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A Tar Sands Partnership Agreement in the Making?

Macdonald Stainsby | August 1st 2011

Campaigns against tar sands production have grown rapidly over the last four years. From the relative obscurity in Alberta to an international lightning rod for people trying to address all manner of concerns from indigenous and community self-determination to peak oil and climate change – criticisms of the largest industrial project in human history have gained a major voice. The voices are certainly not homogenous, but a large contingent of these voices call for a shut down of tar sands production and a move away from fossil fuels – if not an outright move away from market-led growth of any sort. But, in the language of the environmental elite, what are the “decision makers” preparing to do with all this anti-tar sands resistance?

While there are still small scale, community led victories against certain developments – like the defeat of the recent Prosperity Mine proposal in British Columbia – I contend that mainstream environmentalism has effectively become a means by which corporations (who used to be anathema to environmentalists) now get the social license necessary to operate. There are obvious examples such as the World Wildlife Fund running commercials with Coca-Cola. But the real social management is done out of sight, and involves some of the most important players in the circles of the North American ruling class.

Co-opting Environmentalism

In the United States, major foundations – led at the time by the Sunoco-oil founded and controlled Pew Charitable Trusts – stopped fighting against environmentalism and sought instead to co-opt it and make it a “partner.” This model expanded over the next couple of decades until it slowly began to creep north of the border into Canada. Now this same technique dominates the Canadian enviro landscape as well, in some cases with a new twist. The Canadian Boreal Initiative [CBI] – a champion of “working with industry to find common solutions” – is not even an organization, but receives their money from Ducks Unlimited Canada who receive theirs from Ducks Unlimited in the United States. All of this funding originates with the Pew Charitable Trusts in Philadelphia. The Pew Foundation was started with a multi-billion dollar grant from Sunoco and today their board of directors is more than 50 percent tied to Sunoco, either through the Pew family or executive work with the oil giant. This same Pew gives funding to other well-known policy right-wing hawkish think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute.

The CBI spearheads something they call “the Boreal Conservation Framework,” a plan to protect at least half the Boreal Forest. Fact: far, far less than half the boreal forest has been developed or is slated for development. This “initiative” partners openly with corporations such as Suncor, Nexen and several leading forestry corporations. The CBI, funded and directed by the Pew, also signs on to their

framework the International Boreal Conservation Campaign – another Pew front group in the US. Along with corporate friendly organizations like the WWF, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, the Nature Conservancy and of course, Ducks Unlimited are a smattering of First Nations governments. Also among their signatories are the Tides Foundation and the Ivey Foundation.

With this behind them, the CBI then “negotiates” what the final deal of a particular industry should look like. Guaranteed at the outset is that corporations will continue operations, and that the general public is out of the loop right up until the moment the “deal” is announced.

Many other foundations – most but not all American – now play the same game of social manipulation in the environmental field. Foundations such as Rockefeller Brothers, Ford and Hewlett have not only entered into the fray in a major way, in the case of the tar sands campaigns, they have collaborated with the Pew to take social manipulation to a new level. The aforementioned Tides Foundation was set up as a sort of clearing house for other philanthropists and foundations, for many years receiving the overwhelming bulk of their money through the Pew. Today, other groups and foundations give them money and earmark where they want it spent. Tides exercises total control over something you are not supposed to hear about: The North American Tar Sands Coalition.

The Tides and the North American Tar Sands Coalition

The routine is fairly straightforward. After a long stretch when grassroots and community led struggles build up support using a multitude of strategies – from direct action blockades to boycott campaigns and speak outs, demonstrations and more – suddenly many of the organizers who started the campaign are shuffled aside. Professionals are either appointed within the ranks or are imported from outside and all are given foundation-led salaries. With or without public knowledge (almost always without) a “stakeholder” negotiation is undertaken between corporations, government and the new “professional” environmentalists will take place. The terms of the negotiations do not reach the public until a smiling photo-op of the “stakeholders” appears at a press conference to announce an “end” to a particular “campaign” now called a “win-win.” Details will vary, but they always include three things: A promise to stop organizing against a particular industry, market-based incentives that would lead to “change practices” and a guarantee for that industry to be allowed to develop, now unhindered. Such a process is slowly being constructed for tar sands production in Canada.

As if on cue, once the multitude of forces against tar sands development began to crack into both national and international media the large foundations appeared in the background. In this particular case, they had set up a spider’s web of control from the get go. All the usual foundations – Pew Charitable Trusts, Hewlett, Rockefeller Brothers, Ford Foundation – now use the Tides Foundation as a singular source to centralize control over the would be recipients of funding.

By funnelling all money through the Tides Foundation all organizations and movements that approach any of these sources can be directed to only one source – the Tides Foundation and their “North American Tar Sands Coalition.” The NATSC is headed by one Michael Marx. While they also have “Canadian” and “American” campaign leaders, Marx has near total authority to forge the funding decisions, policy directions, media strategy and over-all focus of how the “coalition” will operate. Who then, is Michael Marx?

Marx is known as a “corporate responsibility” campaigner. Previously working with ForestEthics and now, along side his control over the tar sands campaign, he is a head of Corporate Ethics International. His own personal bio celebrates that he has previously helped “green” Wal-Mart, one of the largest and most labour exploitative corporations in the world. He does not believe that the tar sands can or should be shut down, and is shaping political messaging to that end. The list of ENGO’s that are funded by Michael Marx’s NATSC is long, but to list merely the largest of the Canadian ones that have been with them from the beginning of the “invisible to the outside” coalition: The Pembina Institute,

Environmental Defense Canada, ForestEthics, World Wildlife Fund (Canada), The Sierra Club of Canada (and associated regional chapters), Eco Justice and the Canadian Boreal Initiative. Perhaps most important to note is that the coalition also involves Greenpeace Canada – important because historically GPC did not take foundation funding but has now been listed for several grants from Tides Canada for this work.

There are also many regional only organizations – working on regional only campaigns, such as to ostensibly stop the Enbridge Gateway Pipeline across parts of unceded first nations territory in northern British Columbia. These groups include Living Oceans Society, The David Suzuki Foundation, West Coast Environmental Law and the Dogwood Initiative with a host of community led groups. These regional grants are controlled by Canadian understudy to Michael Marx, Jennifer Lash.

Since the highly criticized deal called the “Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement” was signed in 2010 between what was called nine environmental NGOs and 21 forestry companies, Tides has started muttering in public as their own voice – calling for the “bridging of the two camps” of environmentalists and energy companies over the tar sands. No first nations have been mentioned in their pronouncements. Nonetheless, in Europe they have moved in to steer the direction of anti-tar sands campaigning. Marx himself showed up recently in the UK, speaking out on campaigns to “stop tar sands expansion” in ads paid for by Corporate Ethics International. These same ads have appeared in Alberta; Marx himself lives in San Francisco.

Astroturfing is a term often applied to various Republican or Tea Party ventures in the United States, ones where money and slick marketing are used to build an appearance of a grassroots network where, in fact, none truly exists. While there most certainly is such a grassroots network against the tar sands – and it is expanding globally – the astroturfing of “demands” to go into the backroom negotiations is tailored to appear genuine. The manner it is done is to put forward a vague and almost completely uncontroversial call and ask people to sign on to some declaration.

As of late that has appeared to be towards the blight of the toxic tailings ponds littering the landscape by the vast open-pit mines. In recent months as well, Suncor (the original tar sands corporation, former property of Sunoco oil and largest energy company in Canada) announced they had developed “dry tailings technology” and that they planned over time to roll out and implement it. Considering that Suncor is openly partnered with the Canadian Boreal Initiative, it seems strangely convenient that the astroturfing campaign is now targeting tailings ponds – shortly after many of the more corporate environmental organizations and the largest players among tar sands operators were caught – trying to have a private, unreported meeting together.

The first attempt at such a meeting, last April, was spearheaded by the Pembina Institute. The Pembina is employed as consultants for Nexen, Suncor, TD Financial and many other industrial corporations and has partnered with the original tar sands giant Suncor Energy since 1982. That meeting was to be a “fireside chat” but it was cancelled when people got wind of it and it appeared first on the *mediacoop.ca* and later on in the *Globe and Mail*. Today, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, the Tides Foundation and others are calling for “dialogue.”

What Would a Tar Sands Partnership Agreement Look Like?

Based on the market trajectory of the Marx-led team, it will involve beyond promises on water and tailings – including carbon offsets, promised investments in “green” energy technology alongside perhaps some announcement on further research into carbon capture and sequestration (CCS).

Based on all previous deals in Canada and the United States, such a framework could only be announced as the “end to the war over tar sands” – to effectively give social license to tar sands operations permanently. This would then eliminate Tides based on all previous deals in Canada and the

United States, such a framework could only be announced as the “end to the war over tar sands” – to effectively give social license to tar sands operations permanently. This would then eliminate Tides based anti-tar sands funding for all organizations in the NATSC. Certain groups such as Greenpeace, the Indigenous Environmental Network, Rainforest Action Network as well as several community initiatives have official positions to end tar sands development. The Pembina Institute, CBI, Tides, David Suzuki Foundation, Sierra Club, and near the totality of ENGO’s who receive NATSC funding in the United States do not call for the cessation of tar sands development, but mitigation of the “worst” impacts.

The breathtaking pace and size of tar sands development in Canada has not gone unnoticed to other would-be producers; many countries around the planet have deposits of bitumen that would require much the same technology. Those investors have been visiting Canada, learning, and heading elsewhere where bitumen beckons. A partial list of locations that are now threatened with tar sands extraction includes Trinidad and Tobago, The Republic of Congo, Madagascar, the US state of Utah, China, Russia and Jordan. There is also the country that may have even larger deposits than Canada – the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

With the exception of Venezuela, whose production is still but a fraction of Canada’s, none of these countries have gone into commercial production at this point. It will be nearly impossible to stop tar sands developments in Africa, Latin America Asia and elsewhere if all of our collective work in opposition to the development of tar sands is sacrificed to a “partnership deal” that allows for continued tar sands extraction. Corporations like France’s Total in Madagascar could then argue: “If this development is clean and responsible enough for Canada, why not so for Madagascar?” Such a dynamic must be avoided at all costs on many levels, not least of which is the remaining sliver of hope that the worst effects of climate change can be avoided, rather than simply managed or mitigated.

Climate justice organizing is, in part, an attempt to go beyond the counting of CO2 emissions and to get to the heart of solutions to the climate crisis – solutions that involve the end of oppression of the communities that bear the brunt of the climate crisis, and do so in ways that respects their self-determination. Addressing the needs of these communities as they speak for the solutions they want cannot be a part of a backroom, anti-democratic model of development pushed forward with money from the very industries trying to eliminate them from history. It will take a global effort to hear and then amplify the voices – from Africa to Asia, and north to south in the Americas. None of these voices can be heard if someone closes a door to hold secret meetings with the financial powers whose assets already scream so loudly – as we edge ever closer to a point of no return.

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