

Green Scene: Bearing Witness Against Enbridge

by Elaine Golds

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Last week, I appeared in a hotel in downtown Vancouver to make an oral statement to the National Energy Board's Joint Review Panel regarding the proposed Enbridge pipeline which could bring tar sand oil from Alberta across the middle of BC for shipment overseas from Kitimat. It was a very formal proceeding. In addition to the three members of the Panel, two people from Enbridge were present as well as staff to swear in those making oral statements, court recorders and security people. Only one thing was missing from this public hearing and that was the public.

People who had signed up well over a year ago to make an oral statement were not even allowed in the same room as the Panel except when they were escorted, in groups of three, to make their statements. Prior to that, presenters were directed to sit in a waiting room where the televised proceedings could be viewed. People were expected to show up at the beginning of each hearing period to show their photo ID, be sworn in and wait before being called for their presentation. Sometimes, a wait of several hours was required. After making presentations, people were not allowed to re-enter the waiting room. If they wished to continue to listen to the oral statements, they were told to walk several blocks to another hotel where members of the public could view the televised hearings. All this was done ostensibly to prevent public demonstrations from interfering with the work of the Panel. Such is the current state of democracy in Canada.

Hundreds of people have already appeared before the Panel. In general, their comments have been heartfelt, knowledgeable and, almost without exception, adamantly opposed to this pipeline project. If the members of the Joint Review Panel are truly listening to what the public has to say, they will turn this project down. However, along with the severe weakening of federal legislation for environmental protection, the Harper government has now given Cabinet the authority to overturn any decision of this learned Panel. Such is the current state of democracy in Canada.

Although the impacts on global warming from all the greenhouse gas emissions resulting from this project and associated tar sand resource extraction is a concern of most people making oral statements, the Panel will not consider such emissions except for those emanating specifically from this project. Most people also commented on the opposition of 130 First Nations and that fact that the pipeline will cross territory not presently covered by Treaties. Many people have also commented on the fact that the project does not make good economic sense and that a better way to create jobs would be to refine tar sand oil in Alberta and develop secondary industries there to manufacture products. In particular, Marc Eliesen, a former CEO of BC Hydro and advisor to many governments, commented that Enbridge's estimate of benefits was simply "market propaganda masquerading as economic analysis".

An overriding concern of most presenters was the risk of an oil spill either along the pipeline or from a tanker in some of the most biodiverse areas of BC. It was pointed out by many people that the pipeline will traverse challenging mountainous terrain with a high risk of landslides and a known risk of earthquakes. Some presenters pointed to the complicated structure of Enbridge's partnerships which will apparently limit the liability of their shareholders to \$280,000 for a 20,000 barrel oil spill –approximately the size of Enbridge's Kalamazoo oil spill in Michigan which has already cost about \$800,000 to clean up. Other presenters pointed to Enbridge's astonishing history of oil spills from their existing pipelines - 610 spills over a 12 year period which resulted in the loss of 132,000 barrels of oil. Of great concern to most people was the hazard of having up to 340 large and loaded tankers per year transiting the narrow Douglas Channel from Kitimat and through Hecate Strait which is known to have some of the most extreme marine weather in Canada with winds gusting to 193 km/hr and waves 30 meters high. I listened to my fellow presenters and became even more alarmed.

The Joint Review Panel will resume hearing oral statements in Kelowna on January 28 and return to Vancouver on January 30 until February 1. The most convenient way to listen to the hearings is via their website (www.gatewaypanel.review-examen.gc.ca) by clicking on the audio link. Transcripts of oral presentations are posted to this website the following day. After listening for a bit, you might feel compelled to express your democratic rights and join a demonstration... or two.



On January 18, about 300 people in Vancouver demonstrated peacefully and respectfully in a "blue drop" gathering against the proposed Enbridge pipeline. *Nancy Furness photo.*