

CAGS/SSHRC 2015: Imagining Canada's Future

University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) Participants:

Rob Angove (MA graduate and Facilitator) (250) 960-5723
Dr. Annie Booth (UNBC Faculty and Keynote Speaker) (250) 960-6649
Cherise Chrispen (Graduate Student) (306) 425-9892
Carolyn Emon (Graduate Student) (250) 964-0393
Marlina Hawes (Prospective MA student and Notetaker) (250-960-5007
Jeffrey Kormos (Graduate Student) (250) 981-6664
Dr. Zoë Meletis (Moderator) (250) 960-5920
Alycia Mutual (Graduate Student) (778) 890-0401
Kirk Walker (Graduate Student) (778) 349-5475

UNBC's roundtable discussion included a keynote presentation and discussion. The event was captured on video; pictures were also taken. All participants completed SSHRC's authorization form.

Question: What effects will the quest for energy and natural resources have on our society and our position on the world stage?

Dr. Booth's keynote address made it clear that the question above is enormous and that it is something she has continued to ponder over the years. She chose to start by looking at just what people really think about Canada. Americans, she says, are developing a mixed opinion given the "dirty oil" issue and what Canada's oil means to the US marketplace. Her Google search about the world's view of Canada results in countless videos about maple syrup, hockey, the belief that everyone rides horses and that we are generally very nice people. This is not entirely surprising given that it has traditionally been a popular choice for immigrants, who see Canada as safe, friendly, and welcoming. Notions of greenness and niceness, openness and tolerance helped to make Canada the popular choice that it was and still is for some.

But how does Canada view itself? Dr. Booth characterizes our own view as being somewhat "bipolar." It sees itself in the league of nations as a first world, developed country: sophisticated, cultured, and economically stable. Canadians tend to hold that view very tightly. That is, we see ourselves as a distinct, developed, first world society based upon that sense of self. As she suggests:

We find ourselves in the hallways with Americans and British and Germans, as equals. But if you actually look at how Canada operates, particularly economically, Canada is not a developed country. Canada, in spite of all its initiatives, operates as a developing country, a third world country if you will, in that so much of what builds Canada is natural resource extraction and raw, or primarily raw, export of those resources, and that, economically, is how most economists would actually characterize smaller countries whose only value lies in the extraction and export of resources.

So, Canada sees itself differently than what the reality actually is. In reality, we are a "hewer of wood and a drawer of water" – yet filthy rich when it comes to our natural resources. Ironically, and despite those resources, we lack effective regulations to deal with and properly manage them. The US, by contrast, lacks resources but has many regulations.

Dr. Booth's perspectives certainly resonated with the participants, and the questions about Canada's views of itself, in addition to the traditional perspectives other countries have of Canada, led directly to the next part of her presentation. This country, she insists, is built upon the royalties of natural resource extraction. A look at our provincial and federal budgets, which are often "based" or "built" upon the extraction of natural resources, provides direct evidence of this. In many cases, our resources are leased out to others. Company headquarters are often located elsewhere, in other countries, so Canadians do not entirely benefit, or at least are not always the main beneficiaries of Canadian natural resource extraction. So what are the perceived benefits? Well, in Christy Clark's view, for example, natural resource extraction and what economic benefits are derived from it, is what underwrites our surgeries after heart attacks. And to that end, she is correct. What she failed to mention, however, is that the costs of resource extraction are borne by all Canadians. And it is always a risk to put all of our eggs into one basket as Canada so often has. Take, for example, liquefied natural gas in BC and, perhaps most prominently, the case of oil extraction in Alberta. Canada has no backup plan; there are currently no, or few, alternative industries. So while many Canadians' views of Canada – as a first world country in the mold of Germany, France, the US, and the UK – are quite different from the reality – as a third world country with first world aspirations – we nevertheless continue to hold this view over all others. In so doing, Canada runs a very real risk of giving up those first world aspirations and dreams given that, underneath it all, its reliance upon natural resources is simply too focused, too one-dimensional, and far too risky.

How, then, can Canada continue to perpetuate the façade of prominence on the world stage while retaining an almost complete economic reliance upon resources? Do we have a longer view when it comes to natural resources and what is that longer view? We do not, but we need to. With respect to health care, for example, not all benefits are equal. Chetwynd, a community in northern BC with the biggest fracking site in the world, has no doctors. Its residents must go to Vancouver. How is this possible in the face of ostensible riches? The reality is that the extraction of resources leaves massive scars (see: Mount Polley Mine disaster) and the costs and benefits of resource extraction remain very far apart. Northern BC residents suffer from poorer health (long- and short-term) and higher morbidity rates than those who live in the lower mainland, yet geographically they are closest to the very natural resources that ostensibly provide riches. Industries get away with this because of the fact that jobs in said industries help pay for children's education. Again, Dr. Booth sees this as a misconception, for in spite of the perceived wealth of our country, one in five children in Canada goes to bed hungry. "How," she asks, "does this happen in a country as wealthy as ours?" The discrepancy between rich and poor, between costs and benefits, and in particular between beneficiaries and "sufferers" of and from resource extraction is even more alarming when one considers Canada's aboriginal population and First Nations communities. In literally any demographic or ranking system, they rank dead last in Canada in terms of general health, early mortality, teenage pregnancy, loss of enjoyment and life owing to disease, AND, importantly, loss of culture. Again, among the reasons for these massive inequities is the overreliance on natural resource extraction.

Dr. Booth's presentation shifted a little, toward climate change and its impact on the situation – because it will have an impact on natural resources, extraction, and the continued quest for energy in the near and distant future. Canada is in many respects actually ideally situated and will, initially at least, benefit from climate change. Our resource extraction, however, nevertheless has an impact, both here in Canada and in those countries that export our resources. Resource extraction contributes to climate change. It just does, and one of the early examples was in the US, with Hurricane Katrina. So where, Dr. Booth asks, do we go from here? She states:

And so we have these massive inequities within our own country, within the world, as a result of the government's overreliance on a single type of economic development, and the question still remains: What will happen to Canada, long after the current politicians are gone, retired to the south of France (until the sea rises), when all those natural resources are extracted, exported, and processed? What remains for Canadians when the coal is gone, when the oil is gone, when the natural gas is gone, when the diamonds are mined, when the land is poisoned and the wildlife is extirpated? What remains? That's beyond the mindset of most politicians because most politicians think in terms of the next election cycle, five to ten years. The contamination already exists, but we are already at peak oil, peak natural gas, and long past peak agricultural production. What is going to fill that massive gap? Where is the next basket into which we stick our eggs when those resources run dry? Because the only thing we can say for certain is that they will run dry. And there, I think, are some of the really interesting questions. How else can Canada position itself in the world – not just as a hewer of wood and drawer of water, fracker of natural gas, but as a creator of sustainable technologies, of more innovative use of resources that are sustainable, of more innovative ways of thinking about not just human capital, but also natural capital, which can underpin a society that may then genuinely claim to be a first world country and perhaps leader in some of these ideas and technologies.

This summary led particularly well to the questions that participants then addressed:

What is Canada's long-term vision of itself? What else does Canada have as a vision? In this, we have to consider the vision of the people – *all* people – because we cannot rely solely upon the vision of politicians. Can Canada remake itself as a different kind of economic creature? Can we diversify? If so, how do we do this in the face of immediate needs and with the current cost-benefit misconceptions? It will, as Dr. Booth suggests, be a rocky road given that so much of Canada's employment is directly related to natural resource extraction. It is the in-between period that causes and will continue to cause issues, but researchers can and should help Canada become a driver of the world beyond just the extraction of natural resources. One of the main evolutionary difficulties is surely to be getting from A to Z while continuing to maintain our current expectations and definitions of ourselves. This project and any and all research and development deriving from this and similar ventures, from researchers – not just the scientists so often tasked with technological development, but particularly those researchers with the vision of what Canada can and ought to become – needs to be one of the drivers of change in the short and long term.

The conversation in response to Dr. Booth's presentation and the questions she raised was neither difficult to initiate nor long in starting. Two students immediately talked about the misconceptions about Canada, and Canadians' preconceived and often misguided notions about itself. Cherise Chrispen, a UNBC graduate student in the Master of Arts in Natural Resources and Environmental Studies program, talked about her recent travels to Turkey, and that conversations with residents there and with a roommate from Ghana discussed notions of health – and in particular, notions that women in Canada do not die from childcare. Jeff Kormos, another participant studying for his MA in Political Science, spoke about Canada's self-identification, and the fact that Canadians DO see themselves as rich, as first world, whereas the reality may well be very different. Dr. Zoe Meletis followed up on this by referring to the Scotiabank commercial: "You're richer than you think you are." She both contrasts and parallels it with Canada in that we are actually poorer than we think. But how to re-envision the "enshrined" given that so much is mired in legal documents? Governmentally, should there be a clamp-

down on corporate riches? Do we tax water extraction (e.g. bottled water)? Maybe, but it is really the sense of complacency and apathy that needs to be overcome. We do not have to be this poor, and perhaps one of the best places for researchers and others to begin is to show exactly how poor we are, and why. No economist would advise someone to sell his/her assets before they're at peak price, but that is exactly what Canada has been doing and continues to do, and Dr. Meletis is excited at the prospect of students such as everyone in attendance examining this very issue.

Overwhelmingly, participants talked about the need for change, and this is something that seems to be generally recognized: Things simply cannot go on this way forever. As Alycia Mutual, another participant in the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies program stated, while it is hoped that as older CEOs and other executives retire, and as those in positions of power become younger (and really belong to a newer generation), this will not on its own bring about change. One of the participants brought about the example of her brother-in-law, a microbiologist who started his own company cleaning up mine sites. While he undoubtedly retains his environmental consciousness, since selling his business and becoming a young corporate executive at a major oil company, his values have changed to the extent that he works for a company with a different "end goal" than he had as a business only. Moreover, they changed with family, which became his priority economically. Broadly, everyone in attendance agreed that structural changes and, importantly, changes in the belief systems, values and morals, and business models of impactful corporations is going to have to supplement and help shape individual changes. This is not to discount individual change entirely, as children are changing social attitudes from the ground up. They can be a driver for change – for example, convincing parents to recycle – and teachers and others can help facilitate changes on a small scale, but they clearly do not have the money or influence to effect change the way big businesses can and have to. And that is where students and established researchers come in. Kirk Walker, another MA Interdisciplinary Studies student and participant suggests that the "frame" is what is important. We need to change the messages that frame what we think is important and constantly be aware of and more effectively utilize language. We need to indoctrinate a different belief system, and it's difficult. It is one thing to teach children about environmental responsibility, but they are growing up in "this" environment and at this point look to be facing the same issues, the same ethical and moral dilemmas that we currently face, when they get older. There are also conflicting demands on what is environmentally sound. Children may be taught to recycle, to use less paper, to use less plastic, but in using smart phones they are contributing to energy and environmental waste and impact. They're also taught about oil and gas and may well see that something needs to be done, but they cannot be told that to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions we should all stop driving cars and trucks. It is, for one, unrealistic, and secondly, large changes are simply overwhelming. We need to know the end result in order to change behaviours, and we are not there yet.

What we do know is that, on the surface, money buys products and products and consumption are supposed to make us happy. It is therefore ironic that this is yet another case of perceptions and beliefs being very different from reality. In a study, Canada did not score very well in the happiness index. Canadians scored worst when it comes to taking vacation time, and although comparatively speaking we own lots of "stuff," we spend the vast majority of our time working and no time enjoying the very things we have worked so hard to own and which were intended to provide enjoyment. If government, policy, employment, and income were intended to make Canadians happy, such efforts are abject failures.

As participants stated, one of the things we need to do is look elsewhere and at different models. Researchers will play a major role in this by travelling to countries, talking to companies and executives – influential voices elsewhere and whose voices may help carry weight here – and by experimenting

with different technologies and, particularly for humanities and social sciences researchers, examining what has already been tried; at what has been successful and what has failed. This is one of the best ways to investigate new ways to shape Canada, its economic development, and help reposition it on the world stage. Unfortunately, to this point we have often been “late to the party” in that other countries seem willing to try things – new technologies, new ideas, new ways of exploring the ties between energy, the environment, and the economy – and, in particular, working to better “harmonize” the relationship between environmental and energy needs and responsibilities with economic urgencies. This requires a vision and brought the issue back to Canadians: What do we want to be? Do we want to remain a former colonial entity? Are we content with being half-American? Where is our sense of self? It is an important vision to have and one that, as Jeff Kormos stated, seems to have brought us to a real crisis of conscience and consciousness. On one hand, we understand that we have the opportunity to be world leaders and innovators, while on the other we really do not appear to know where to begin. This is, as another participant stated, made all the more confusing because the message from governments is that we already are a leader. But a leader of what? Who exactly do governments, provincial and federal, think we are? While we have historically relied upon preconceived notions of Canadians as a “nice” people, “niceness” has really timed out as an identity. There is a clock on our reputation and it is already clear that we are not as nice as we think. Canada has not been a leader when it comes to signing onto progressive agreements that would help to prevent further climate change and protect aboriginal rights. That we fail to invest in more progressive relations with our First Nations peoples is in so many ways difficult to understand.

Participants clearly believe that Canada has a lot to offer the world, but how we tap into that potential is really the question that underlies all questions of a future identity. What can we do to benefit the world and help Canada serve as a role model? Also clear, therefore, is participants’ belief that we need to work on fixing things internally before we are ever going to create a more succinct international definition of Canada and Canadian identity internationally. This is a critical piece because of the advantages Canadians have given the wealth of natural resources at our disposal and the potential for true, resource- and consumption-responsible economic development.

Is what is inhibiting change a lack of governmental leadership? As Cherise Chrispen suggests, one of the flaws of our democracy is that there is an election every four years, making it difficult to implement a long-term plan or vision. It is the system we have, however, and so it is incumbent upon Canadians to better monitor the people in power. Citizens rely upon governments to do their jobs well, but this does not always happen, and Canadians need to take better and more collective ownership in order to keep governments in check. What can be done about apathy and the failure to properly monitor those in power? For one, we need to better understand apathy, particularly within the context of generational change. It is somewhat odd, and in many ways striking, that many of the millennials who are in favour of actions and innovations to help protect our environment are the same people who are apathetic when it comes to voting. This is another area for students and researchers to explore: What are millennials with environmental values contributing and how can they contribute more? It is simply not possible to model a sustainable lifestyle with a version that is not shared. That is, a person can have a lifestyle that includes car-pooling, recycling, and the like, but when all around them people in power are making decisions that do not support those values, they need to vote in order to create a like-minded movement that has a real chance to effect responsible change. Fundamentally, it may simply be the perception that, in the north, where political representation is particularly sparse, voting does not make a real difference given that the big decisions are made in larger urban centres largely removed from those areas where the environmental impact is greatest (and yet, ironically, where economic development is often largest with respect to industrial scale.

Universities and metropolitan areas need, therefore, to be among the real drivers of change. Often, this is inhibited by other dilemmas: faculty working in silos (i.e. business, environmental studies, engineering), a narrow reward system for faculty among whose training is to focus on and facilitate new ideas and technologies. There is perhaps an opportunity for granting agencies and universities to work together and become more interdisciplinary to help bridge the gap between environmental responsibility and economic development, but faculty and program reviews unfortunately focus on disciplines, not interdisciplinarity. Tenure reviews are in that sense a real barrier to change and to innovation. It is simply difficult to get started when the demand and rewards are not there. Ultimately, any real change may have to be driven by students, who need to tell institutions and governments that they want such a change.

So often, faculty ideas to create innovative courses and degrees that would perhaps serve as new models are stopped before they start. Interdisciplinarity is a hurdle and many faculty do not “check that box” in their funding proposals because even though it might ultimately serve to help innovation, such projects tend not to be funded in Canada. This was contrasted with the US model, which, it was stated, often facilitates interdisciplinarity. Proposals that bring in different values and skills are often funded and result in the types of change that could help Canada when it comes to the quest for energy and natural resources. A question that remains unanswered is whether or not we might be better served by models that encourage co-authored Master’s and Doctoral theses/projects/dissertations. Political ecology, cultural studies and complexities, the history of medicine: These are examples of interdisciplinary work that has finally gained at least some acceptance in Canadian universities.

Another issue brought up is the research and practice gap. Most Canadian universities and their structures do not allow students to gain practical experience. Jeff Kormos sees real value in tying theoretical knowledge with practice. Co-op programs are, however, costly, and the payoff is difficult to measure. Although faculty see students who have gone through this type of experiential learning as some of their very best, there seems to be reluctance – in governments at least – to hire experienced people who also have a verifiable research background (particularly those with a PhD). Why, asks Marlina Hawes, a prospective Master’s student, cannot more non-governmental internships be developed so as to create a real ground-up system? On the surface, there seem to be so many possible benefits to different learning models, many of which would undoubtedly serve to help Canada. We are seeing more acceptability when it comes to things that used to be referred to as fringe methodologies such as critical theory and environmental research (for example, in his research, Kirk Walker focuses on photo voice as methodology, on visuals and film production), but as Dr. Meletis states, these still have to be defended so much as to make them difficult to undertake. Universities do now seem to fit better with business, but why must we focus solely on business? There is the Mitacs model, and it certainly has its benefits, but people still need to legitimize projects and it seems as though there is still nothing that allows work between non-business subjects.

The answer may be that innovation is still seen as something that needs to be profitable. While participants unanimously accept the fact that we can profit from the restructuring of researchers and researchers in different fields working more closely together – in the context of this discussion, to help address the question of what effects the quest for energy and natural resources have on our society and our position on the world stage – this remains difficult to impart in practice. We need, as Dr. Booth insists, to reconceptualise education in order to allow researchers to help play a more effectual, important role in the development and growth of Canada and to help re-define us as a nation and allow

Canada to become a leader of positive change, environmentally and economically. Dr. Meletis agreed and talked about the idea of major projects

As a corollary to this discussion, Carolyn Emon, a participant working on her MA in Interdisciplinary Studies degree, brought up the idea of the development of an invitational lecture series allowing faculty to hold one lecture that is open to everybody to help open up discussions between students and researchers across disciplines. The hope is that this might be brought up in the near future.

Dr. Meletis also brought up a question that could not be more fully addressed in this discussion: How can Canadian natural resources be developed in such a way as to respect aboriginal rights and benefit First Nations, Inuit and Metis communities? Would it not be nice as a country to decide that we are going to enshrine seven generations as something that must be discussed for every proposed project?

Participants were asked if this project was helpful, and they all agreed that it was. As Dr. Booth stated in her opening remarks, the question that was asked was broad and certainly could not be fully addressed in this forum and has in fact long been an issue she has thought about as a researcher and faculty member. In many ways, as many questions were brought up as possible answers, but what was clear is that Canada has a great opportunity to become and remain a global leader when it comes to environmental research and development. There is a lot of work to do, and one of the keys is that Canada has to define its own role. What do Canadians want that role to be? How do we see ourselves, both internally and internationally? How do we want others to see us? How will students and researchers help lead change, create, and innovate? To what extent can universities and funding agencies help facilitate change and, importantly, make it easier for ideas to be discussed, published, and implemented? How can we make governments and industries responsible for their actions? And ultimately, how can we make change profitable environmentally and economically?