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CAROLAN: Money, ecology trouble political waters

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"Perhaps humanity will do the right thing, but only after it has exhausted all other possibilities."

-Winston Churchill

It's early spring and the crocuses are up. Predictably in this mettlesome Year of the Horse, already political waters are troubled.

In a surprise move, both North Vancouver municipalities are talking warily about the implications of municipal "restructuring." That's amalgamation in clear speech. The financial implications are gigantic and they're critically far apart here. Apart from two mayors and a dozen councillors, most of whom bluff and worry about losing their jobs, there are two self-interested bureaucracies that'll fight tooth and nail to sabotage anything that might lead toward what taxpayers will sensibly regard as downsizing.

As Chancellor Bismarck said, there are two things the average citizen should never know: how sausage is made, and how government really works. Still, as veteran North Vancouver City Coun. Don Bell says, "It never hurts to do an update."

And why not? It doesn't snow much on the North Shore, but you have to shovel your way through heaps of local politicians. In the half hour it takes to drive from Deep Cove through the two North Vancoovers, West Vancouver, with a wave to Bowen Island en route to Lions Bay, we've got five mayors and 28 councillors - serving fewer than 200,000 people. That's as wacky as in the Balkans or China. We know how efficient they are.

Under the provincial Community Charter there can be no forced amalgamation of municipalities. It's worth noting, however, that in 1995 folks in Abbotsford and Matsqui felt the urge to merge after a referendum. That created the City of Abbotsford, now B.C.'s fifth largest. In a crazy year anything can happen.

How crazy? Well, the city and district, as well as West Vancouver have all applied for intervener status at hearings into the Kinder Morgan pipeline expansion. So there's agreement on some things - but only with the public mood in clear opposition to the location of the expanded Trans Mountain terminus at Burrard Inlet's Westridge marine site.

It's good to see all three mayors and councils finally get religion on this brief. Say it out loud: it's the wrong location. The existing site dates back to 1956 when Elvis had his first hit - practically a previous incarnation. Since then, everything has changed utterly.

Meanwhile, Ottawa's rejection for the second time of the Taseko Lake's New Prosperity open-pit copper mine near Williams Lake has some of B.C.'s Chamber of Commerce types and B.C. Liberals tearing their hair out. This decision follows a comprehensive assessment by the federal Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency, but already Premier Christy Clark is crying the blues, despite the respected scientific advisory panel's recommendation. Is this deal really over? Alas, the Conservatives say they're willing to devolve control over such decisions to the provinces. If the dodgy Enbridge northern gateway can get approval subject to more than 200 mainly environmental conditions, you wonder how awful a proposal would be to suffer rejection by our Madam Premier.

Enbridge lucked out with a softy from the environmental assessment, partly explaining those costly advertisements we're hearing ad nauseam telling us what a great deal it's supposed to be. The 71 per cent foreign ownership of Alberta's oil sands operations couldn't agree with them more.

Now there's talk of opening up new coal mines in the Comox Valley north of Nanaimo. It's the dirtiest of fossil fuels, and even China is attempting to cut back on its use of coal-fired energy. But with the meltdown of Japan's Fukushima nuclear plant - a story that's far from over - industrialized nations in Asia and Europe are reassessing coal as fuel. In the U.S., where coal is rapidly being replaced by cleaner-burning natural gas, declining coal demand has received a shot in the arm as Germany and other nations are suddenly buying up U.S. production as a hedge against reliance on nuclear power. Coal is back, at least temporarily, and Vancouver Island's dormant coal sector is getting a fresh look.

In B.C., the increasing authoritarian nature of Prime Minister Harper's polarizing petro-politics has become disturbing to swing voters who decided to give him a chance with a majority. Harper's belief that the problems we create by over-producing fossil fuels in Canada can be rectified by technological solutions is looking suspect. Ask the folks living in low-lying coastal areas around the Pacific. I note this since the World Bank is funding a \$3 billion study into sea-level change.

Despite our long B.C. coastline we don't hear much about this subject. You do in the South Pacific world - Australia, New Zealand and a score of small island nations, along with the Indo-Pacific region's Sri Lanka, the Maldives and much larger countries like

Bangladesh, Pakistan and India's south. Scientists are predicting a 35-year window before large-scale human migration issues commence in regions likeliest to be affected.

Stamp collectors will recognize that most of these states threatened by rising sea-levels are British Commonwealth members. They'll expect to emigrate to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Britain. Are we prepared for that degree of impact? It's one of the sleeper issues that are part of the climate change situation.

It was instructive therefore to meet federal Liberal environmental critic and former party leader Stephane Dion 10 days ago during his B.C. visit.

I went to hear him speak to university students, a natural environment for the NDP, right? Consider: a visit by a high-ranking Liberal MP like Dion to an audience the other guys have owned for decades. It tells you that thinking has changed at the top among Justin Trudeau's Liberals.

They're showing street smarts, gearing up to take on the NDP in a generational campaign that won't fully kick in until these students have left school and become fulltime workers and potential Liberal voters.

Mark it up to Obama's Democrats from the U.S. who've been advising the Liberals on defeating the Conservatives in October 2015.

North Shore Liberals still like Dion. He wasn't national leadership material, yet no one doubts his integrity and his Green Shift program in 2008 was innovative. I asked him about the Liberals' position on Western Canada's energy debate.

"The world is changing, but our way of discussing it is not," he said. "It's sad to see so many people investing so much hope resisting the pipelines. What we need is a climate change policy - there are ways to develop that are sustainable.

"My Green Shift plan put a price on carbon, on pollution. (Today) the National Energy Board is linked very closely to the producers, more than the scientists.

"The issue is not a pipeline, yes or no. It's to decrease our dependency on oil. (But) if we're using the fossil fuels, we need to transport it. ... My view is that you don't do it if the environmental assessment says it's not safe. If the communities are not on board, you don't do it."

That's a softer, pragmatic version of the current situation, but still not what North Shore pipeline critics expect to hear from federal Liberals seeking their vote. We'll see what Justin Trudeau tweets next.

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