

Canada's pipeline wars of the 1950s: a memoir

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The Canadian government's present plan to build a pipeline carrying environmentally disastrous tar-sands oil through northern B.C. "has prompted an outpouring of opposition unlike anything seen in years," wrote Les Whittington in the *Toronto Star* on September 9. He quoted Green Party leader Elizabeth May as saying the pipeline was unlikely to be built, "because the level of public unrest over this will be sufficient to force [Prime Minister Stephen] Harper out of office."

Far-fetched? Not really. There is a precedent in 1957, when a pipeline controversy galvanized public opposition to the Liberal government, ultimately driving it from office. And I, as a 15-year-old Toronto high school student, played a role in that drama - a small role - or perhaps not so small.

At issue was how natural gas from the recently developed Alberta oilfields should be marketed. South into the United States? Or east across Canada to Ontario and Quebec? The oil companies favoured sending the gas south - the most profitable option - and letting eastern Canada find a supply as best it could from U.S. producers. This option was opposed by Canada's major political parties - the ruling Liberals, the opposition Progressive Conservatives, and the smaller Social Democratic party, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), all of whom wanted a cross-Canada gas pipeline.

But how to build it? The Liberal government cobbled together the Trans-Canada Pipelines Ltd. (TCPL), founded in 1951 with 50% ownership by Texas oil tycoons and a mission to build a gas pipeline to the East. The scope of the project soon outran TCPL's financial reach, and by the mid-fifties the company seemed near to collapse. Early in 1956, a solution took shape: the federal government would build the most challenging segment of the pipeline, across northern Ontario, injecting \$115 million of public funds - then a stratospheric sum of money. [1]

Pipeline 'surrender' to U.S. oil millionaires

The new scheme encountered stiff opposition. The Conservatives demanded "an all-Canadian company, and under Canadian control" and denounced the proposal as "a treaty of surrender" to the United States. The CCF called for complete public ownership of the project, attacking a "sell-out" that would result in "enormous profits for private United States economic buccaneers." [2]

The controversy touched a raw nerve in Canadian public life. True, there was then no awareness of

the global environmental issues that so concern us today. Instead, the debate concerned Canada's place in the world. Canada's government was reorienting the country away from the British connection and toward close political and economic integration with the U.S. This rankled not only British Empire traditionalists but also left-wing opinion concerned by the U.S. anti-communist witch-hunt and its imperial arrogance on the world stage.

At the time, I already had a precocious interest in public affairs, nurtured by my radio link to Canada's national broadcaster, the CBC. Ear glued to the radio, I followed the controversy avidly, becoming a fan of the biting satirical sketches of Max Ferguson's "Rawhide."

Soon TCPL added a new demand: enabling legislation for the massive subsidy must be adopted by June 7, the expiration date of an option it held for purchase of steel piping. The government obediently informed parliament that the law must be passed by June 5, come what may. This would be achieved, it said, by systematically cutting off parliamentary debate through imposition of "closure," then viewed as a drastic measure; it had not been invoked in more than two decades. [3]

When closure was announced, parliament exploded in an uproar. "Guillotine," cried the opposition members. "Dictatorship." The issue now was not so much the pipeline sell-out but parliamentary democracy. The battle raged for a month, and parliament teetered on the brink of chaos. The crisis was unmatched in Canadian politics since the World War 2 conscription controversy. The Liberals were much condemned in the media, but they bulldozed ahead. And after tumultuous chaos on "Black Friday," June 1, the bill was rammed through early in the morning of June 6.

The 3,500 km pipeline, much of it blasted through the pre-Cambrian shield of Northern Ontario, was completed by TCPL, with Liberal and Tory governments assistance, in October 1958.

High school rebels

I talked of these events with some friends at school who shared my interest in public affairs. Personally, I felt a tie to the ruling Liberals. I had once met the Liberal prime minister, Louis St. Laurent, who spoken to me in kindly fashion while pressing into my hands an autographed portrait. When my history class discussed the Canadian Pacific Railway crisis of the 1870s, I had defended the Liberals, who were then hostile to handouts to private interests. But the Liberals had now become abject servants of oil millionaires.

During the months that followed the pipeline uproar, our circle turned its attention to our school's program of compulsory military training. We attended the University of Toronto Schools, an elite institution that, although government financed, prided itself on its private-school culture. My friends and I were scornful of its narrowly Anglo-Saxon composition, its exclusion of women, its football focus, its pro-business ethic, its obsession with test results, and its snobbish lack of imagination. The cadet corps, locking us into long hours of oppressive close-order drill, epitomized everything we disliked.

We launched a shadowy underground movement, the "League to Abolish Compulsory Cadets." With an attention to logistics that was to serve us well, we procured a "Support the L.A.C.C." rubber stamp and worked out a technique to stick handbills on the school walls without breaking stride. Notes popped up with the biblical admonition to "beat your swords into plowshares" and Junius's appeal, "neither advise nor submit to arbitrary measures," adorned with the LACC logo. [4]

It was not long before "The Brock" (school headmaster W. Brock McMurray) identified us and threatened us with expulsion. We stopped posting notices, burrowed deeper underground, and

carried on.

The controversy over U.S.-Canada relations that figured in the pipeline controversy was renewed the next year by a tragic incident in a different context. A U.S. government agency engaged in the anti-communist witch-hunt, the Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security, revived long-standing charges that E. Herbert Norman, a distinguished Canadian diplomat, had been associated during his youth with communist groups. Norman had previously been cleared of these charges. Given the U.S. government's continuing vendetta, Norman became convinced that his career had been irretrievably damaged and, on April 4, 1957, committed suicide.

My family knew Norman well; so did that of Richard Fidler, the group member most gifted in winning his classmates to support the LACC. Indeed, back in the 1930s, his father, my father, and Norman had all been housed together in the University of Toronto Burwash Hall residence, and all three had known Lester Pearson, then a professor and now St. Laurent's Minister for External Affairs.

Richard and I took heart in the strong denunciation of the attack on Norman by Liberals and Conservatives alike. The Conservatives' new leader, John Diefenbaker, expressed our feelings: Norman's death was due to "the witch-hunting proclivities of certain congressional inquisitors," conducting a "trial by suspicion and conviction by innuendo." [5] Pearson privately thanked Diefenbaker for these comments. This incident gave us warm feelings toward the Conservative chief.

Pipeline war rekindled

A few weeks later, federal elections were called, to be held June 10. The Liberals had ruled for 22 years and appeared unbeatable; they had a lead in opinion polls and held it through the campaign. Diefenbaker was an outsider - from Saskatchewan, of all places, and Canada's first party leader not of British or French extraction. Still, the Liberals' arrogance during the previous year's pipeline debate rankled. Diefenbaker hammered on the issue, and St. Laurent was forced onto the defensive. It was a second edition of Canada's pipeline war.

My band of high-school rebels were on Diefenbaker's side, and we soon spotted an opportunity to express our opinion. The Liberals had called a monster rally in Toronto's hockey palace, Maple Leaf Gardens, to be held Friday, June 7. We decided to carry out a pro-Diefenbaker demonstration on the floor of the arena. We laid careful plans and busily assembled materials: picket sticks, posters, and tools. Friday afternoon, half a dozen 15-year-old conspirators gathered in the garage behind my home and busied ourselves with hammer, saw, tacks, and adhesive tape. One of the picket sticks we sawed most of the way through. Preparations completed, we grabbed some supper, picked up our gear, jumped on a bus, and - holding signs displaying St. Laurent's portrait - made our way into the Gardens along with more than 10,000 other participants.

Confrontation at Maple Leaf Gardens

As the time approached for St. Laurent to speak, we made our way down to the arena floor. One of us, Bill Hatton, stood aside from the group. The others waited until St. Laurent's speech was in full stride and then stripped his portrait off our signs, revealing a handsome photo of Diefenbaker. At that time the security state was still in its infancy; there were no guards or police to stop us. Out we sauntered onto the floor waving our signs in front of the 10,000, greeted by a chorus of boos and angry, shaking fists.

As we finished, Hatton advanced toward the speakers' platform, which was on a high dais above a flight of stairs. Hatton marched up the stairs to within five meters of the prime minister. "I've had enough of this hypocrisy," he proclaimed, breaking the pre-sawed picket sign over his knee and tearing up the picture of St. Laurent that adorned it.

St. Laurent's biographer describes the prime minister's reaction and the ensuing events:

"The seventy-five-year-old leader stared, open-mouthed and uncomprehending, at the spectacle; the crowd watched in hushed silence. Then the chairman of the meeting [Vincent Regan], fearing a direct attack on the Prime Minister, rushed forward to seize the wrongdoer; he only succeeded in pushing [Hatton] backwards, and the boy fell down the steps, striking his head on the cement floor, and knocking himself unconscious. A horrified gasp rose from the crowd as the figure lay, crumpled and alone, a few feet below the Prime Minister of Canada...."

In a matter of a few seconds, which seemed like hours, the young man was surrounded by attendants, and within a few minutes he was able to stand up and be escorted out of the hall.

The first reaction over, the crowd turned its indignation upon the men on the platform; the incident appeared to prove the charges of the other parties that the Liberal oligarchy was so remote from the people that it could not be approached with impunity." [6]

The police detained Hatton briefly and then sent him to a hospital, where he quickly recovered. Police Inspector Charles Bond told reporters that it was "politically impossible" to figure out what really happened when Hatton toppled, so no charges would be laid. [7]

Press reaction the next day was typified by Toronto's Globe and Mail, whose front-page banner headline read: "Teen-Age Heckler at PM's Rally Taken to Hospital After Clash." In the June 10 voting, Diefenbaker's Conservatives were elected to government. The Liberals' chief pipeline proponent, C.D. Howe, was defeated in his Northern Ontario riding by a CCF candidate.

It was an upset victory. Based on the last polling before the Toronto rally, the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion forecast a Liberal lead of 14% in the popular vote; three days later the Liberals' edge had shrunk to 2%. [8]

Drawing the lessons

Did our Maple Leaf Gardens initiative tip the balance? The question is somewhat misleading. In fact, the Diefenbaker campaign had a momentum that polls failed to capture. Our gesture was effective because it was well aligned with popular sentiment and played on the Liberals' notorious arrogance.

After the initial sensation, I saw no further press comment on our action. No reporter interviewed Hatton. Our floor demonstration had made the news, but no one connected it with Hatton's actions. No Conservative youth organizers sought us out. At school, the administration kept mum. Our parents reacted with reserve. [9]

As for Hatton, he proved a true conservative in spirit. After his high-school graduation, I saw him one last time in Marburg, Germany, in 1961, where he had joined Saxo-Silesia, one of the country's aristocratic duelling fraternities. Later, he won mention as a Diefenbaker loyalist, serving as organization director of Youth for Diefenbaker in 1967. When Diefenbaker died in 1979, Hatton was on the train that took the body from Ottawa to Saskatchewan. [10] He then dropped from public view.

Myself, I was pleased that the overbearing Liberal government had been brought down but less happy with the outcome of our Gardens escapade. I had wanted to convey an idea; instead, our involvement led to a violent confrontation. What is more, experience with the Diefenbaker government soon convinced me that our idea itself - supporting the Conservatives as a lesser evil - had been wrong. The new regime was no less committed to big-business profit interests than the old. Fidler and I concluded that the CCF had been right, with its call for pipeline nationalization. We joined the CCF together some months later and went on to help found the New Democratic Party in 1961.

At school, our band of dissidents found lots of scope, leading the Public Affairs Club, the debating society, and the school's contingent in the city-wide model United Nations. Our UN delegation, representing - of course - the Soviet Union, won the school much more honour than the football team, bringing home a trophy in 1960. The cadet corps remained a bone of contention, as did our efforts at socialist education within the school's walls. Conflicts with The Brock continued. "Pacifism, socialism, Marxism," he thundered at me on one of these occasions, "you can't bring any of these isms into this school." Again I was threatened with expulsion and, in 1961, The Brock threw Fidler out a few months before his graduation.

After leaving the school, we dissidents scattered in several directions; Fidler and I began a lifetime of activity in the socialist movement. [\[11\]](#)

Today, 55 years later, Canada is once again locked in a struggle over pipelines. The Harper government is campaigning globally to establish Canada's tar sands as the answer to declining conventional oil supplies. More is involved than boosting corporate profits; tar sands oil enormously escalates the threat of global warming. As the noted climatologist James Hansen wrote recently, "If Canada proceeds [with tar sands development], it is game over for the climate." [\[12\]](#)

Harper is boosting projects for tar-sands pipelines west to the Pacific, south to Texas, and east across Ontario and Quebec to the Atlantic. Stopping this is not easy. Governments now routinely ride roughshod over parliamentary filibustering; prime ministers no longer expose themselves to disruption by 15-year-old protesters. And yet all the tar-sands pipelines have met strong resistance, above all from First Nations, and the projects are all in trouble.

Let Harper ponder the deeper lesson of the pipeline war of 1956-57. As Elizabeth May suggests, it is far from excluded that popular outrage on the pipeline issue could - by one means or another - force his government out of office.

John Riddell, September 16, 2012

Afterword

Richard Fidler and I are both involved today in the movement against tar-sands pipelines. See reports on his blog ("Ottawa tar-sands protest: reports and impressions" [\[13\]](#)) and on mine ("Packed Toronto meeting discusses action plans for environmental justice" [\[14\]](#)). *Preparations are under way for a Toronto teach-in November 17 entitled: "The Tar Sands Come to Ontario: Resistance and Creative Alternatives."*

For a summary of the case against tar sands oil, see *Leave the tar sand in the ground*, by Ian Angus [\[15\]](#).

Thanks to Richard for many valued suggestions regarding this article.

P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/09/16/canadas-pipeline-wars-of-the-1950s-a-memoir/>

Footnotes

[1] Robert Bothwell and William Kilbourn, C.D. Howe, a Biography, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979, pp. 295-297.

[2] Dale C. Thomson, Louis St. Laurent: Canadian, p. 421-22, 425.

[3] J.W. Pickersgill, Seeing Canada Whole: A Memoir, Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1994, pp. 450-53.

[4] The first quotation from Isaiah 2:4, reads: "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." Junius was the pseudonym of an eighteenth-century essayist; our quotation was taken from the masthead of the Toronto Globe and Mail.

The founders of the LACC favoured abolishing the cadet corps outright. The name "League to Abolish Compulsory Cadets" defined the goal in a way that won support from students who liked aspects of the military instruction but saw that a question of conscience was at stake, requiring a flexible policy.

[5] Liberal foreign affairs minister Lester Pearson privately thanked Diefenbaker for these comments. Denis Smith, Rogue Tory: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker, Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1995, p. 220.

[6] Thompson, pp. 516-17.

[7] Jamie Bradburn, "How Not to Run a Liberal Election Rally," in torontoist.com, April 30, 2011.

[8] "Canadian Federal Election 1957" in Wikipedia. Because the Liberals' vote was concentrated in Quebec, they needed an edge of more than 2% of the federal vote in order to win a majority of the seats in parliament.

[9] The father of one of our band wrote Diefenbaker, reporting that he had asked the police to lay charges against Regan. This was impossible, he was told, because "police could find no witnesses." "Canadian Federal Election 1957", citing Diefenbaker archives.

[10] 'Keep Dief' Cookouts Organized by Youth," Montreal Gazette, July 13, 1967.

[11] Turbulence at UTS increased in the decade after our departure. The LACC's demand that cadet training be made optional was won in 1966. See the University of Toronto Schools article in Wikipedia.

[12] Climate and Capitalism, quoting from New York Times, May 9, 2012.

[13] Available on ESSF (article 26433), [Ottawa tar-sands protest: reports and impressions](#).

[14] Available on ESSF (article 26434), [Packed Toronto meeting discusses action plans for environmental justice](#).

[15] See on ESSF (article 26371), [Canada: Leave the tar sand in the ground!](#).