We need to think about future

Robert Hicks

On August 9, the world marked the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples. It should be a day of recognition, but perhaps also of listening.

At a time when floods overwhelm homes, wildfires consume communities and extreme heat becomes increasingly familiar, we are asking an old question: What is in the national interest?

That question has become particularly urgent with Alberta's proposed West Coast oil pipeline, which could carry roughly one million barrels of oil a day to the coast of British Columbia.

On July 2, the Government of Canada referred Alberta's proposal to the federal Major Projects Office, which is reviewing the submission and conducting consultations to inform a decision on whether to list it as a project of national interest.

There are powerful economic arguments for the project: jobs, export markets, energy security, investment and government revenues. They deserve to be heard. But they cannot be the only arguments.

What happens when what we call the national interest conflicts with the interests of those who live on the land—and those who will inherit the consequences of what we decide today? That is where the concerns of Indigenous peoples deserve our attention. Indigenous rights cannot be reduced to consultation after a decision has effectively been made. Economic benefits cannot substitute for the right of First Nations to determine their own futures.

There is something larger here than a pipeline. There is a question about what we mean by *interest*. Whose interest? Today's interest? The government's? The investor's? Or the interest of the child who will live with the consequences long after today's decision-makers have left the room?

We have become very good at putting the future into reports: future emissions, future economic growth, future environmental impacts, future generations. But the future is no longer somewhere beyond the horizon. It is arriving.

It arrives as water rising through a basement. As smoke over a city. As a forest burning. As a community wondering whether it will ever again feel safe.

A tonne of carbon dioxide does not carry a passport. Floodwater does not ask which government a community voted for.

This does not mean every fossil-fuel project must be rejected without consideration, or that economic security is unimportant. It means we must stop pretending these questions can be separated.

Climate security is economic security. Environmental protection is community protection. Indigenous rights are not an obstacle to the public interest; they are part of how a democratic society determines what the public interest actually is.

If this pipeline is to be considered in the national interest, Canadians should ask: What are its consequences? Who bears the risks? What alternatives have been considered? What happens if the assumptions behind the project prove wrong? And perhaps most importantly: What will the people of 2050 say about the decisions we made in 2026?

Indigenous Peoples have long asked us to think differently about our relationship with land, water and those who come after us. Perhaps the climate crisis is teaching the rest of us why that wisdom matters.

National interest is not simply the sum of today's economic interests. It is a promise to tomorrow.

The future has no voice in today's meetings. It cannot vote. It cannot write a letter to the editor. It cannot tell us what it thinks of our decisions. So we must speak for it—not by pretending to know exactly what future generations would choose, but by accepting responsibility for what we leave behind.

When the future finally arrives, will it find that we were listening?

Robert Hicks is a member of SCAN's Education Outreach Working Group. If you would like to learn more about the EOWG's work, please contact Norm Park or Martin Bush