

Twilight of the age of oil signals an uncertain future

With the stroke of a pen, U.S. President Joe Biden didn't just cancel the Keystone XL pipeline. In the eyes of some, he's cancelled Alberta.

Pipeline owner TC Energy Corp. almost immediately informed its employees it will eliminate more than 1,000 good-paying construction jobs across both Alberta and the midwestern states. But beyond the immediate job losses, the end of Keystone XL is emblematic for many Albertans who used to sport "I am Alberta oil" bumper stickers handed out by the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, said Alberta sociologist and environmentalist Randy Haluza-DeLay.

"An identity claim (based on oil) is being formulated here," said Haluza-DeLay, who edited the 2013 book *How The World's Religions Are Responding to Climate Change*.



Randy Haluza-DeLay

Over years of running seminars on climate change for faith groups in Alberta, Haluza-DeLay has noticed a shift in attitudes. While there's a core that ideologically rejects Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* and any suggestion that an inevitable shift away from oil will require sacrifice, most accept the climate is changing, he said.

A Pembina Institute poll released Jan. 15 found 68 per cent of Albertans support Ottawa's goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. However, that goal doesn't change Alberta's immediate concern over losing the \$8-billion Keystone project.

Almost three quarters of Albertans (72 per cent) want Ottawa to push Biden to

reverse his decision, compared to 26 per cent of Quebeckers and 38 per cent of Ontarians. Only in Alberta and Saskatchewan is there a majority in support of efforts to rescue the pipeline, according to a new poll from the Angus Reid Institute.

While most Canadians acknowledge cancelling Keystone will be bad for Alberta (65 per cent, according to Angus Reid), Canadians outside Alberta and Saskatchewan think it's time to move on.

But knowing the age of oil is over doesn't translate into knowing what to do next, or knowing what Alberta or an Albertan is in a post-oil world, Western Canadian theologians and religious studies professors told Canadian Catholic News.

"A lot of people's jobs depend on the oil and gas and that's changing. People are scared about the change. I think fear is a bigger factor than anything else," said Haluza-DeLay.

The Church needs to respond to both the immediate needs of people and families who have lost their jobs and to communities that have to reimagine who and what they are, said philosophy and Catholic Studies professor Timothy Harvie of St. Mary's University in Calgary.

"This is a great time to reorient ourselves, to be creative again," he said.

Catholics should look to Pope Francis as they think through both the future and the immediate needs of unemployed neighbours, Harvie suggested.

"These people are in very real need," he said. "This is why we need, and Pope Francis again has called for, robust systems of aid and solidarity and practical social safety nets to be part of our society."

Whether the Church in Canada will in fact respond pastorally to the new reality is a question very much up in the air, said Regina archdiocesan theologian Brett Salkeld.

"What is far more likely, it seems to me, is that the Church – I don't just mean the clergy, but all of us – are almost certainly going to just divide along partisan lines on this," Salkeld said. "We're in a cultural context where it's so easy to be subsumed by ideology. We ignore the resources in our own Catholic tradition to address (issues). Whether it's an economic question, a pastoral question, a political question, we have resources."

Salkeld has no doubt that pastors will respond spiritually and practically to families that have lost jobs and income. But whether the Church will help communities to come together and discover a new hope, a new sense of the future, or leave them stewing in anger and resentment, is very much in doubt.

“What is going to be the response of the Church?” Salkeld asked. “God I wish it was compassion for the unemployed and also a commitment to the environment. Could we do both of those together?”

“People are entitled to just employment and labour,” said Nathan Kowalsky, a philosophy professor at St. Joseph’s College at the University of Alberta.



Nathan Kowalsky

The good news is that just employment is exactly what Pope Francis demands in *Laudato Si'* and it's what proponents of a “green new deal” or “just transition” are striving for, said Kowalsky. The tendency of Alberta media and politicians to dismiss serious talk about changing the economy keeps many Alberta Catholics from bringing their faith to bear on these questions, he said.

Moral questions about oilsands development were raised in Alberta long before *Laudato Si'*, in a 2009 pastoral letter from St. Paul Bishop Luc Bouchard.

“The moral question has been left to market forces and self-regulation to resolve, when what is urgently required is moral vision and leadership,” Bouchard wrote.

Not facing up to the moral question then, or even earlier, has led Alberta to its present dilemma, Haluza-DeLay said.

“So now they are struggling with questions about if this is what we're so dependent on, what do we do now?” he said. “This is such a big question for Alberta.”

The solution, at least for Catholic Albertans, should be to look again at the traditional Catholic approach to big questions, said Harvie. “As Catholics, we are used to taking the long view. We are used to viewing things with an eye that isn't simply determined by economic interests or the interests of those in power,” he said.

In Saskatchewan, Salkeld fears that ideology will overwhelm any truly Catholic process of discernment about the future.

“One group will use this to say, ‘This is why this environmentalism stuff is bogus and look now, it’s cost people their livelihoods and are you happy now you liberals?’ And the other group is going to say Alberta shouldn’t have had all its eggs in one basket,” Salkeld said.

“We need voices in the Church – bishops, lay people, priests, everyone – who can articulate these issues from a Catholic point of view first.”