

A prevailing question is bouncing around the country: Should Canadians trust the energy sector?

It preoccupies a fair number of people, including academics and politicians. Many are intent on doing good by creating new ways of thinking through some of the country's complex energy challenges.

Creating trust is a cornerstone of this thinking. But trust must travel along a two-way street.

So why is no one asking the obvious corollary question: Should the energy sector trust Canadians?

The question is more than simply rhetorical. After all, trust doesn't travel well along the bumpy highway of hypocrisy. It seems increasingly obvious that most Canadians want to have their energy cake and burn it, too. Many Canadians just don't seem to want to do the intellectual heavy lifting when it comes to the tough conversations and choices that define energy production, transportation and consumption.

The complexity of our energy dynamic is daunting. In the complicated confluence of the fossil fuel sector's maturing and the rise of new alternatives, we have done a terrible job of sorting things out.

Energy suppliers exist because energy consumers exist. And yet people decry basic market-driven realities in which production and consumption move in lockstep.

Now, the average Canadian would be puzzled by the assertion they don't deserve the trust of the people and companies producing the energy that lubricates the cogs and gears of their lives.

After all, people pay for gasoline, airline tickets and home heating bills, and daily buy multitudes of products created from refined petroleum.

So what more do energy companies want?

To be trusted the same way people trust other sectors and companies that supply other staples of their lives, such as education and health care.

That doesn't mean people should stop voicing concerns or pushing for improved environmental performance. It does mean they should be more knowledgeable about what's already being done and pushing from that perspective.

Perhaps then the voices will take on a different, more constructive, tenor.

But the reality is that the everyday Canadian is energy apathetic and the consequence is problematic.

Many people, through ignorance and complacency, have had their perspectives hijacked by the special interest and activist voices that oppose all things energy. Many ordinary citizens have become the unintentional puppets of small interest groups opposing energy development and the processes by which society makes energy policy and regulation.

These groups have co-opted the Canadian unconsciousness and put their voice to it. Unfortunately, it may not be what Canadians would say should they reflect on their role as energy consumers.

But it's why their trustworthiness is suspect.

They spend so little time in reflection that the energy sector can't really know what's on

their customers' minds.

Surveys tell us the majority don't actively oppose energy development. But what surveys don't reveal is what Canadians actually know about energy's tough choices.

Canadians think so little about their role in the energy systems matrix that they may actually come to accept the views of the strident opposition as their own opinion on why the energy sector needs to shut down.

Trust is slippery and elusive. It's often contingent and contextual, and must be consistently earned in a relationship of give and take.

Do Canadians have a right to demand energy producers do better and more to earn their trust? Absolutely. And most energy sector folks would agree they haven't done the best job in earning that trust.

Conversely, energy producers and transporters have the right to ask their customers to think about their consumption needs and behaviours — and the sometimes difficult decisions required to evolve our energy systems. In other words, to think their own thoughts and put voice to them.

But will Canadians step up? It would be nice to think they will and bring some balance to our energy dialogues. Perhaps then we can begin working on something that resembles mutual trust.

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*If you are going through hell, keep going.*

**Winston Churchill**