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Our third winter in a row of downturn is looming. As one of my Directors wrote in our Fall edition of The Source....Many of us could handle a one year slowdown but few are prepared for a three year downturn.....

Bill Whitelaw is president and CEO of June Warren-Nickles – publisher of various Oil and Gas Media products including the Daily Oil Bulletin. His words come at a time of great struggle between activists, industrialists and governments.

Here's some advice for ordinary Canadians: "Keep Calm and Carbon On."

That is perhaps sound guidance for folks who may want to engage more deeply in some of the critical conversations around carbon that will be so foundational to shaping Canada's economic and energy future.

How long Canadians can remain calm is uncertain.

Right now, many are likely — and legitimately — frustrated with the challenges of breaking through the seemingly impermeable barriers that characterize the various echo chambers defining what amounts to Canada's current carbon conversations.

So, what's an echo chamber? Simply put, it's a social construct via which like-minded people and organizations talk to — and at — each other in a self-reinforcing and self-fulfilling way. If your perspective isn't shared, or it is untenable in some way, you're not part of the echo effect. Think about it as being on a conversational hamster wheel: lots of momentum but energy wasted.

Provincial climate leadership plans are echo chambers of sorts. So too are independent commissions and think-tanks with carbon perspectives. Carbon tax proponents reinforce their belief systems with each other — so too do cap-and-trade proponents.

It amounts to a whole lot of ambiguity and complexity if you're on the outside looking in. And while man-on-the-street Canadians may not currently know a lot about carbon dynamics, they know as sentient beings one thing for sure: as a country, we're rapidly drawing close to a critical carbon crossroads.

At that crossroads will be tough choices.

But rather than being ready and able to be constructive participants in important dialogues to tackle those choices, they're caught in carbon crossfire between the echo chambers. That crossfire is a bewildering and dizzying swirl of headlines, soundbites and tweets, each extolling a particular carbon perspective. Politicians, bureaucrats, policy wonks, economists, industry leaders and ENGOs are doing what they do best: talking to (and shouting at) each other around — not through or to — ordinary Canadians. At that crossroads, as a country, we have two reasonably clear choices: we can choose the path clearly marked "Carbon Coherence" or we can select its alternative: "Carbon

Conflict” — which is pretty much simply an extension of the road we’re currently travelling.

The Carbon Coherence option presupposes a commitment by all stakeholders to be more inclusive via an innovative set of discursive processes that have at their core key principles that are intolerant to exclusion of anyone with a reasoned opinion. It also presupposes that Canadians commit as individuals and as members of a civil society to a learning philosophy.

The Carbon Conflict choice is merely an extension of current state — but an extension which promises a future exponentially more divisive than our contemporary status. While it’s lamentable that as carbon stakeholders we’re losing teachable moments for all Canadians right now, what is particularly egregious about our behaviours to date is our failure to cast out generationally and think about next-gen carbon conversations. Put another way, in 2030 to pick a date, how do we want such dialogue to be? As polarizing and non-productive as it is now? Or conducted in such a fashion that as a civil society we’re more constructively shaping policy, taxation and regulation in a way that the Canadian economy remains as robust driven by new energy systems mixes and it was by previous energy drivers.

Constructive conversations, to be sure, are not always amicable or collegial. Indeed, they can be tough and fraught with tension. But dialectically, they’re driven by the spirit of reaching a common truth. At the risk of sounding preachy, that’s how you achieve consensus — not compromise euphemistically masquerading as consensus.

Canadians need to be assured they will somehow be accorded their carbon voices in the near-term, in a way that’s more engaging, and more inclusive, than just showing up at the ballot box once every four years.

That’s just putting a tick against an echo chamber box.

From the Thursday Files:

In hindsight, I've almost always been wrong when I haven't listened to myself.
- Daniel Day-Lewis