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Transition in a Petro Province? The Alberta NDP in Office

Jeff Diamanti¹

Editor: In 2015, Alberta's New Democratic Party was swept into office with a landslide victory.² Its platform speaks to many issues including healthcare, education, "diversifying the economy," protecting the environment, respecting First Nations, and "taking leadership on climate change"; it also mentions a renewable energy program.³ How did this platform emerge and how are we to think about the energy transition in a provincial economy based on fossil capital?

Jeff Diamanti: The rise in power of the NDP in Alberta is a really interesting phenomenon for those of us working on environmental and social justice issues because it has made visible some of the political and economic contradictions of a system tied to both increases in overall energy on the one hand and increased GDP on the other. I don't want to oversimplify things here, but I think it's important to underscore that fossil fuels occasion social democratic parties, but maybe in two opposite and conflicting directions. From one side, environmental and social exploitation means that socially and fiscally conservative platforms have lost their social license – and so parties that speak of reparations, first nations reconciliation, and economic growth will increasingly win the game – while from another direction, the volatility of energy markets and the falling rate of profit means that we are likely going to see a faster pivot from party to party – left, right, and centre – with no real, paradigm-setting solutions. This is why as political subjects, thinkers, and workers, what we need to do is

1. Interview conducted by the issue editors.
2. Unless otherwise specified, we use NDP or Alberta NDP interchangeably to refer to the provincial Alberta New Democratic Party and not to the *federal* New Democratic Party; the party also refers to itself as "Alberta's New Democrats."
3. For the NDP Platform, see <http://www.albertandp.ca/platform>.

sharpen our conceptual skills in order to actually isolate what it is we're talking about when we talk about energy, because the historical specificity with which energy and capital become politically and logically bound to one another is going to be important for explaining recurring crisis, surprising political developments (the NDP), and the inability of market drivers address environmental crisis.

Four or five years ago nobody would have expected an NDP majority in government, and I think one thing that has to be said upfront about the relationship between the energy politics of that province and the democratic politics that matches it is that all political capacity and legitimacy is contingent on healthy oil prices. The NDP got its majority eight, nine months into what is now almost a two-year slump in oil prices. I think it's important to remember that, in late 2014, quite suddenly and quite unexpectedly, the price of oil plummeted internationally.

The price of oil had shaken before, obviously, as late as 2009, but nothing like this. What this drop in oil prices immediately exposed was how, especially in a place like Alberta (but this is a problem everywhere), the provincial budget is fully tuned to the rhythms of the energy market. Oil and government budgets, these have been interconnected for a very, very long time, but I think in a less visible way. It's just been part of the overall growing structure of the market, broadly defined, that energy and the price of oil play a huge role in modulating macro-economic rhythms, and that it has given shape to the last half century of economic development.

All of a sudden, even at the mature stage that we're at now, a slump like what we saw in November 2014, which was a \$40, \$50 drop in the price of oil, leaves a place like Alberta almost inoperative; financially and fiscally it's inoperative. The Conservatives can't do what they promised they were going to do, in large part because the provincial budget there had been effectively pegged to somewhere around 10% royalties on energy exports, and the value of those exports was suddenly cut in half. This way of doing politics leaves governments totally naked to the market. For me, the NDP majority doesn't make sense outside of this phenomenon.

I think it exposes something that we increasingly have to get hold of on the left, which is that parliamentary politics and democratic politics as they exist now cannot be imagined simply as a place to oppose something like fossil fuels, because *they are the consequence* of fossil capital dynamics. It's easy for an observation like that to become destabilizing for progressive politics, but it doesn't necessarily have to be.

When we recognize that parliamentary politics is severely constrained by the energy system and dependent on its revenues and royalties, we can understand the limits of the parliamentary setting as a place where fossil fuel (as a larger cultural and economic system) is going to be directly opposed. All of a sudden we can take a step back and start saying maybe that's why the NDP hasn't produced the immediate and sudden transition away from fossil fuel that we had hoped. Instead it's going to be a very, very long struggle that includes provincial politics but doesn't begin and end there.

Editor: Just to add some context to this, what was the relationship between the NDP and groups that are interested in the energy transition, for example, indigenous organizations and various left-wing projects in the lead-up to the election?

Jeff Diamanti: From my experience organizing with different groups and in Edmonton specifically, from around 2010 to 2014, major figures in the NDP like Rachel Notley, who is now the leader of the provincial NDP, routinely crossed paths with grassroots organizers when it came to environmental demonstrations together with Greenpeace, during the Occupy movement (which was fairly large in Edmonton), and labour disputes in all sectors, but especially with the Alberta Union of Public Employees (AUPE). This was during a time of pretty severe budget cuts, especially to public sector workers, acutely felt across the health and education sectors. Wildcat strikes, walkouts, outrage, an upsurge in left consciousness at universities: this was a really busy period, and the NDP is usually smart to show support for this kind of activity (as it does elsewhere in the country). The NDP, which at that time was third, sometimes even fourth in the province when it came to the polls, were like the activist party that would show up on the front lines with us (even when some people didn't want them to).

Even though the activists amongst us were suspicious of party politicians, the youth wing of the NDP, *especially the youth wing*, was much further left of the party. Like elsewhere in the world, the left when it gets down to activist politics is surprisingly more singular than it is when it becomes more institutionally specific. When it comes to on-the-ground struggles and demonstrations in Alberta, it's absolutely true that the environmental movement and the social justice movement tend to be more united, less defined. I think that their paths and their platforms divorce very quickly as you move up a few registers, but I would say on the ground there was reason to

be optimistic about the overlapping personalities and platforms and NGOs. I would say that was the case for a good four or five years before the NDP was elected. In my mind, that's the political and social context for their May 2015 victory.

Editor: Can you provide us with a higher-resolution picture of the overlap on the ground level, between social movement activists and the NDP? This seems to be similar to a challenge in the United States, especially in unions and communities of color where Democratic Party activists interact with grassroots activists. There's a lot of overlap at the grassroots level, but as soon as you move up a few registers, as you put it, that's where the unity starts faltering very quickly.

Jeff Diamanti: I think that when we put our activist hats on, this kind of thing matters a great deal. We share actual physical resources, we shared spaces for art builds and things like that where you make your banners and your placards; and when the movement is still in its demonstration phase, organizers always look to the regular and recognizable figures in the broad coalition of the left in order to give the demonstration its popular front feel: student activists; Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL); public sector organizers; First Nations leaders; environmental activists (Greenpeace and Sierra Club); Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and so on. I imagine this is a common theme in North America – you are organizing with the same people week in and week out during times of popular demonstrations, and it means that political difference gets muted and tempered. Often NDP supporters and the grassroots level of the NDP would be, not only sharing NDP resources, but are also *the same people*. I know from friends struggling in the west coast and the United States that it is usually the case there as well. Even if you routinely encounter suspicions of ulterior motives, and nobody wants a social justice demonstration to be hijacked by a party platform, it's inevitable that those who have taken on the burden of organizing rely on other organizers. It's brutal work and, as a model of politics, needs full-time figures doing the heavy lifting. I think this is something many of my friends and comrades found frustrating for a long time, but we also realized that it's a necessary feature of what the left *is* in North America today. We're in the wake of an institutionalized workerist left; we are very much in the wake of that and we're rebuilding; we're rebuilding from every place, every nook and cranny of a broken economy. This means that we are always going to be coming face-to-face with people who we imagine don't share our cause because of their institutional

affiliations, but who are also struggling on the ground. But it is also an opportunity to recognize possible affinities, and to have your own pre-conceptions broken up.

Editor: Jeff, there are a number of different ways I'd like to follow up, but I'm going to have to put that on hold to understand why people voted for the Alberta NDP in 2015. Would you attribute the NDP coming into office with an overwhelming majority of seats to the fact that it was the sole overtly organized parliamentary force opposing the budget cuts and offering an alternative? Would that explain why they were chosen as opposed to say the other conservative party or the Liberals?

Jeff Diamanti: That's a big question. The NDP presented a very legible and distinct platform from the conservative party, that is the Progressive Conservative (PC) party and, the other conservative party, the Wildrose Party, which is even further right, extremely socially conservative (think Trump with a better haircut and you get Danielle Smith). It did then and continues to have a lot of grassroots support. So does the Wildrose, but NDP support comes from a largely disenfranchised urban population. That's one way to explain it. The skeptical narrative is that the PCs had cut too many services and begun to run the province's finances into the ground – again, we are talking about the period when oil markets effectively crashed internationally – and that a vote for the NDP was a simply a protest vote against the PC dynasty. This makes sense in part to me since the NDP had never enjoyed success like we saw in 2015, and it is certainly the kind of bar talk you heard in the weeks following the election. But there are concrete economic situations that need to be taken into account as well. The NDP presented a very clear response to budget cuts and they promoted a social welfare vision of the future. The healthcare sector organizations and unions were also instrumental in electing the NDP given the kind of exploitation that they experienced in the conservative years and the systematic decreases of their paychecks and benefits. Healthcare workers form a large part of the Alberta economy but are not much represented in the discourse about Alberta as a place where people work. The NDP intelligently recognized this and foregrounded the issue as a way to address some of that injustice.

Again, I don't think that would have been possible without the sudden and terrifying drop in oil prices. Neither conservative party, the PCs nor the Wildrose, had any systematic account of this crisis. They seemed to project the perspective that we just have to weather

this storm and when it's over we'll get back to business as usual. The NDP presented an alternative picture of what the episode of that storm could look like. It's important to underscore we're not over that storm yet. Actually, this is probably the gust of breeze you feel on your cheek before the storm of the century knocks you on your ass.

Editor: One of the things you've helped me – as an outsider – to understand is why the NDP placed healthcare and health services almost at the center of their program. They also do talk about moving away from fossil fuels which is, I expect, a pretty radical thing to do in Alberta. Was it a consequence of the strong influence of health unions within the NDP interacting with the former's existing environmentalist constituency?

Jeff Diamanti: Yeah, both of those things have to be partially true and responsible for it. There are still, contrary to popular images of Alberta, very strong unions in the province and there's strong union leadership that no doubt, like elsewhere in the world overlaps with center-left party politics. These are partially responsible for it. I will add that in my experience and in the circles in which I circulate, there's a necessary suspicion about the energy language – especially now that we've seen a year (with the NDP in office) of rhetoric around changing the royalty system in Alberta – as well as about carbon taxation. There's some suspicion about not only the kinds of changes that are actually going to happen but also *who* is responsible for the technical structure of those now more or less finalized decisions. For one, just recently the Alberta Modernized Royalty Framework was finalized after a long process.⁴ When you look on Alberta.ca and you finally get to the report on what the new framework is going to look like, it's not only incomprehensible, but it also self-consciously draws attention to the fact that what it's going to reward are *producers* of energy. This is the aim: "Over time, the effect of the change will be to grow net revenues industry-wide, which in turn will make Alberta's energy sector more attractive for investment, help create more jobs and increase total royalty revenues to the province."

It should come as absolutely no surprise then when you read about the AB NDP pushing (alongside the federal Liberals of Justin Trudeau) for TransCanada's Energy East Pipeline, which would carry over a million barrels of oil a day from Hardisty, Alberta to St. John, New Brunswick (4,600 km away).⁵ When you read something like that,

4. The Modernized Royalty Framework report can be found here: <http://www.energy.alberta.ca/Org/pdfs/RoyaltyReportJan2016.pdf>

you think that the center left, or social democratic, response to energy royalties in a province like Alberta shouldn't be to attract more investment. There are a lot of people who think that that's no longer a viable response. The response should rather be to take control over the means of production, *especially* energy production – which could mean something as banal as redirecting wealth from energy production into a transition fund, which was essentially the conservative policy 20 years ago, and now strikes even liberals and social democrats as too radical. That sort of speaks to how difficult a political situation the NDP are in when it comes to what to do with fossil fuels: they have not even moved away from primary aims of the conservative royalty framework which is the most important part of the entire platform. A \$30 carbon levy per ton by 2017? The NDP reproduces a fantasy about progressive change that gives the market the active position in the production of history. I'm not the first to propose a different axiom for eco-socialism: *a socialist response is to reduce carbon emissions by controlling them; not by pricing them*. A real question for socialists is whether this axiom on energy transition (that socialists don't price carbon emissions – they control them) is best materialized through federal and provincial governments, or if cities are the units of measurement, and the instruments of power here.

Editor: What is the constitutional and legal framework around ownership of the fossil fuel resources?

Jeff Diamanti: Much of the “mineral rights” still actually reside in Alberta (81%); they reside with the people of Alberta, but those are leased off to these companies and that's why there's still a royalty framework, rather than just a tariff structure. It's in the provincial government's jurisdiction to name the royalty rate which is essentially the value of leasing the land to these companies. It's not arbitrary, obviously. Hypothetically there's a rate at which *no* production happens and in the situation where so much of the budget comes from royalties, no production happening in a fossil-fuel industry is a very bad thing. It's a disastrous thing for the province. But there's nevertheless much room for adjustment compared to what they've so far named as their ambition – which is effectively nothing different from the conservatives.

It also raises a really important question though for a leftist ecological position, which we are collectively building right now. The sense of

5. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/energy-east-pipeline-explained-1.3420595>

what a leftist response to the ecological crisis is, has to include strong claims about what governments, *as they exist*, can and can't do about this, about the political economy of energy and capital, and about fossil-fuel production. Examples of places where we've seen maybe the most exciting, optimistic discourse about climate change and infrastructural responses to it are municipal governments. The City of Edmonton, for instance, released a policy document called, *The Way We Green*.⁶ Many people who are responsible for constructing and composing that document come from academic and activist circles as well as from municipal council backgrounds.

We see this across the globe and there are important reasons for it. *Municipalities* as opposed to provincial governments, or even in some cases federal governments, are leading the way towards a real energy transition. Municipal governments are where policy, stimulus, and budgets etc. get actually materialized into infrastructure, into zoning, into buildings, into the spaces where we live and struggle. It makes sense to me that the municipal is the place where we're seeing real ambition, real leftist, left-ecological ambition.

The Way We Green is not without its problems, but the idea broadly is that the energy transition is a question of infrastructure, zoning, and incentives; that in a place like Alberta where even today, upwards of 50% of electricity generation comes from coal-fired power plants, cities are in a position to change the form and content of energy systems. Depending on where you're talking about, electricity generation is the responsibility of publicly-owned or -managed utilities. Even if that has been attacked systematically in the past 30 or 40 years, there's important political residue there. There's the capacity to actually change where electricity comes from, away from fossil fuels and towards renewables, but also the opportunity to come up with new social structures and habits around energy. Think of what happens around large-scale community gardening, co-operative food systems, and so on – these are totally structural models for energy-based social forms that alter political relationality, community, and of course sustainability, and there is no reason why we can't start thinking about energy production and distribution in a similar ethos.

That's one thing, but the question of energy transition from electors' perspectives is never just about the source of energy, right? The thing that gives us the light bulb, that makes the light bulb turn on, is about the whole social and physical infrastructure that feeds it and

6. City of Edmonton (2011) *The Way We Green: The City of Edmonton's Strategic Environmental Plan*.

makes it possible. So something like sharing dividends from a publicly-owned utility in order to subsidize housing, for example, can take place in a municipality.

Editor: Is this something that The Way We Green actually proposes, or is it aspirational at this stage?

Jeff Diamanti: It's aspirational, or "strategic," but I think that's just the nature of policy. In Canada, at least, that's where that decision-making takes place. The cities have to ask for the funding from provinces, and that funding actually was cut significantly by the NDP in Alberta, but strategic policy is still the result of real proposals, and is the condition of possibility for municipal transition. Don Iveson is the mayor of Edmonton. He's kind of a young lefty politician with the right idea for cities. He got elected exactly on *that* vision – which Edmontonians share – to really fund public transit and turn different forms of public transit into hubs for social and change. Obviously, that can be misconstrued or read as a policy that's perfectly consistent with liberalism, except that it takes *away* from other sorts of subsidies for fossil fuels that you see elsewhere. So I don't think that it is mere liberalism. Edmonton's "Energy Transition Strategy" is an impressively comprehensive, readable, and ambitious policy for turning the city's existing legal and infrastructural resources into the source of long-term sustainability. No one expects these sorts of documents to decouple energy production from the accumulation of capital, to make a revolutionary break in the political economy that binds economic growth to energy deepening, but there are nevertheless the building blocks of real, infrastructural transition in the strategy.

Editor: In effect it would involve some measure of redistribution, although you probably wouldn't use that word.

Jeff Diamanti: I think that to the extent that municipal governments are able to do that, it is absolutely able to redistribute certain kinds of wealth that could be going to one place, but instead go to working populations and low-income populations. It looks to me like the strategy is to involve community leaders in a kind of coalition that consults on energy issues across the city, a "central coalition of community leaders and stakeholders." The Edmonton process was very consultative and it took over a year of meetings ...

Editor: So it was a fairly participatory process?

Jeff Diamanti: So I am told.

Editor: When we go back then to the provincial level, the NDP has been in office for a year and prices are still low. The economy, the budget is still dependent on royalties from these low prices. How has the NDP done?

Jeff Diamanti: I really think that they've done as well as they can given the fiscal constraints of a political system that is so intimately tied to the fluctuations of the energy sector. The Energy East Pipeline, which has been a major part of the NDP platform from day one, has alienated other NDP supporters across the country, as well as environmentalists across the country. These are sometimes the same people, sometimes not. The Green Party in Canada is a fairly popular party, as you probably know, but seldom get more than one or two seats, and they of course oppose the pipeline for ecological reason, and they seem to be the only party that recognizes the mass opposition from First Nations groups to infrastructural expansion and ecological risk.

Anyway, the NDP pipeline stance has alienated much of the country's left. But you have to ask the question, how else, within a budget framework like the one they inherited from the conservatives, are they supposed to fund alternative visions? It's not like the new federal Liberals have a different vision for the energy content of Canada's economy. They are all locked into a logic. Even with the Energy East Pipeline, they're still expecting a deficit upwards of \$52 billion, within I think it's like, 20 or 30 years – which is not that uncommon for provinces, but now imagine the deficit *without* the added royalties from one million additional barrels a day, plus the spin-off benefits from domestic refineries on the east coast. The NDP, like all of us, find ourselves in an economy, a world, a set of imperatives and logics, not of our own making.

On education and health, the public sector, they've definitely stopped the bleeding and it was an enormous wound. People who have been fighting that battle, in post-secondary education especially, have been able to take a deep breath. Now, of course, they are picking up the pieces and looking at the aftermath of 20–30% budget cuts across the board and trying to figure out what to do next. That's something we can recognize as extremely positive. They haven't been able to return the budget cuts but they've obviously stopped the bleeding. City funding has been cut still and that's going to affect working people but within the context of Canada, which is a veritable petro state, and especially Alberta, the political economy of energy seriously limits

the kinds of radical proposals and visions that can take place at the provincial level.

Editor: In that context then, how did the NDP respond to the very unexpected Liberal ascension to federal office?

Jeff Diamanti: I don't know how the Alberta NDP is dealing with it; I think it's going to be an issue for the federal party for some years to come, because of a variety of factors, including the very contingent one, the popularity of Justin Trudeau internationally. I would also say that in the last election, the federal NDP never offered a fully differentiated vision from the Liberal Party, especially of what the country could look like under the federal NDP. It is going to be interesting to see how the split between the provincial party in Alberta and the federal party is going to be resolved. I don't know how it is going to be resolved! For instance, you might have seen during the federal convention in Edmonton, just a month or so ago, the party decided to take up the question of how to respond to the LEAP Manifesto which was written in 2015 (Spring).⁷ It was authored by a variety of well-known public intellectuals, indigenous activists, leftists, and environmentalist from across the country. It was strongly supported by the youth wing of the NDP.

That's in part why the federal NDP had to respond to it and when Rachel Notley (Alberta NDP) essentially said that the Leap Manifesto was not to be taken seriously, that it was a fiscal disaster, that it would ruin the province and the country, it again alienated a lot of supporters of NDP across the country and also exposed again the ways in which party politics at the provincial level go hand-in-hand with the economic structure of fossil fuels. I don't know how they're going to respond to the Liberal ascendancy. I think we will have to wait to see who the new federal NDP leader is going to be and during that decision-making period, what the platform is going to be. The Liberals aren't speaking of energy transition, and neither are the Conservatives. Maybe the NDP at all levels should take note and offer a bold and

7. The manifesto responds to the Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report on violence against Indigenous people in Canada's "near past." It advocates a quick end to fossil fuels extraction and use and a moratorium on new infrastructure projects for those purposes. The document was authored at a two-day summit involving indigenous leaders and signed by more than 40,000 leading Canadian figures including Naomi Klein, David Suzuki, Hassan Yussuff, Leonard Cohen, Maude Barlow, Alanis Morissette, Michael Ondaatje and Neil Young. The manifesto may be found at <https://leapmanifesto.org>.

(don't hold your breath) socialist vision for large-scale energy transition. They'd need to start by putting "socialism" back on the party constitution . . .

Editor: *One of the things that a party does, at a very fundamental level, is to aggregate and arbitrate between different interests within its constituency. The way you've described it, the education and healthcare sectors certainly have been beneficiaries of the process within the provincial NDP. How does the environmental left try to strengthen itself . . . to get a better place at the table? Do you see room for that?*

Jeff Diamanti: In my reading the way that the environmental left has advanced its interests in the party, at least the NDP, has largely been to propose job creation around clean energy. While it has been a necessary rhetorical gesture and pattern for quite a while now, it's still a useful strategy. But I think we should also be suspicious of it.

Rather than doom and gloom politics which I think was exposed as not very useful a long time ago, Greenpeace, the Green Party, and an environmental wing of the NDP have rallied around the question of job creation and employment from clean energy. Curtailing emissions sounds like economic constraint; job creation sounds like good fiscal policy. I think that's a common strategy from environmentalists across the board, though. We have seen numerous studies verifying the policy claim about clean industry which is that it will not only employ more workers in the future than fossil fuel production, but that *it already is*.⁸ Conservatives will point to the not entirely clear metric system around which "clean energy" is determined across a whole range of economic activities – to the point, bizarrely, that certain types of coal and natural gas facilities count as "clean energy" – but the point is still a good one to make when the *sine qua non* of liberal democratic capitalism is growth. Is that what you meant?

Editor: *Yes, that is exactly where I would like to go – job creation being a very concrete kind of thing that the left can propose and it becomes a way to interface with other interests within a coalition. But how do you not only get that into a platform, but translate it into something that becomes concrete – actual policy? Is there the capacity on the left to make that happen?*

8. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/clean-energy-provides-more-jobs-than-oilsands-report-says-1.2857520>

Jeff Diamanti: It is concrete policy, and you don't need a social democratic party to make it happen. If you are speaking from the position of parliamentary democracy, which we are doing when we talk about the NDP, then I would say the NDP is doing exactly what one would expect them to do within a larger set of political and economic constraints that come with the structural logic of fossil capital: they've put a price on carbon. The idea behind that is two-fold: one, you disincentive fossil fuel production; and two, you redistribute those funds to clean industries by way of subsidies. By 2017, there will be a levy of \$30 per ton in Alberta and that's supposed to increase incrementally until about 2050, at which point we would have a stabilized emissions model.

Through taxes – which is effectively what it is, it's a tax that the conservative party in Alberta, perhaps with some truth, claim will actually hurt taxpayers as much big companies – the conditions for transition are *suggested*. We are talking about parliamentary democracy addressing climate change from a market-driven platform, so within that matrix, within that structure, that's the best that we can hope for. The only other adjustment we could expect is more taxes – more taxes for the big companies that are responsible for the emissions and then redirecting that income to other social programs. I think we're seeing a version of this with the NDP, which is great in relation to what you can expect from the parliamentary route. But I also think that leftists should be extremely skeptical of the underlying assumption behind all this, which is that an energy transition (even tailored to and by the left) is best imagined as an opportunity to keep existing social relations, lifestyles, growth models, political systems, the imperative to labour, and so on, the same. That's ludicrous to me. If we are talking about a transition in the *input* to our energy system, then we aren't talking about a transition at all, or at least not one that any version of “the left” I'm familiar with would fight for.

Editor: *Let me ask you about that dimension. Revenue is raised through taxes – fine, we live in a market system that we're apparently not ready to displace and so we're going to raise revenue this way. To what degree does the investment that would follow from those carbon taxes result in the creation of jobs that are more sustainable? Is the building of energy cooperatives organized for other more suitable renewable energies? In other words, do the carbon tax reforms create a constituency that will not only depend on the taxes to get started, but have an interest in continuing the taxes for as long as there's carbon being emitted? Does it transform the employment base and*

even create a new voting base – a new voting bloc supporting this left-reformist project?

Jeff Diamanti: The question is whether or not it can be successful?

Editor: Yes, how are the taxes being reinvested? Is it just going into the general fund or is it being directed in favor of an energy transition?

Jeff Diamanti: It varies from province to province for one, and also the rhetoric and concrete structure of carbon taxing, whether it's cap and trade or carbon levying is still fairly new in Canada. Not only does it vary, but it's still up in the air as to how exactly it's going to get reinvested. It depends on the concrete ways in which that money gets reinvested – either through incentives, subsidies, penalties, or (if we are lucky) through public sector ownership of new forms of energy production and distribution. All of the above are unfolding in Canada, and certainly in places like Scandinavia, Germany, and so on. I'll give you one example. In Ontario, Kathleen Wynne, who is the Premier of this province and a Liberal (they have been in power there for a long time), announced a carbon tax. The long-term vision of how that's going to get implemented was more or less outlined today and it's going to include incentives for large-scale industrial green energy companies to set up shop, which they have been providing for a very long time.

In recent years we have seen a combination of secondary and tertiary contract workers, relatively precarious compared to traditional forms of industrial labour, making up the bulk of those industries. As you probably know, coal was fully phased out of Ontario a couple of years ago, because of this sort of mechanism, so you can call that a victory. The other way it's going to get implemented concretely in Ontario is through incentives for homeowners to retrofit, etc., etc. They think that this is a fully palatable and acceptable way to mitigate emissions. And while it is not nearly as ambitious as we should be hoping for, residential and commercial architecture is a fundamental piece of the puzzle when we hear statistics about emissions and learn that upwards of 50% of emissions come from buildings. That's a sort of the shocking statistic that makes you sit back and think. The rhetoric of gas-guzzling cars, SUVs and that sort of thing obviously doesn't get to the heart of the matter alone.

But the left response to this (and no one is pretending that the Ontario Liberals are left of anything) is not to ratify existing property relations in order to address the architectural side of emissions, but

to instead turn this into an opportunity to disseminate participation, decision-making, and collective forms of ownership across communities. I'd love to see a policy that takes the municipal ward as the unit of distribution and ecological enfranchisement.

To get back to the question, it varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, and I don't know how it's going to work in Alberta right now. Notley's rhetoric puts the source of transition at the level of market incentives. It's going to become, the logic goes, less and less profitable to invest in fossil fuel and heavily extractive industries. It should also become more and more profitable to amass some clean energy portfolio which supposedly has a labour intensive side to it (which may or may not be true, but it certainly is *capital* intensive!).

The contradiction is that at the very same time, you have the royalty review which is dependent on fossil fuel and extraction coming in. But the review essentially leaves the conservative framework untouched and is rapidly alienating the Alberta left (see Niki-foruk).⁹ With reps from Suncor and Syncrude sitting on those review panels, it's unsurprising that the royalty framework draws attention to the fact that its main motivation is to keep production high and to reward efficient producers of fossil fuels. That runs exactly counter to the whole idea of incentives for clean energy.

Editor: Yes, that makes little sense from the point of view of an energy transition.

Jeff Diamanti: I think that's where you get to the political contradiction of what is fundamentally an economic question. The question of energy is about large-scale economics and that's why we're in a kind of impasse when we try to address climate change through market incentives. The impasse itself is the result of market logic.

Editor: By way of concluding, how do we get beyond this impasse, and in order to do so, how should we relate to the NDP in Alberta in particular? At least how should we relate to the experience in Alberta?

Jeff Diamanti: As leftists across North America, we should read the NDP as a symptom, but also as a possibility. We should read it as a symptom of a downturn in oil prices for one, but we should also recognize that on the question of climate change, it is a symptom of the ways in which *that* register of politics has its hands tied. It's obviously an

9. <http://theyyee.ca/News/2016/02/02/Alberta-Royalty-Review-Disaster/>

enormous source of possibility not in and of itself, but as a sign of the indeterminacy of transition.

We're in the middle of a transition globally and I think there's a great deal of indeterminacy which has got to be the most exciting fact presented to the left in a very long time. In other words, the way this transition is going to happen is not yet fully scripted – it can go a number of ways. One trajectory is unfortunate, which is the one the NDP's rhetoric around market incentives and investor-driven policy makes a reality. But dissatisfaction with a party like the NDP should reinvigorate a social imaginary around new ways of distributing wealth – new ways of generating power, electricity etc., and building communities around that, rather than having communities confront expensive utility bills, etc.

There are very positive organizations, NGOs and projects all over the world, but indigenous communities in Canada have been a strong source of radically alternative forms of thinking around energy, politics, and ownership structures. In some indigenous communities, you have projects to rethink how, for example, hydro power can be a locus of political power for those communities but also for economic sustainability for those communities. You have lots of thinking going into ways to use old infrastructures and old forms of power generation to reinvigorate communities. The more that energy and capital are disarticulated in concrete political projects, the more we will have the opportunity to come up with a new kind of re-articulation where a different kind of political economy drives decision-making, where communities are at the base and they're the ones that control their own destinies, and I think we're moving towards that.

Plainly the energy transition is a struggle, and not some set of common-sense policies that will *de rigueur* ferry us over to green pastures. It will require sophisticated accounts of how we got into this mess in the first place (the relationship between energy and capital is a great place to start), and (more importantly) unexpected political strategies that simultaneously bust open the impasse and articulate collective forms of social and ecological sustainability. Hopefully parties like the NDP will smarten up and become allies in this larger sense of transition. If not, then they are one more barrier we'll fight to overcome.