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## Lamphier: Ecofiscal commission comes to Edmonton Policy group focuses on carbon pricing

BY GARY LAMPHIER, EDMONTON JOURNAL | MARCH 9, 2015

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Andrew Leach is a noted energy and environmental economist at the University of Alberta's School of Business.

Photograph by: Ed Kaiser , Ed Kaiser

EDMONTON - If Alberta's oilsands stopped producing bitumen tomorrow, the planet would barely notice. The drop in global carbon emissions would be tiny.

Canada accounts for less than two per cent of man-made greenhouse gas emissions, and the oilsands generate about a tenth of that. Ergo, Alberta's key industry is a bit player in worldwide terms.

Of course, that hasn't stopped green activists from demonizing the "tar sands" or President Barack Obama from playing to his base by delaying approval of the Keystone XL pipeline.

That's politics, where spin and tactics often trump sound economic or environmental policy — even if it means thumbing your nose at your key

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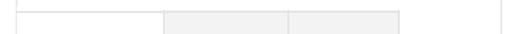
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trading partner, as Warren Buffett puts it.

It's also clear that while most Canadians profess support for a carbon tax — or “putting a price on carbon,” in the current lingo — they'd like someone else to pay for it, as a recent Nanos poll shows. Preferably the energy industry, which means Alberta.

No wonder talk of carbon pricing makes some Albertans (including yours truly) twitchy, especially at a time when the province's key industry is struggling. It feels like just an excuse for a tax grab.

After all, we've seen this movie before. Remember former Liberal leader Stéphane Dion's ill-fated Green Shift plan? It would have hammered oil-rich provinces like Alberta, while funnelling billions of tax dollars to special interest groups elsewhere.

Dion claimed it was “revenue neutral,” but it was anything but. More to the point, it would have done zilch for the environment.

Despite this, some policy wonks and politicians continue to talk about the need to impose a price on carbon. Canada's Ecofiscal Commission, launched last November, is among the leading advocates.

The privately funded group is chaired by respected McGill economics professor Chris Ragan and backed by a high-powered advisory board featuring former Liberal prime minister Paul Martin; Suncor CEO Steve Williams; former federal opposition leader Preston Manning; and ex-Quebec premier Jean Charest, among others.

On Wednesday the commission arrives in Edmonton, where it and the Canada West Foundation will host a panel discussion titled *Aligning Aspirations: An Ecofiscal Approach to the GHG Challenge*.

Forget the nerdspeak. It's sure to be a provocative discussion, now that Alberta Premier Jim Prentice and even Prime Minister Stephen Harper have begun musing about a coordinated North American approach to dealing with climate change.

Speakers will include Steve MacDonald, chief adviser to Prentice on energy and climate change issues; Andrew Leach, a noted energy and environmental economist at the University of Alberta's School of Business; and Leon Zupan, chief operating officer at Enbridge's Liquids Pipelines division.

Ragan is a smart, thoughtful, articulate guy. So is Leach. Both offer compelling reasons why they believe Canada — or the provinces — must consider putting a price on carbon.

“I think we're way past time for it,” says Leach. “If we believe the economy we have only exists because we can pollute without paying for it, that's a real problem.”

He concedes that no Canadian policy will have much of an impact on global emissions, and that some carbon tax proponents indulge in “magic” thinking by exaggerating its likely impact. But he says that's no excuse for inaction.

“The most risky climate change policy outcome for Canada would be to allow other people to impose a policy on us, and Keystone XL is an

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example of that," he says.

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