexpected as the community of Fort McMurray also experienced significant stresses during its first boom (see Huberman, 2001; Matthiasson, 1971).

Longer-term challenges facing the oil sands industry include the level of greenhouse gas emissions<sup>10</sup>, and the amount of natural gas used in the extraction process<sup>11</sup>. Not only is natural gas costly for oil sands operators but it also attracts criticism as it converts a “clean” energy source, which could be used to heat homes or produce products like fertilizers and plastics, into a “dirty” one. Several policy actors during the study period (including both the then federal Minister of Natural Resources and front-running leadership candidate Jim Dinning) raised nuclear power as a possible solution. Previously, the Klein government had rejected it. Despite some of its former opponents embracing it as a low greenhouse gas producing energy source, nuclear power remained controversial in Alberta. In addition to typical objections of safety and disposal of waste material, the oil sands industry also questioned whether the energy produced could be a successful replacement for the energy produced by natural gas needed in the extraction process. As discussed in the discourse analysis section, all three newspapers ran editorials on the issue of using nuclear power for fuelling further oil sands growth.

Lastly, the amount of amount of water (two to four barrels) used to produce a barrel of oil sands bitumen is routinely criticized. Unlike many other water uses, some of this water is “removed permanently from the hydrologic cycle” (Urquhart, 2004: 24). Through new technologies and increased recycling, the oil sands industry has significantly reduced its water use.

## Editorials

“The news media are like the boards of a hockey rink” — this is perhaps the best metaphor to describe the media role (Kinsella, 2007, 84). First, they largely set the parameters of public discourse. As such, they have tremendous agenda-setting power. One way newspapers can “amplify” an issue is simply by making it the focus of an editorial (Nesbitt-Larking, 2007: 320). Due to the limited number of editorials and column space, editorials provide a clear signal to readers, government, and other policy actors about the topics a newspaper thinks are important. Whether the media is leading the policy agenda, in step with, or following other policy actors depends on the

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<sup>10</sup>The industry continues to challenge the claim that the oil sands are “dirty” because of the high levels of greenhouse gas emissions arguing that when applying a full life cycle accounting, oil sands are only 5 to 15 percent higher (IHS CERA, 2009: ES-4). When comparing production methods, oil sands release two to three times more greenhouse gas emissions than conventional oil production.

<sup>11</sup> To produce a barrel of upgraded crude oil from oil sands mining project, 14 cubic metres (500 cubic feet) of natural gas is needed. An in-situ project uses approximately twice as much (Canadian Centre for Energy Information, July 2006).

specific issue attributes and may change over time (Soroko, 2002). However, the mainstream media remain a crucial place where the “game” is played despite whether it is leading or lagging other actors.

Second, Kinsella (2007) argues policy actors who challenge the media head-on will more likely get hurt themselves than the media will, just as player who hits boards straight on is likely to get “hurt” (85). Actors who challenge the media’s dominant “frame” will have difficult time in getting their position covered and heard. In employing certain frames over others, the media limit our thinking about the issues that they choose to cover (Nesbitt-Larking, 2001: 357). Van Dijk (1991) provides additional cautionary note that editorials, even more than hard news stories, are like to rely on formulistic “practical, common-sense frameworks.” To be successful at this, it is not that they need to “mould opinion” to reflect their preferred stance, “it is enough that they create opinion visibility, giving legitimacy to certain views and illegitimacy to others” (Sherman and Gismondi, 1997:14). For example, an editorial focusing on the economic benefits to Canadian governments through increased oil sands production would activate a different set of values than one whose focus is protecting Canadian energy security by ensuring a domestic oil reserve. Both editorials would be radically different from one that evokes an environmental frame. Language also plays an important role. Originally the Alberta oil sands were called “tar sands” a metaphor used to describe what they essentially looked like – black goeey tar like substance — and the fact that one of their earlier but ineffective uses was as a paving and roofing material. Not only is tar considered less valuable than oil, it is also creates the impression of dirty resource. Government and industry consciously worked to re-label the resource “oil sands”. Now, only critics of the industry employed the term “tar sands” domestically. Internationally, the discourse has been slower to change. It is important to note that what is actually extracted is neither “tar” nor “oil” but bitumen. Both “oil sands” and “tar sands” are frames<sup>12</sup>.

Third, Kinsella (2007) argues the media, like boards, can be extremely helpful to policy actors when understood and applied effectively (85). This gives a level of agency back to other policy actors. It also recognizes the “symbiotic” relationship introduced at the start of this paper. Through press releases, interviews, and the like, policy actors seek to cultivate a positive assessment from the media, which can connote a sense of legitimacy and credibility to their policy stance that no amount of money can buy.

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<sup>12</sup> In French, the resource is more accurately labelled: sables bitumineux.



## Methodology

This study examined editorials<sup>13</sup> pertaining to the Alberta oil sands in the *Calgary Herald*, the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Fort McMurray Today* that appeared from October 1, 2005 to October 31, 2007. Each of these papers serves as a community directly linked to the massive oil sands development – the head office (Calgary), the governing and service centre (Edmonton), and ground zero (Fort McMurray). While the *Fort Murray Today* is the only paper serving the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, two newspapers serve both Calgary and Edmonton. I selected the *Herald* and the *Journal* because they are both broadsheets and have larger circulations than their local counterparts have.<sup>14</sup> Canwest Media owns both the *Journal* and the *Herald* while the *Fort McMurray Today* is owned by Sun Media (Quebecor Inc.) During this period, a total of 82 editorials were about the oil sands.

The *Fort McMurray Today* penned the largest number of editorials, at 39 editorials. At 23 editorials, the *Calgary Herald* produced slightly more editorials than the 20 in *Edmonton Journal*. Nine editorials were written between October to December 2005, 37 editorials were written from in 2006, and 36 editorials were written from January to October 2007.

Content analysis<sup>15</sup> produces a quantitative record that allows one to compare specific variables across and within newspapers (Trimble et al. 2010). In this study, I employed it to measure the main frame and specific emphasis of both the headline and the body of the editorial. Editorials were categorized under the following main frames: economic, environmental, social, energy security, or “other”. Content analysis was also applied to identify actors in the headline and sources in the body of editorial. In addition, the editorial was also judged on its portrayal of oil sands in both its headline and body.

To supplement the summary method of content analysis, this study employed discourse analysis to tease out the paper's intentions behind the editorial. Discourse analysis links the specific discourse (in this the case, the editorial) to both the specific socio-economic and political context that produced it but also how, in turn, the discourse shapes these contexts (see Richardson 2007; van Dijk 1991). The editorial is a unique type of text because it not only interprets the “hard” news for the readers but also seeks to address directly the social, economic, and political elite through offering a critique, support, and advice (van Dijk, 1991: 134). Specifically, my analysis of the editorial cartoons was guided by the following questions:

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<sup>13</sup> Editorials, over 300 words in length containing the words “oil sands/oil sands” or “tar sands” in the lead paragraph and/or headline,<sup>13</sup> were selected for analysis.

<sup>14</sup> The two other papers, the *Calgary Sun* and the *Edmonton Sun*, are both tabloid papers.

<sup>15</sup> The coding framework is available from the author upon request.

- Is the editorial *attacking* a specific actor(s)? What is the basis of this attack?
- Is the editorial *defending* a specific actor(s)? What is the basis of this defence?
- Does the editorial provide advice and if so, to whom?

### Findings: Content Analysis

To discover whether there was “dissent” voiced against oil sands development, this study began by analyzing the main frame expressed in the body of the editorial. As Table 1 shows, although the percentages between the two large metro newspapers, the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal* vary, the rank order remained consistent — economic (1<sup>st</sup>), environmental (2<sup>nd</sup>), social (3<sup>rd</sup>), and energy security (4<sup>th</sup>) frame. In the *Fort McMurray Today*, environment and social frames switch rank order with social now occupying the 2<sup>nd</sup> place.

**Table 1: Main editorial frame of oil sands related editorials by newspaper**

	Calgary Herald	Edmonton Journal	Fort McMurray Today
Economic	8 (35%)	8 (40%)	14 (36%)
Energy security	2 (9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Environmental	9 (39%)	6 (30%)	6 (29%)
Social	4 (17%)	3 (15%)	14 (36%)
Other	0 (0%)	3 (15%)	5 (13%)
Total	23	20	39

The media literature often presents editorials as a unique form of news discourse. To understand the structure of an editorial, this study contrasted the frames adopted by editorials with those presented by hard news and columns/commentaries. As Table 2 demonstrates, the economic frame was the primary frame for all three story types. However, editorials in the three Alberta papers were significantly less likely to have economics as their main frame than both the column/commentary and hard news story types. The hard news category was overwhelming dominated by stories in the business section, of which the majority focus naturally on economic issues. Editorials were also significantly more likely to cover stories that address the social implications of oil sands development than the other two story types.

**Table 2: Main editorial frame of oil sands related content by type of story**

	<b>Editorial</b>	<b>Column/commentary</b>	<b>Hard News</b>
Economic*	30 (37%)	61 (50%)	857 (64%)
Energy security	2 (2%)	15 (12%)	56 (4%)
Environmental	21 (26%)	27 (22%)	241 (18%)
Social*	21 (26%)	15(12%)	125 (9%)
Other	8 (10%)	14 (12%)	62 (5%)
Total	82	121	1341

Note: Difference between story type significant at \*p=< .01

An overall measure of negative tone was one way that this study analyzed whether or not editorials took a dissenting opinion against oil sands development. Although the percentages vary among the newspapers as Table 3 shows, the rank order remained consistent across the *Calgary Herald*, the *Edmonton Journal*, and the *Fort McMurray Today* with the majority of the editorials offering a balanced or neutral perspective concerning the oil sands development. Discourse analysis revealed that that criticism of a particular aspect of oil sands development (e.g., greenhouse gases or infrastructure problems) was tempered by general support for the industry.

**Table 3: Portrayal of oil sands development in the body in editorials, by newspaper**

	<b>Calgary Herald</b>	<b>Edmonton Journal</b>	<b>Fort McMurray Today</b>
Positive	2 (9%)	1 (5%)	6 (15%)
Negative	4 (17%)	8 (40%)	7 (18%)
Neutral	17 (74%)	11 (55%)	26 (67%)
Total	20	23	39

The majority of all story types were neutral or balanced reflecting neutrality in tone or offering both positive and negative assessments of oil sands development in the story. As previously stated, the neutrality of editorials was not due to fact that they offered no advice or opinion but usually critique one actor or aspect of oil sands development while generally supporting the industry.

**Table 4: Portrayal of oil sands development in the body, by story type**

	<b>Editorials</b>	<b>Column/commentary</b>	<b>Hard News</b>
Positive*	9 (11%)	26 (22%)	408 (30%)
Negative*	19 (23%)	24 (20%)	170 (13%)
Neutral	54 (66%)	71 (59%)	763 (57%)
Total	82	121	1341

Note: Difference between story type significant at \*p=< .01 and

Another measure of tone employed in this study was whether the editorials used the more negative term: tar sands. Out of the 82 editorials, only two editorials (one in the *Edmonton Journal* and one in the *Fort McMurray Today*) used the words “tar sands” and “oil sands” to describe the resource. However, none used the term directly as each of these uses were contained within a quote. Clearly, all three newspapers embraced governments’ and industry’s preferred term.

Sources can help set the tone and direction of a news story. As outlined in Table 5<sup>16</sup>, a high number of editorials do not rely directly on sources. The top three sources first relied on by editorials were the provincial government, the municipal government, environmental groups. Although the percentages varied, hard news and columns/commentary, sources both shared the same ranking for first and second sources: industry actors (1<sup>st</sup>), provincial government (2<sup>nd</sup>), and environmental groups (3<sup>rd</sup>).

**Table 5: Top three first and second sources quoted by story type**

	Editorials		Column/ commentary		Hard News	
	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Provincial government	8 (10%)	6 (7%)	15 (12%)	10(9%)	100 (18%)	116 (10%)
Municipal government	7 (9%)	--	--	--	--	--
Environmental groups	4 (5%)	3 (4%)	4 (3%)	2 (2%)	82 (6%)	57 (5%)
Oil sands companies & other	--	3 (4%)	28 (23%)	14 (12%)	640 (44%)	328 (28%)
No source quoted	34 (42%)	55 (68%)	18 (15%)	55 (48%)	6 (0.4%)	279 (24%)

<sup>16</sup> Results are grouped for all newspaper as the small numbers make creates low frequencies for particular actors.

## Findings: Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis revealed several issues that were prevalent across the *Calgary Herald*, the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Fort McMurray Today* or a particular focus of one newspaper. Each of the following is explored in the section below:

- royalties and municipal taxation
- Fort McMurray's infrastructure crisis
- east vs. west "energy wars"
- "greening" the oil sands
- the approval process
- the oil sands industry right to manage itself

### *Royalties and municipal taxation*

During this period many Albertans, environmental groups, labour and others felt that the 1997 royalty regime was too generous in the era of high oil prices and seemingly endless billion dollar announcements<sup>17</sup>. Public opinion had swung against the Klein era doctrine that royalty system was fine and no review was necessary. As described below, editorial opinion among the three newspapers was split. The *Calgary Herald* defended, for the most part, the oil sands industry perspective in regards to the royalty review process. The *Edmonton Journal*<sup>18</sup> and the *Fort McMurray Today* both sided with the royalty review panel and the Stelmach government that royalties were too low and needed to be increased.

While recognizing the need for review, all of *Calgary Herald's* editorials adamantly state that any new regulations should apply only to new projects. The effectiveness of any legislation would be greatly reduced especially if one defined "new" in pre-lease terms. For example, the *Herald* rejected Stelmach's decision to change Syncrude and Suncor's contracts, tying the issue to a larger one of maintaining investor confidence:

Of deepest concern, however, is the government's seeming determination to reopen its Crown agreements with Syncrude and Suncor. It is certain to cause profound cynicism about its bona fides and the potential harm to Alberta's reputation as a place where contracts mean something can hardly be understated (Herald, 2007<sup>a</sup>, A24).

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<sup>17</sup> For a flavour of direct testimony on individuals and groups, a summary is provided in the "What was said" section of the Royalty Review Panel Final Report (2007).

<sup>18</sup> Editorials on the release of the royalty review were not captured in the data set because they did not directly address oil sands in either their lead paragraph or headline. However, upon review, it should be noted that *Journal* supported royalty review panel and then Stelmach's new royalty regime noting in their headline that "the sky fails to fall" (Journal, 2007<sup>a</sup>, A18).

In contrast with the *Herald* position, the *Fort McMurray Today* came out in favour of the Royalty Review Panel's recommendations rejecting the notion that changes in royalty structure would change the fundamentals behind the business case:

The high price of oil ...means that exploiting the resource will continue to be very profitable for industry. Any company that cuts back investment simply because of the new royalties is short-sighted – its actions would be taken for no other reason than spite. If the business case to profit from the oil sands existed before, it's still the case. Oil is simply worth too much (Today, 2007<sup>b</sup>:A4)

It also tied the increased royalty directly with the province's ability to pay for the necessary infrastructure:

It's a lose-lose for oil companies, and a win-win for individual Albertans. Lots of growth and jobs have boosted the Alberta economy like no other region on (t)he(sp) face of the globe. We have the oil companies to thank for that. We appreciate it. In turn, the oil companies have enjoyed record profits – billions as a result. To thank-us, they can pay higher royalties. They can help pay for the massive infrastructure that must be built to accommodate the growth they kicked off (Today, 2007<sup>a</sup>: A4)

Likewise, the *Fort McMurray Today* advocated shifting the property tax burden away from households to industry in two editorials (Today, 2006<sup>d</sup>: A4; Today, 2005<sup>c</sup>: A4). Municipalities, with a "fixed" industrial base," will often employ this strategy (see Kennedy and McAllister, 2005). Written from a "voice of the reader," the *Fort McMurray Today* justifies this tax shift by holding the oil sands industry responsible for infrastructure deviancies facing the community:

Oil sands companies are healthy; they're cashing in record profits. They're in a fine position to help pay for the infrastructure needed to support the employees they're bringing here (Today, 2006<sup>d</sup>: A4)

#### *Fort McMurray's infrastructure crisis*

Written in the authoritative voice of the editor, the *Calgary Herald* ran two editorials advocating that the provincial government must address Fort McMurray's infrastructure problems, as their top priority for the provincial government because if left unaddressed they would negatively affect the whole province (Herald, 2007<sup>a</sup>; Herald, 2005):

Mayor Dave Bronconnier<sup>19</sup> may be making the most noise about the need for a greater share of the provincial funds, but Fort McMurray usurps

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<sup>19</sup> Mayor of Calgary

Calgary at the top of the priority list. . . .Fort McMurray's infrastructure and social woes are everybody's problem. . . . Alberta is poised to become one of the most powerful petroleum producers in the world. We need politicians who are up to the job of shepherding this province through the next decade of transformation (Herald, 2005: A20).

Advocating that Fort McMurray is a special case is a direct reputation of a long-standing Klein-era that refused to recognize Fort McMurray as unique (Pratt, 2007). The advice was not directed at Klein as even the earliest editorial, the *Herald's* October 25, 2005 editorial, is envisioning a post-Klein era:

It is going to take visionary leadership from the premier's office, whoever shall fill the chair once Ralph is safely retired, to set the course through what could be a century of uninterrupted prosperity (A20)

Likewise, the *Edmonton Journal* joined the *Herald* in arguing, that the provincial government should treat Fort McMurray as unique. Even arguing that the infusion of \$400 million of funds was not enough to solve the community's problems:

The difference between the little Dutch boy and Stelmach is that while the former was able to send for help while he provided temporary stop-gap, the latter doesn't have the luxury of being able to rely on stop-gap measures, nor help coming from other sources. This is Stelmach problem to fix (Journal, 2007<sup>e</sup>: A16).

While the *Fort McMurray Today* would agree with the editorial stances of the *Journal* and the *Herald* that Fort McMurray's problems were unique, they extended the degree of responsibility much further than the province's main papers. As stated above, in addition to holding industry responsible, they hold the federal government as responsible as the province:

For too long, Fort McMurray has been treated badly by government officials in Edmonton and Ottawa who cashed royalty cheques but refused to invest much of that largesse in ensuring infrastructure kept up with the massive growth happening here (Today, 2007<sup>d</sup>: A4).

This editorial position—the idea that Fort McMurray was unique and deserving of extra assistance—was instep with a new consensus that was emerging. Earlier that year, the oil sands industry and local authorities in Fort McMurray had made the “business case” as to why the community was unique and why new funding represented an “investment” in the province not just the community (RIWG, 2005). Government initiatives during the study period, the Radke report and the final report from the Oil sands Multistakeholder Consultation committee reconfirmed Fort McMurray uniqueness. Leadership candidates running to succeed Klein pledged to resolve Fort

McMurray's infrastructure and social woes. It becomes apparent that the *Herald* and the *Journal* represented the new status-quo.

*East vs. west "energy wars"*

In many instances, the *Calgary Herald's* editorial point of view is consistent with one's expectations of a newspaper devoted to telling Calgary's story. In particular, the *Herald* replayed the familiar us (Alberta) vs. them (Ottawa, eastern Canadians) dialogue of the "energy wars." From the NEP to Kyoto, many Albertans believe that the federal government consistently blocks Alberta from realizing its full potential (e.g., Bickerton and Gagnon, 2009). Liberals most often feel the brunt of Alberta's anger since, as government, they were responsible for the implementation of the NEP and other controversial policies. Yet, as the Conservative government in Ottawa sought to "green" itself, the *Calgary Herald* was worried that the Conservative party, even one headed by a Prime Minister from Calgary, would be willing to sacrifice western interests in search of electoral victory in eastern Canada:

Could it be trying to distance itself from greenhouse-gas belching oil sands industry as part of its revised environmental strategy . . .? Yet Baird's comments suggest once again that western interests are about to be treated as secondary to the ruling government's obsession with appeasing Quebec (Herald, 2007<sup>b</sup>: A20)

Certainly if Ottawa puts to the Alberta's oil sands to curry favour with eastern voters anxious over global warming, the provincial government would have no choice but to defend itself. Aggressive legislation would lead to overheated rhetoric – on both sides – and the possible revival of a wild card western separatist party (Herald, 2007<sup>b</sup>: A16).

In responding to new "green" politics, the *Herald* reconfirmed an anti-Liberal bias on the part of the paper, "Liberal governments have used Alberta as a convenient bag when stumping the East" and "would have no reason not do so once more" (Ibid). Likewise, it was difficult for the *Herald* to envision how a federal energy plan could be developed without infringing on areas of provincial responsibility

The (Conference Board of Canada)'s proposals for a National Energy framework defining Canada's energy policy principles – even if anything meaningful could be written without intruding upon the provincial mandate – doesn't solve any government's basic conundrum: How much is one prepared to slow oil sands development to curb greenhouse gas emissions (Herald, 2007<sup>f</sup>: A12) ?

Although less than the *Herald*, the "us" vs. "them" attitude was still present in the *Journal*:



In a province still angry about PET's 1980 NEP, the notion that Europeans and even Americans, powered by their nuclear plants, frustrated by reliance on Middle Eastern and Russian oil and beset with own emission sins, would seek to shut down our economy is rather unlikely to be well received (Journal, 2007<sup>b</sup>: A14).

The "us" (Alberta) vs. "them" (Ottawa, eastern Canadians) manifested itself differently in the *Fort McMurray Today*. As highlighted in the previous section, it believed that both Ottawa and Alberta have treated it badly in the past (Today, 2007<sup>d</sup>: A4). It has also perceived "drive-by" smears from both outside media and environmental groups (Today, 2007<sup>c</sup>, A4). For this newspaper, the "us" was often defined in exclusively local terms.

### *"Greening" the oil sands*

Despite improved environmental performance on a per barrel basis, the oil sands remain extremely vulnerable to attacks from the environmental groups. With climate change dominating the environmental news (Gunster, 2009), the issue of whether or nuclear power should be used in the oil sands extraction became a central focus of 8 editorials

First, saying "there's no better application in Canada than a large scale industrial user in remote area (Herald, 2006<sup>b</sup>: A24), the *Calgary Herald* came out strongly in favour<sup>20</sup> of nuclear power in four editorials. It claimed that nuclear power was a safe, reliable energy source, which would result in a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, lower water usage, and greater price stability for oil sands operators. If local criticism emerged, the *Herald* dismissed it as not rational:

If people can live next to nuclear power station in Pickering (ON), a plant in northern Alberta well removed from Fort McMurray should meet any objective measure of risk (Herald, 2007<sup>d</sup>, A16).

The *Herald* also called on the provincial government "to take leadership on the issue" (Ibid). While it is not unexpected that the *Herald* would support the development of nuclear power in an area of the province it perceived as "remote," what is unexpected is that it did so without questioning whether or not the oil sands industry could actually *use* the energy produced by nuclear power and if feasible who would *pay* for the development of nuclear plants. The *Herald* appeared to be calling for significant new government initiatives in an area where a clear business case has yet to be

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<sup>20</sup> The *Calgary Herald* did run one guest commentary, by the Pembina Institute and Sierra Legal, which critiqued the nuclear power's "clean" energy, affordable, and reliability claims (Wilkins et al., 2007: A10). It also pointed out the fact that no oil sands company had made a commitment to using nuclear power.

developed. Likewise, the *Edmonton Journal* is supportive of nuclear power, as a means to reduce the oil sands industry dependence on natural gas - "the time is short if we want to avoid a major environmental catastrophe" – but tempers the *Herald's* enthusiasm by calling for a debate on the subject.

In contrast with the province's two main newspapers, the *Fort McMurray Today* advocated in two editorials that it should be industry who decides if nuclear power is "the best way to go" limiting the provincial government role to one of "safety not advocacy" (Today, 2006<sup>a</sup>: A4). With no oil sands companies publically coming forth, it questioned whether nuclear power was even a viable solution:

Those behind the nuclear proposal need to put up or shut up. Is it a make-work job for a federal Crown corporation or a real possibility to help private industry cut costs and do better on the environmental front (Today, 2007<sup>e</sup>: A4)

The oil sands industry is also extremely vulnerable on its overall water usage. A hard cap on water usage could potentially limit oil sands production.<sup>21</sup> Rising water usage coupled with a drought would make water a highly contentious issue (Urquhart, 2004). Therefore, it was somewhat surprising that the *Herald* embraced the idea that of cap in amount of water taken from the Athabasca River:

This type of stewardship (cap on the amount of water) is in line with what former premier Peter Lougheed meant when he advocated an easing of oil sands development out of concern for its environmental effects (Herald, 2007<sup>e</sup>: A28).

By referring to Lougheed, the *Herald* sought to build a bridge for its position by tying it into the recent advice from the elder Conservative statesman. Water is one area, which could divide traditional allies.

Editorials in all three papers addressed the issue of how the industry should respond to increasing environmental scrutiny levelled at the oil sands. Upon Greenpeace's arrival to Alberta, the *Edmonton Journal* noted that Albertans would welcome a "respectful voice" but would not appreciate being told to "shut down their economy" (Journal, 2007<sup>b</sup>: A14). Likewise the *Fort McMurray Today* was critical of Greenpeace and its "drive-by environmental smears" (Today, 2007<sup>c</sup>: A4) but highly supportive of the Pembina institute for raising the level of debate with the release of its report, *Oil sands Fever* (Today, 2005<sup>a</sup>: A4). The *Herald* called for "tougher standards", seemingly advocating an anti-industry argument (Herald, 2007<sup>c</sup>: A22). However, closer examination of their argument revealed that they argued for improved environmental

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<sup>21</sup> This study did not capture any editorials on water usage in the other two papers.

standards as means to buttress the industry from attacks – an offensive position to overcome the “emotional” appeals of the industry’s environmental critics:

To say that regulations are reasonable, and we have met or exceeded them, is not persuasive as a furry face. Nor do jobs, the necessity of the product, and billions in taxes, hold up well against a simple idea, cleverly marketed (Herald, 2007<sup>c</sup>: A22).

### *The oil sands approval process*

One dominant theme running throughout Edmonton *Journal's* editorials was a concern with process of how decisions are made granting new approvals for oil sands projects or managing its impacts. In these aspects, it held the provincial government entirely responsible:

Those policy questions (infrastructure problems facing Fort McMurray), quite clearly, are better left to the political leaders, not an appointed board (AEUB) unaccountable to the legislature (Journal, 2006<sup>a</sup>: A16).

Finger pointing at individual companies won't solve the problem. . . It's the scale of production, and the gargantuan plans for the future that hold the threat. The provincial government gives no sign that it has a handle on the environmental challenges posed by oil sands production . . . We need a committed, purposeful government willing to actively govern (Journal, 2006<sup>b</sup>: A18).

As such, the *Edmonton Journal* was not anti oil sands development *per se* but rather questioned how government was allowing it to proceed. For example, it argued that consultation needs to occur before a sale of a lease not after it (Journal, 2007<sup>d</sup>: A16). While the two other newspapers critiqued the outcome of Klein's “no plan” plan (e.g., the infrastructure challenges), the *Calgary Herald* and the *Fort McMurray Today* largely did not challenge the processes which had allowed it to happen - like the lease sales and the AEUB hearings.

### *The company's right to manage itself*

The editorials within the *Fort McMurray Today* demonstrated a complex relationship with the oil sands industry. The *Fort McMurray Today* advocated a position that oil sands companies have the right to manage themselves across a number of controversial issues. For example, it defended the oil sands operators for providing “a partial solution” to the housing problem by building private airstrips to fly-in, fly-out workers despite local objections from the municipality (Today, 2005<sup>b</sup>: A4). This viewpoint was particularly strong in relation to on-the-ground labour relations:

If CNRL chooses to bring in foreign workers because the union members cost too much, should they be prevented from doing so? Should unions be given a veto over the situation? Should this country be a place where freedom is replaced by dictators (Today, 2006<sup>c</sup>: A4)?

No matter what the legal system says about this situation (on site drug testing), no supervisor can ever give the keys to a heavy hauler or dozer to someone under the influence (Today, 2007<sup>f</sup>: A4).

The message was that oil sands companies know the best way to run their workplaces, and actors who thought otherwise, be it unions, courts, or provincial governments, were mistaken. At first glance, this position appeared incompatible with the earlier one where the *Fort McMurray Today* called on the oil sands industry to pay higher royalties and municipal taxes. However, the disconnect between the pro-business positions on some controversial issues and the desire to have industry pay more was reduced when one understood that the local newspaper distinguished between local plant managers and the owners and shareholders:

Fort McMurray has always stood behind the industry because residents here know the managers of the plants have more than the interests of their owners and shareholders in mind (Today, 2006<sup>b</sup>: A4).

These on-ground issues were not featured strongly in the editorials of the other newspapers. Only in one editorial did the *Edmonton Journal* tackle a specific labour relation issue – whether the language or training of Chinese workers contributed to the industrial accident causing their deaths (Today, 2007<sup>c</sup>: A16). In this editorial, they placed primary responsibility on to the provincial government to discover the causes of the accident.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Did the Alberta media take a more critical view of Klein-era policies of oil sands development? Although the study was limited to three Alberta newspapers, the analysis revealed that Alberta's relationships with the energy industry, and particularly with the oil sands boom, was more complex than previous examinations would suggest. It is not true that to "openly challenge the oil industry is offensive" as Clark (2009) suggested. In fact, Clark identified several actors, like Pembina, who were actively challenging the status-quo, but critiqued the media for making words like "environment" or "labour" into "dirty" words (224). Like Clark, this study identified these attitudes in some of the editorials. For example, several editorials in the *Fort McMurray Today* had an anti-union bias and all the newspapers were critical of Greenpeace's arrival into Alberta because their past tactics. However, unlike Clark, it also identified the opposite. For example, the *Fort McMurray Today* recognized the

Pembina's *Oil sands Fever* report for raising the level of debate by providing and correlating facts. The question for these papers was not *should oil sands development expand* but *how should this occur* thus they offered limited but meaningful critiques of how development was allowed to proceed in the Klein era.

The *Calgary Herald* challenged several previous Klein-era policies including advocating for the provincial government to treat Fort McMurray as special case and promoting the use of nuclear power. In both of these cases, it aimed its advice at the provincial government rather than the oil sands industry and perceived that the outcomes of both would be beneficial to industry. In only one case, its support of a hard cap for water usage could potentially be problematic for industry.

The dominate challenge to the Klein-era policies from the *Edmonton Journal* centred on the process of approvals in particular calling for more and earlier forms of public consultation and renewed calls to make the legislature more relevant. If the province adopted the *Journal's* advice, it could significantly alter the approval process. Yet, the *Journal* was careful to point out that the problems were not created by individual companies but rather a failure of government to fulfill its role. As such, the *Journal* primarily directed its criticism and advice at government not the oil sands industry. Industry was only challenged over the level of royalties it pays.

The *Fort McMurray Today* held the broadest number of actors responsible for the problems created by this unparallel boom – all levels of government and industry. Perhaps most remarkable given the industry threats at the time was its support to increase royalties and Stelmach's decision to renegotiate with Suncor and Syncrude. At the same time, it is extremely proud of the industry and willing to defend it against what it perceives as unjustified outside attacks.

Overall, it is clear that during a period of significant change, where the leadership race to sit in the Premier's chair coupled with rapid economic development driven by the oil sands made Alberta and Albertans receptive to new ideas from a range of actors and that these Alberta newspapers reflected some of the milder critiques rather than leading the public into bolder directions. In other words, while the media participated in some level of descent within Ralph's Kingdom, these three newspapers stayed well "within the boards" in their editorial content during this period.

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