

Corporate Canada demands Trudeau quell opposition to Trans Mountain pipeline

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From Canada's corporate media, oil industry, and big business as a whole there is a deafening clamour for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the federal Liberal government to do whatever it takes to ensure the rapid completion of the Trans Mountain pipeline, which is to transport Alberta tar sands bitumen to the British Columbia shore.

Numerous press commentators have declared that the fate of the Trudeau government now hangs in the balance. Failure to ensure that the "national interest" prevails will, they claim, undermine Canada's competitive position, damage the Canadian federation, and cause domestic and international investors to withdraw their support for Trudeau's Liberals.

Some are urging Trudeau invoke the Emergencies Act, the successor to Canada's notorious War Measures Act. Others that Ottawa deploy the army.

Trudeau and his government have hastened to vow that the Can\$7.6 billion project, which would triple the capacity of an existing pipeline, will be built, and built expeditiously. "Failure is not an option," declared Finance Minister Bill Morneau last week.

At the conclusion of an emergency meeting Sunday with the premiers of Alberta and British Columbia, Trudeau reiterated his previous assertions that the pipeline is in the "national interest." "We are absolutely focused" on making progress "this construction season," said Trudeau. "This is something Canadians expect us to do and quite frankly international investors who look at creating jobs in Canada want to see us able to do."

The Trans Mountain project has long been a political flashpoint. Wide swathes of Canada's population, especially in BC, oppose it because of its adverse impact on indigenous groups and the environment. In recent months, the pipeline project has been the subject of a bitter feud between the Alberta New Democratic Party (NDP) government and the BC NDP government, which

is dependent on the support of three Green legislators for its parliamentary majority.

What has brought the pipeline dispute to a head was the April 8 announcement by US-based Kinder Morgan (KML) that it is suspending all but essential work on the project and could soon jettison it altogether. If "the undue risk" to KML shareholders is not removed by May 31, declared KML Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Steve Kean, "it is difficult to conceive of any scenario in which we would proceed with the project."

Trudeau has said his government will soon bring forward legislation asserting and reinforcing federal control over the pipeline project. Previously Ottawa had insisted such action was not needed, because Canada's constitution places responsibility for inter-provincial transportation infrastructure squarely in its hands. This suggests the coming legislation will augment federal authority, possibly by setting aside local and BC government regulatory processes, limiting anti-pipeline protests, and increasing legal penalties for protesters who seek to impede pipeline construction.

The federal government has joined Alberta in offering to invest in Kinder Morgan or provide it with loan guarantees to reduce shareholder "risk." The Trudeau government is also said to be considering threatening BC with financial penalties if it doesn't quickly abandon any and all objections to the pipeline project. According to Morneau, "All options are on the table."

On Monday, Alberta's NDP government, which is completely beholden to Big Oil, tabled a bill that would give it the legal authority to curtail oil exports to BC. Saskatchewan's rightwing Saskatchewan Party government has vowed to follow suit.

Such legislation is viewed warily by Canada's elite. Not only is it unlikely to resolve matters by KML's May 31 deadline. It could well be struck down by the courts. Moreover, were Alberta to try to punish BC by cutting off

or reducing oil-flows it would embroil the country in an inter-provincial trade war.

Corporate Canada is adamant that it is the federal government that must enforce its interests by ensuring the pipeline is built and breaking, thereby, the oil industry's almost total dependence on the US market. This dependence has resulted in Alberta and Saskatchewan oil selling at well below the world price, costing the Canadian bourgeoisie tens of billions in profits.

Canada's ruling elite, however, is far from convinced that Trudeau will act with sufficient resolve and ruthlessness—that he will show, to use the words of Andrew MacDougall, a former aide to Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the “army steel” his father “flashed” when he invoked the War Measures Act and suspended basic civil liberties on the spurious claim two FLQ terrorist kidnappings had brought Quebec to a “state of apprehended insurrection.”

In an April 9 editorial, the *Globe and Mail* declared Kinder Morgan's decision to suspend work on the pipeline “nothing short of an economic and constitutional disaster for Canada.” The *Globe* went on to accuse BC of usurping Ottawa's authority, although the province, as legal experts concede, has broken no laws in reviewing the Trans Mountain's environmental impact. “The federal government,” thundered the traditional voice of Canada's financial elite, “cannot let this stand. It must use whatever tools it has.”

According to Kenneth Green of the Fraser Institute, a Vancouver-based big business think-tank, “The question is whether the prime minister has the determination and the willingness to pay with political coin” to push through the pipeline project. “It may come to the point where the prime minister has to say, ‘If we have to, we will put a military escort around the construction sites to get the thing built and then we will prosecute anyone who tries to sabotage it to the maximum extent of the law’.”

In a column titled “Justin Trudeau faces his Margaret Thatcher moment on pipelines ... and cowers,” *National Post* columnist William Watson contrasted the deliberation and ruthlessness with which Margaret Thatcher plotted and carried out the 1984-85 assault on the British coal miners, with Trudeau's supposed fecklessness.

In its April 8 ultimatum, Kinder Morgan emphasized the political infighting surrounding the pipeline project. But there is no question that like the corporate media it is looking to Ottawa not only to strong-arm the BC government, but also to guarantee that any campaign of

civil disobedience against the pipeline will be quickly quelled.

Significantly, BC authorities this week decided to upgrade contempt of court charges against anti-pipeline protesters accused of defying an injunction limiting picketing at Kinder Morgan worksites from civil to criminal charges. Those now facing criminal prosecution include Elizabeth May, the federal Green Party leader and its lone MP, and NDP MP Kennedy Stewart.

The federal cabinet, as Natural Resources Minister Jim Carr blurted out in a 2016 speech, has plans to deploy the military to suppress anti-pipeline protests, but currently deems it politic to play down such a possibility.

The government's flat out rejection, in the name of cabinet secrecy, of a Freedom of Information request filed by the *National Observer* for material concerning the government's November 2016 discussion about opposition to the Trans Mountain pipeline reveals just how concerned it is about exposure of its plans to suppress a civil disobedience campaign.

The furor within Canada's ruling elite over the fate of the Trans Mountain pipeline is being fed by broader concerns that Canadian capitalism's competitive position, i.e., profitability, is threatened by US President Donald Trump's massive tax cuts for big business and the rich and his administration's gutting of environmental regulations. Moreover, Canada, as a country highly dependent on foreign trade, is especially vulnerable to the development of trade war. Fears over the fate of NAFTA have already led to a steep decline in foreign investment.

The ruling class is demanding the Trudeau government act more aggressively to assert its interests against the working class at home and on the world stage and, if need be, use, as in the case of Trans Mountain, authoritarian measures to do so. Earlier this week the *Globe and Mail* urged Trudeau to follow the example of French President Emanuel Macron, who spearheaded last week's provocative and illegal air strikes on Syria and has used emergency powers to push through the gutting of worker rights and the privatization of the country's rail network.



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