

Suzuki Foundation, Tides and other groups brace for impact of Jason Kenney's new war

April 17th 2019 Carl Meyer

Prominent Canadian environmental leaders say they hope to focus on priorities such as fighting climate change as they brace for the impact of government-led attacks and investigations promised on Tuesday night by the incoming premier of oil-rich Alberta.

The comments came in response to a blistering victory speech delivered by Alberta United Conservative Party Leader Jason Kenney as he reacted to a resounding victory that will soon give him a majority government in the provincial legislature of the Western Canadian province.

Kenney's party had captured more than 50 per cent of the vote and about two-thirds of the seats by the time he took the stage to deliver his warning to the opponents of one of Canada's most powerful industries.

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A crowd of supporters in Calgary roared with approval as Kenney pledged to start a political war with those opponents who have also been among his own adversaries. He said his government would launch investigations of environmentalists, complaining that they were spreading lies about the impacts of industrial development in a province that sits on the bulk of the world's third largest reserves of crude oil, following Saudi Arabia and Venezuela.

The former Harper government minister, who has [defended](#) his stance questioning the degree to which humans are causing climate change, wants to bolster the province's crude oil exports at a time when [experts say](#) a global transition to renewable forms of energy will make costly fossil fuels less attractive to investors.

He made no mention of internal estimates from the provincial oilpatch regulator which has estimated clean up costs for oil, gas and pipeline facilities in the province could add up to [\\$260 billion](#) in financial liabilities. He also neglected to mention [new federal government statistics](#) estimating that the pollution from Alberta's oilsands in 2017 was higher than all of the greenhouse gas emissions produced that year in Quebec or British Columbia.

Instead, Kenney called out Vancouver-based non-profits Leadnow and the David Suzuki Foundation, accusing them and other groups of a "campaign of defamation and double standards." He said this campaign is only focusing on Alberta oil, without going after oil from other jurisdictions that have poor democratic and human rights standards.

"To the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Tides Foundation, Leadnow, the David Suzuki Foundation and all of the others: Your days of pushing around Albertans with impunity just ended," Kenney said. "Today we begin to fight back." He vowed to "launch a public inquiry into the foreign source of funds behind the campaign to landlock Alberta energy," which had become a UCP campaign platform pledge.



Alberta premier-designate Jason Kenney, leader of the United Conservative Party of Alberta at the Manning Networking Conference on Feb. 10, 2018. File photo by Alex Tétreault

'An attack on hundreds of thousands of Canadians'

The unwanted attention from right-wing politicians is old news for groups like the David Suzuki Foundation and Leadnow. Leaders from these groups said Kenney was attacking democracy by singling out legitimate advocacy organizations that push for positive social change, and that hundreds of thousands of Canadians support.

Kenney's old boss, former prime minister Stephen Harper allocated [\\$8 million](#) in its 2012 budget to probe the political activity of environmental organizations, including the Suzuki foundation. Last year an Ontario judge ruled that the Canada Revenue Agency's political audits [infringed](#) on the constitutional right to free expression.

Leadnow became the subject in 2015 of several complaints to the Canada elections commissioner's office that accused it of using foreign funds for advertising. Canada's election watchdog cleared the organization of improper spending after finding no evidence.

"Non-profits and charities have a long and trusted history of working toward positive, meaningful social change in Canada and around the world. By attempting to revoke our statuses as charities, Mr. Kenney is attacking a fundamental pillar of the modern democracy we in Canada value so much," David Suzuki Foundation CEO Stephen Cornish told *National Observer*.

Leadnow co-executive director Sonia Theroux said Kenney's comments were "concerning."

"What he's framing as an attack on foreign influence, with respect to Leadnow, is in fact an attack on hundreds of thousands of Canadians," she said. "That's who our membership is, that's who we're funded by, that's who we're lead by."

Cornish said the David Suzuki Foundation passed the Harper-era audit "without any issues" and that the CRA was satisfied it was fulfilling its charitable status role. The organization was remaining focused on its mission, he said, "to help find solutions to today's climate emergency."

"This includes helping ensure Canada meets its Paris climate targets with an effective national climate plan, including a national price on carbon pollution," said Cornish.

"This also includes helping accelerate our transition to a clean energy future through the adoption of renewable energy sources like wind and solar, as well as climate solutions like electric cars, active transportation like biking and walking, smarter city design and faster, better public transit."



File photo of David Suzuki Foundation CEO Stephen Cornish. Photo by Alex Tétreault

'In 2019, every government needs a climate plan'

The federal government's latest climate change report to the United Nations shows that pollution from fossil fuels in Canada continues to grow. Alberta's carbon pollution increased by 18 per cent from 2005 to 2017, "primarily as a result of the expansion of oil and gas operations," the report stated.

A major scientific report released this month said Canada and the rest of the world must reduce carbon emissions to "[near zero](#)" by roughly mid-century to avoid more extreme warming from climate change. It said this will increase the risk of floods, wildfires, loss of freshwater and other issues.

On Tuesday, Kenney said "we take seriously the challenge of climate change" and "we are world leaders in innovating to reduce emissions and shrink the environmental footprint of Canadian energy."

He also thanked "the growing number of progressive Indigenous leaders across Canada who want to be partners in responsible resource development."

"Alberta's government will sit down with you in the spirit of the treaties, and of

reconciliation, to develop real partnerships that can help move First Nations people from poverty to prosperity through resources," he said.

"The time has come to move beyond symbolic gestures to real, practical measures for Indigenous peoples to benefit from the resources that lie beneath the lands that they first inhabited."

But he has also been campaigning hard against a "carbon tax," calling it a "cash grab" that offers "no environmental gain," despite evidence that without British Columbia's carbon tax, implemented in 2008, emissions would be five to 15 per cent higher.

"In 2019, every government needs a climate plan. We haven't heard much about the Mr. Kenney's, so we look forward to that," said Cornish.

"The time and money he proposes spending to investigate charities would be better spent helping tackle the biggest problem facing our planet right now: climate change."

The UCP platform promises to "launch a public inquiry under the Inquiries Act into the foreign sources of funds behind the anti-Alberta energy campaign. The inquiry will have the power to compel witness testimony, and have a \$2.5 million budget."

The party did not respond to a request for comment about when Kenney expected to launch this inquiry, and whether it would compel testimony from the four groups he mentioned in his speech Tuesday.

Asked for comment, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's office referred to his [statement](#) congratulating Kenney on his victory. "Together, we will address issues of importance to Albertans and all Canadians, including supporting canola producers, and taking decisive action on climate change while getting our natural resources to market," he said.



File photo of Tides Canada president and CEO Joanna Kerr (centre).
Photo courtesy Joanna Kerr / Facebook

'Not worth the drop in the bucket'

Foreign money is no stranger to the oilpatch: foreign oil companies have historically been quite [present](#) in the industry. In fact, many analysts were concerned about an "[exodus](#)" of foreign capital from the sector following trade and pipeline uncertainty.

But while Leadnow has been criticized for accepting \$63,000 in funds from American foundations in 2016-17, that money "reflects 0.25 per cent of our revenue for those years," said Theroux, and the organization hasn't touched U.S. money since.

"We just don't have any problem raising money from Canadians who are trying to fight for a better world," she said. "We've historically been very little funded by American sources, other than the very beginning."

Plus, the amount of time and resources Leadnow spent on the Commissioner of Canada Elections investigation made it "not worth the drop in the bucket that the American money was for us," she said. "It just didn't make sense to be continually fighting this battle when really we didn't need the money."

Similarly, Tides Canada president and CEO Joanna Kerr told *National Observer* that

"less than one per cent" of the group's funding has gone towards pipeline or oilsands related activities.

"Mr. Kenney's blame is actually misdirected. The business community is rapidly moving on to clean energy. Citizens across Canada want urgent solutions for climate change. There is no better time to create green jobs now and protect our land, water and air for future generations," she said.

Kerr also noted that the Tides Foundation was a separate organization with no legal, financial, or governance ties to Tides Canada. Representatives from the Tides Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund could not be reached for comment before publication.

Earlier this week, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund told [the Star Calgary](#) that it supports climate change mitigation efforts around the world and has divested from fossil fuel investments.

"This body of work stems from the fund's long-standing commitment to the environment and conservation over more than 75 years," the fund told the newspaper. "The Rockefeller Brothers Fund does not, in accordance with the law, engage in or support political activity in any country."