

THE FREE PRESS OPINION

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"The theory of a free press is that the truth will emerge from free reporting and free discussion." Walter Lippman

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Talking about black gold

What a difference an election makes. An actual adult discussion about offshore oil and gas drilling may now be possible in B.C. The traditional response of 1960s socialists in politics and media to this subject is the same hysteria that always greets the suggestion of water exports, or mining: Maude Barlowe, David Suzuki, CBC television and the Glen Clark Chair of Groundless Scare Campaigns at SFU rise up as one to screech that British Columbia is just too precious for industries that are practiced all over the world.

That's not to say offshore drilling in B.C. is a good idea. While much more placid than the North Atlantic, the West Coast has its own unique hazards, not the least of which is an earthquake fault that shook the islands of Haida Gwaii just a few weeks ago.

It is to say that the smug "environmentalist" monopoly on this sort of discussion needs to end. In his 1994 book *Degrees of Disaster*, science writer Jeff Wheelwright analyzed the Exxon Valdez cleanup in Alaska, and what he found raises more concern about the distortion of science by politics and media than it does about the oil industry.

Spill investigation was financed and interpreted to fit pre-conceived conclusions and serve political or financial ends. While the environment of Prince William Sound demonstrated an astounding ability to bounce back from the massive oil spill in 1989, as it has worse disasters such as catastrophic earthquakes, financial and public relations considerations guided the so-called "cleanup". Even the sexy victims of Exxon Valdez like the bald eagle were disturbed more by armies of beach cleaners and aircraft than they were by eating contaminated fish.

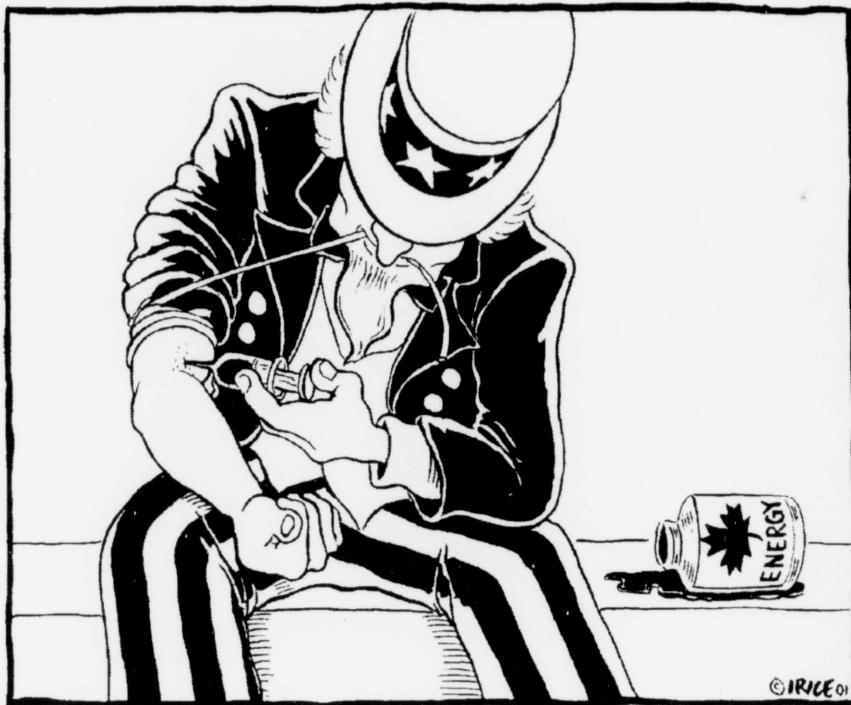
When Northern Development Commissioner John Backhouse delivers his report to the new government it will likely contain a detailed guide to holding public meetings on the subject. And while the Backhouse report is unlikely to urge oil and gas exploration, the report is good a first step towards having a discussion based on logic and not just emotion.

Enviro-nonsense has distorted B.C. forest and mining policy for a decade. Let's try to do better with oil and gas.

Cabinet challenges

Gordon Campbell has unveiled his team to lead British Columbia into what he proclaims to be a "new era" and there were a few surprises. Mike de Jong being named forests minister tops the list, but so does handing over the duties of deputy premier and education to Christy Clark, who is soon to become a mother. And the appointment of Geoff Plant as a attorney-general surprises no one, though also making him the pointman for treaty negotiations gives Mr. Plant a rather full plate. Shirley Bond will represent the Prince George area at the cabinet table as advanced education minister, which is likely a good spot for her — she is familiar with education issues but also has time to get used to the rough and tumble world of B.C. politics.

But the biggest challenge will be, as Mr. Campbell put it, getting British Columbians to trust their government. Good luck.



As the debate over MP's pay heats up, Cam McAlpine argues our federal leaders deserve the money they get.

Only masochists need apply

The federal government has been trying to sell this idea of a 20 per cent wage hike for MPs on the principle that, in order to attract the best and brightest to the job, we must be willing to pay. And that, apparently, means salaries equivalent to what these so-called best and brightest would make in the private sector.

That argument might wash for paying senior bureaucrats a good wage. They, after all, are not there on principle. They're just doing a job, and not a very nice one at that.

The argument is not quite so strong when justifying a pay raise for politicians, for two reasons.

First of all, it assumes that the "best and the brightest" consists only of people earning over \$100,000 a year right now, which is patently false. There are plenty of people

out there making nowhere near \$100,000 who are better and brighter than the narrow field of corporate candidates and lawyers suggested by this figure.

Secondly, and most importantly, it assumes that people will enter politics for the money. Which, in my limited experience, couldn't be further from the truth. Who, in God's name, would be insane enough to become a politician for the money?

No, it's high ideals that send people to Ottawa, not money. (What happens to those ideals after they get there is anyone's guess, of course.)

Still, I think federal MPs deserve a raise. Most of the griping, I would suggest, has more to do with jealousy than with any logical reasoning.

But if you think you deserve the money, then go for it. Spend the next few years working seven days a week, most of it away from your

home and family, most of it for little reward or recognition. And then at the end of the first few years do it all over again.

Oh, I know truck drivers and equipment salesmen and loggers and lots of other people have similar hours of work for a lot lower rates of pay.

But the fact is that they don't have to survive an employment evaluation every few years conducted by a panel of judges a few thousand strong, most of whom have little if any idea what they actually do. They don't have to tolerate the media having almost full access to their private and public affairs, or be verbally abused and publicly ridiculed for making a mistake.

These are the realities that politicians face every day. They hold a job that far more people think they personally would be better at than are willing to prove it.

If you ask me, we can't pay them enough.

CAM MCALPINE'S COLUMN
APPEARS EVERY THURSDAY.



Cam
McAlpine

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