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Canada's Pipeline Problem

In the Canadian government's attempt to maximize resources and expedite economic expansion throughout history, it has often neglected, marginalized and abused citizens and peoples who do not directly add to or aid in the rapid development of our country. From Samuel de Champlain to Justin Trudeau, the mistreatment and abuse of Indigenous and First Nations peoples in Canada is nothing new. The Trans Mountain Oil Pipeline Expansion Project, despite its potential economic benefits such as tax revenue and increased job opportunities, is highly harmful to the First Nations and Indigenous peoples in the region as it not only will significantly negatively impact the environment but will also have negative socio-economic, cultural and environmental consequences. This is evident through the examination of the various consequences of previous pipelines on the First Nations and Indigenous communities in Canada by leading scientists, activists and environmentalists.

Along with the Trans Mountain Corporation, the Canadian government has continually emphasized the socio-economic benefits that the Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion Project would have on the oil industry and Canada as a whole. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau boasts that the expansion of the Trans Mountain pipeline is "a vital project in the national interest" and even pushed for the Canadian government to purchase the pipeline from Kinder Morgan for $4.5 billion in 2018 to ensure its expansion and to provide the necessary funding to surpass any political setbacks and delays (Chappell). According to the Canadian government, the Trans Mountain Oil Pipeline Expansion Project will benefit the economy, Indigenous communities, and create a cleaner economy, as each dollar the federal government earns from the project "will be invested in Canada's clean energy transition," which will exploit Canada's traditional resources for revenue and development (Canada). The Canadian government is also in support of the Trans Mountain Oil Pipeline Expansion Project as it is currently the only pipeline system that transports crude oil and refined products to the West Coast (Trans Mountain).

Unfortunately, these socio-economic benefits more often than not.do not expand to the First Nations and Indigenous peoples on reserves. According to Trans-Mountain Corporation, the federal Crown corporation that is responsible for the Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion, the pipeline is planned to "increase the nominal capacity of the system going from 300,000 barrels of crude oil per day to 890,000 barrels of crude oil per day", by expanding the pipeline by approximately 980km (Trans Mountain). In addition, the pipeline expansion is expected to "create benefits including new short- and long-term jobs, job-related training opportunities and increases in taxes collected by all three levels of government" (Trans Mountain) whilst bringing in combined government revenue of $46.7 billion, which can be used for public services such as health care and education and will be divvied up by British Columbia ($5.9 billion), Alberta ($19.4 billion) and Canada ($21.6 billion) respectively (Trans Mountain). Furthermore, Trans Mountain argues that the expansion is necessary as "currently nearly all the oil produced in Western Canada goes to one market - the United States market" and that by expanding the oil pipeline that Canadian oil will be able to be utilized in international trade and markets and will earn Canada an additional $3.7 billion per year (Trans Mountain). It is understandable why many politicians and Canadian citizens are in support of the expansion of the pipeline. However, we must analyze the pipeline's effects based on where it all begins - the labor camps and surrounding areas.

It is indisputable that energy and resource development in British Columbia has generated immense wealth for those with high-paying jobs within the energy sector. Unfortunately, the workforce in the energy and resource sector is highly competitive and primarily made up of young and male workers from outside of the region; therefore, these job opportunities only benefit a selected and limited group of people (Amnesty International 37). Due to many new workers in the area, labor camps are often created to accommodate and support the project without placing "too much" strain on the locals. Unfortunately, the conditions at these labor camps tend to be quite dangerous. According to Amnesty International, "workers sleep in run-down trailers, women and men share the same space, and there is limited to no security...there is little government regulation or monitoring of conditions for workers at the camps during off-hours" (Amnesty International, 39). These horrible conditions not only negatively impact the workers but also the host communities, especially the Indigenous women and children, as they are perceived as "prey" by the workers in the "boys club" (Amnesty International, 37). These workers release pressure from work onto "unhealthy patterns of behavior including drug abuse and binge drinking" (Amnesty International 6). As the population rapidly grows due to increased job opportunities, so does the crime rate in the labor camps and surrounding areas. According to the government, the increasing crime rate further places a strain on the surrounding area and places women and girls, who, according to the government, are at the highest risk of violence, at even more of a risk (Amnesty International, 4). For example, Fort St. John, the largest resource and urban center in northeast BC, was ranked 11th for frequency and severity of crime in over 239 municipalities in Canada (Amnesty International, 50), despite its small population. The rising population increases the demand for essentials such as food and housing, which causes economic instability and further increases the crime rate (Amnesty International, 4). For example, in the late 1970s, a study of a community near Fort St. John concluded that "increased economic activity in the community resulted in increased demand for accommodation, and inflation in housing, rental accommodations and land prices" (Amnesty International, 18). Unfortunately, due to these rising demands and prices for essentials as workers migrate to these communities for pipeline construction, locals are often forced to live in dangerous situations such as insecure housing or illegal occupations (Amnesty International, 6). British Columbia's health ministry has noted and documented concerns about the harmful social impacts of resource development, such as oil pipelines, for at least three decades.

Despite Trans Mountain Corporation arguing that the excess revenue could improve and advance public services such as health care and education, there is significant doubt that it will be mitigated towards Indigenous and First Nations communities and reserves. Historically, essential social services for Indigenous peoples have been chronically underfunded, and in fact, "BC has carried out extensive overall cuts to social services including protections and supports for women's equality" despite the overwhelming demand and need (Amnesty International, 6). Besides, the organizations that do exist too. Despite the promised socio-economic benefits, it is evident that the praised socio-economic benefits and privileges that the Trans Mountain Pipeline promises are one-sided and only extend to the mainstream Canadians and would do more harm than good to society the economy.

The Trans Mountain Oil Pipeline Expansion Project is not only harmful socio-economically but also violates and exploits Wet'suwet'en land and traditions. The Wet'suwet'en (First) Nation is located in Northern BC, Canada and is composed of 13 houses and five clans, which are governed by treaties between the Nation's leaders and the Canadian government as a product of the Indian Act of 1876 (Karp and Meira, 5). According to The Canadian Encyclopedia, the Indian Act was created by the Canadian government in 1876 to submit "Indians" to colonial laws that aimed to eliminate First Nations and Indigenous culture in an attempt to create a homogenous Euro-Canadian society (Henderson). In the present day, the Indian Act is used to provide "Indian" status to First Nations and Indigenous Peoples, manage First Nations governments and manage reserve land (Henderson). The Indian Act is already considerably a violation of Indigenous and First Nations rights, land and traditions as it has labelled Wet'suwet'en land as property of the Crown and under the management of the federal government. Therefore, the leaders of First Nations Tribes on reserves across Canada, for the most part, do not have much power over their land, which we Canadian settlers have stolen and exploited for our own benefit for centuries.

There has been significant opposition to the pipeline expansion by First Nations and Indigenous communities, especially from the Unist'ot'en people who occupy the original Wet'suwet'en territory and camp, which the pipeline is planned to be built through (Karp and Meira, 7). According to the Unist'ot'en website, they state their stance as "Our people's belief is that we are part of the land. The land is not separate from us. The land sustains. And if we don't take care of her, she will not be able to sustain us, and we as a generation of people will die" (Unist'ot'en). Their opposition is nothing new as their disposition against the pipeline is recorded to have been present since the Unist'ot'en people clearly state their unwavering disapproval of the pipeline of 2007 and 2009, which also traversed through Wet'suwet'en. Nevertheless, it seems as if the Canadian government either does not care or does not respect the wishes and opinions of both the Unist'ot'en and Wet'suwet'en peoples. The pipeline exploits the Wet'suwet'en territory and land as it is being built for the sole purpose of economic advancement whilst ignoring the outcry and lack of support from those residing on the land itself. This is particularly disempowering and harmful as the First Nations and Indigenous communities have historically had a great connection with the land, and as previously mentioned: harm to the land directly harms the community and its peoples.

The disrespect on behalf of the Canadian government is furthermore evident through the lack of consultation with the First Nations elders and leaders from the affected areas before constructing the pipeline expansion. Consultation between the First Nations and Indigenous community and the Canadian government is intended to "re-balance the decision-making process on resource development" by providing and placing weight on the interests and traditions of First Nations and Indigenous alongside traditional land and resource interests of the government and oil industry (Parlee, 335). However, it seems as if historically not enough weight or emphasis has been placed on Indigenous and First Nations rights, traditions, and beliefs as pipelines such as the Trans Mountain Expansion are nothing new. According to The University of Toronto Press, efforts to consult often only take place after companies have gained access to traditional lands for development which demonstrates that the Canadian government does "too little, too late" considering that the consultation that does occur only does so after the land has already been affected and harmed (Parlee, 336). The Federal Court of Appeal argued that when consultation occurred between Indigenous groups and British Columbia in response to the Trans Mountain Oil Pipeline Expansion Project, it seemed as if the government often already has the outcome in their favor already in mind. Therefore the consultations that occurred were inadequate and unjust (Smart). In fact, the provincial governments in question (Alberta, Saskatchewan and British Columbia) argued that "Indigenous opposition to Trans Mountain Pipeline should not outweigh public interest," therefore de-validating all comments and opinions of the First Nations and Indigenous communities involved in such consultations (Smart).

Given the previously mentioned socio-economic conditions that First Nations and Indigenous peoples face due to hundreds of years of marginalization and the lack of access to necessary resources under the Canadian government, isolated First Nations communities have limited resources and rights in which to gain leverage and defend their land with (Parlee, 349). Therefore, when the Canadian government draws out these consultations for months, Indigenous and First Nations peoples often develop "consultation fatigue" when bombarded with a large amount of information and when they must focus on the outcome of the consultation over income and their families, they are often forced to concede and hope that their land and traditions are not damaged beyond repair (Parlee, 335). The utter lack of respect that the Canadian government and private sector have for First Nations and Indigenous traditions, values and beliefs is evident and very harmful. Not only does the Canadian government disregard traditions and values, but it also overlooks the importance of consent, especially from a nation and community that deserve a voice after hundreds of years of suppression, whitewashing and abuse.

Most importantly, the Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion Project has many severe environmental risks such as oil spills, water contamination, and pollution - all of which have been present in the construction and maintenance of oil pipelines in Western Canada throughout the last thousand years. In fact, according to The Canadian Historical Review, Trans Mountain has a long history of oil spills and other incidents. In 1953, the company ran a hydrostatic pressure test of the entire system that resulted in five leaks (Kheraj, 176), which is an excellent indicator of the likelihood of oil leaks and spills, yet the Canadian government continues to prioritize the economic benefits over the imminent environmental risks.

Throughout history, the existing pipeline's infrastructure that has been used is prone to spills and leaks without a solid capacity for Indigenous and First Nations communities to contain and mitigate them (Datta and Hurlbert, 1). According to a recent study, "pipeline spills have a more severe impact on rural Indigenous communities' drinking water, agriculture, and traditional practices with land than the other non-Indigenous communities do in urban areas" (Datta and Hurlbert, 3). In fact, the governments' lack of interest in Indigenous issues is evident as according to the Assembly of First Nations; there are currently 81 long-term drinking water advisories affecting more than 50 Indigenous communities across Canada (qtd. in Datta and Hurlbert, 3). As of 2017, the Parliamentary Budget Office estimated the cost of ending boiling water and drinking water advisories (DWA) by 2020 to be $3.2 billion as the Trans Mountain (previously Kinder Morgan) pipeline crosses 1335 waterways, putting multiple communities' drinking water at risk (qtd. In Datta and Hurlbert 3). Instead of the Canadian government allocating funds to ensure clean water for First Nations and Indigenous communities, the Trudeau government is committing $4.5 billion to bail out Trans Mountain (previously Kinder Morgan) and expedite the construction and consultation process (Datta and Hurlbert, 4). In a recent report by Health Canada and British Columbia's First Nations Health Authority, it was found that one-in-four people on First Nations reserves do not have access to clean drinking water and that the Trudeau government has approved a series of developmental projects that further threaten important First Nations waterways which likely will lead to further contamination of drinking water and consequently severe health impacts (Datta and Hurlbert, 4). The adverse environmental effects are apparent as the DWAs increase following pipeline expansions, yet it seems as if the Canadian government is behaving ignorantly and downplaying the severity of the consequential environmental impacts.

It has also been found that oil spills threaten drinking water, but it also contaminates entire ecosystems through the spread of dangerous toxins that significantly impact humans, animals, birds, and plants, which can directly damage native habitats and reduces native species (Datta and Hurlbert, 5). It seems as if the Canadian government is playing a game of Russian roulette, hoping that each pipeline built isn't the last and that it won't cause a major oil leak. To what extent is the government willing to prioritize the construction and presence of a pipeline over our environment? How many species and people need to be at risk for the Canadian government to finally care?

Chart, bar chart

Description automatically generatedBetween the years 1965 and 2010, there has been a reported increase in total pipeline spills, breaks, malfunctions, and incidents (Kheraj, 172). Upon analyzing the graph below, it is clear that the government is continuing to construct pipelines knowing that the risk of a leak is high and that consequently, ecosystems and environments will most likely be destroyed and or severely harmed. One would think that as time progressed that the materials and infrastructure being utilized in pipeline construction would improve and that the number of spills would decrease, but as mentioned prior, funds and resources are being allocated to where the government sees fit rather than were needed – the prevention of oil spills, resolving DWAs and Indigenous and First Nations communities' needs.

In addition, there is a significant risk of a significant oil spill at the Burnaby terminal, the pipeline's western terminus – the most troubling hotspot for construction, that has the potential to threaten local bird populations and "contaminate places of cultural significance to the Tsleil-Waututh Nation" which lives in this region (Cruickshank). It has also been predicted that pipeline construction across the Coquihalla River "could increase the amount of sediment in the waterway and threaten salmon spawning habitat" (Cruickshank). It is readily apparent and unmistakable that the Trans Mountain Oil Pipeline Expansion Project will have and has already had severe impacts on the surrounding environment and ecosystems despite public outcry and protest from the Indigenous and First Nations communities living on the land/reserves. Indigenous activists have fought this pipeline tirelessly and in great numbers claiming that the project will "lock-in decades of dangerous greenhouse gas emissions and compromise Indigenous land rights" yet the Canadian government continues to turn a blind eye and continue with construction and planning (Kwan). The priorities and values of the Canadian government are beyond clear: economic expansion at the detriment and cost of First Nations and Indigenous communities and the environment.

In closing, upon the compilation of case studies, reports and data from previous pipelines, it is evident that despite the Trans Mountain Oil Pipeline Expansion Project's potential economic benefits such as tax revenue and increased job opportunities, it is to be certain that the pipeline will continue to be highly harmful to the First Nations and Indigenous peoples in the region environmentally, socio-economically, and culturally. The pipeline is a direct violation of the affected First Nations and Indigenous communities' human rights as it not only forces displacement and economic downfall but also places community members at risk for severe health conditions and restricts access to basic necessities such as clean drinking water and food. The fight against the Trans Mountain Oil Pipeline Expansion Project is not and will not be over any time soon; according to Mike McKenzie, a resident of the Skeetchestn community, "we have to protect the land and the water no matter what. Our survival depends on it" (qtd. in Kwan).

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