

Canadian oil

Keystone flops

OTTAWA

Barack Obama's rejection of a pipeline is a test for the new prime minister

"THIS is huge," crowed one prominent environmental campaigner. He was celebrating Barack Obama's decision on November 6th to reject the Keystone XL pipeline, which would have carried heavy oil from Canadian tar sands to the United States (see map). To Canada's prime minister, Justin Trudeau, installed in office just two days before, the decision is both a headache and an opportunity.

He will have to come up with a new way of exporting oil without breaking his promise to be a much greener prime minister than his Conservative predecessor, Stephen Harper. Protests and lobbying will now move from Washington to Ottawa. But Keystone XL's demise, weeks before a UN conference on climate change in Paris, will make it easier for Mr Trudeau to forge a national consensus on climate policy and to portray Canada as a helpful partner at the global gathering.

The thumbs-down for Keystone XL, which would have carried 830,000 barrels of oil a day, was not quite as beneficial for the environment as campaigners claimed. Canada is shipping record amounts of crude oil, about 3m barrels a day, to the United States through 31 pipelines. About half is heavy bitumen from Alberta's tar sands, or synthetic oil made from it. That will continue to grow for a while, even though extracting tar-sands oil is expensive and oil prices are weak. Low prices depress future investment, but producers have already spent billions to exploit Alberta's reserves.

What does not fit into the pipelines will be carried by rail, which is more dangerous, dirtier and more expensive. Two years ago 47 people were burnt to death in a derailment in Lac-Mégantic in Quebec. This month a train derailed in Wisconsin, spilling hundreds of gallons of crude.

Still, the environmentalists' victory is not an empty one. Burning tar-sands oil emits about a fifth more carbon than using conventional petroleum. Without Keystone XL to make it more competitive, more of it is likely to stay in the ground.

Until, that is, Canada comes up with an alternative. Alberta's oil producers are still intent on shifting transport from rail to pipeline. Mr Trudeau does not want to disappoint them. His Liberal Party won four seats in Alberta in October's election, matching its best showing since his father, Pierre, a long-serving prime minister, enacted an unpopular national energy programme in 1980. The Liberals do not want



to alienate the province again.

But Mr Trudeau will have to reconcile appeasement of Alberta with the Liberals' many environmental promises. These include modernising the National Energy Board (the main regulator); assessments that consider energy projects' downstream effects, such as carbon emissions, along with their impact on the local environment; and closer consultation with aboriginal peoples on regulation and on how the pipelines are operated and maintained.

Canada's new government

Ungagging order

VANCOUVER

Justin Trudeau wastes no time in setting a new tone

KRISTI MILLER picked up a ringing telephone on November 6th and spoke to a journalist. Until this month, she was not allowed to do that. The government of Stephen Harper, a Conservative who led Canada for nearly ten years until his defeat in an election in October, demanded that scientists in its employ, like Ms Miller, get authorisation to speak to the press. The first targets of the policy were researchers on climate change, a subject Mr Harper avoided discussing, but it spread to other specialities. It represented everything the prime minister's critics loathed about him.

Justin Trudeau, his Liberal successor, scrapped it the day after he took office on November 4th. This is one of several swift changes intended to show that his Canada will be very different from Mr Harper's.

Ms Miller, a biologist at the fisheries department, was among the most prominent of the silenced scientists. In 2011 she co-wrote a paper identifying a virus as one possible cause of a plague among sockeye salmon, which had reduced salmon stocks in the Fraser river in British

Columbia. The government ordered her not to talk about her findings to the press. It may have feared that people would conclude from her work—mistakenly—that fish farming had caused the disease. (She did testify at a hearing on the issue.) Now Ms Miller can “speak the truth and speak my mind and not have a handler,” she says. It is “liberating”.

The day after Mr Trudeau and his cabinet were sworn in, a small group of demonstrators showed up in Ottawa to demand an end to development of the tar sands. He has already ruled out one pipeline on environmental grounds: the Northern Gateway, which would have carried 525,000 barrels of oil a day over the Rockies from Alberta to the coast of British Columbia. That leaves two other big projects. Energy East could carry 1.1m barrels a day to a port on the Atlantic coast. Another option is to increase the capacity of the existing TransMountain pipeline by nearly threefold, to bring 890,000 barrels a day to Vancouver, an outlet to Asia. Energy East looks like the favourite; the premiers of Alberta and New Brunswick, where the pipeline would begin and end, are keen. It also needs consent from the more sceptical leaders of Ontario and Quebec.

Mr Obama did the new prime minister a favour by quashing Keystone XL so early in his term, relieving him of any blame for the decision. The rejection will also help Mr Trudeau to persuade provincial premiers that Canada needs a national plan to cut carbon emissions if it is not to face discrimination from importers. The help from the American president ends there. Mr Trudeau must handle the tricky task of selling dirty oil in a green way on his own. ■

Diplomats, too, have been unshackled. They no longer have to clear appearances at events with the foreign ministry and submit advance copies of their speeches. The new government reinstated the mandatory long-form census. The Conservatives, thinking it intrusive, had replaced it with a voluntary survey, which worsened the quality of social and economic data.

Mr Harper's government “attacked the sector that was providing them with information and data,” said Thomas Landry, a federal biologist and an official of a union that represents scientists and professionals employed by federal and provincial governments. For boffins and diplomats, at least, Mr Trudeau has ushered in a new age.