



BLUE STORM: THE RISE AND FALL OF JASON KENNEY

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Just *Our* Facts: The Energy War Room's Adventures in Branded Content

Brad Clark

Introduction

Much was said about the United Conservative Party's (UCP) proposed "Energy War Room" in advance of its actual launch, but—with the benefit of hindsight—its origins and true purpose were best summed up in a news release, quoting Energy Minister Sonya Savage:

Thanks in a large part to the research of Vivian Krause, we know that the foreign-funded "Tar Sands" campaign has links to bills C-69 and C-48 [the modernization of the National Energy Board and Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency Act, and the Oil Tanker Moratorium Act], which are detrimental to the interests of Alberta's responsible energy sector. Our Energy War Room will be a platform to amplify what has been uncovered by research from Ms. Krause, and other industry stakeholders who have been on the front lines of the effort to combat the misinformation about Alberta.¹

Krause, a writer and researcher, not a journalist, as described by then Premier Jason Kenney, has circulated an argument that US-funded

environmental activism has selectively targeted the Alberta oil patch in an effort to landlock bitumen from the oilsands, all to the benefit of US producers.² The Anti-Energy Campaigns Inquiry was also established to investigate Krause's claims. Her argument has been taken up by politicians and many in Alberta's energy sector looking for someone to blame as pipeline projects have run into opposition at home and abroad. It is the foundation of the UCP's energy policy and fundamental to the "Standing Up for Alberta" campaign slogan from the 2019 election, despite independent reporting that substantially challenges the Krause conspiracy.³ Even the final report by the Anti-Energy Campaigns Inquiry undermined Krause's assertions, with commissioner Steve Allan finding no wrongdoing: "no individual or organization, in my view, has done anything illegal. Indeed, they have exercised their rights of free speech."⁴

However, the UCP government makes no apologies for pushing back hard against dissent, whether it comes from health experts, municipal leaders, or environmentalists. The nascent conservative party endeavoured to defend the oil patch on its own terms by directing public funds (\$30 million annually) to establish what would officially be called the Canadian Energy Centre (CEC), "an 'Energy War Room' to respond in real time to the lies and myths told about Alberta's energy industry through paid, earned, and social media."⁵ Yet since its launch in late 2019, the CEC has become best known for its frequent missteps and belligerent tone, its credibility as the arbiter of lies and myths frequently shredded. Perhaps the deepest cut of all comes from the Anti-Energy Report and Allan who notes the war room has been met with "almost universal criticism" and piled on by assailing its lack of "independence, openness, transparency and accountability."⁶ This chapter traces the CEC's brief but fraught history, and analyzes the content it has produced and disseminated through its website and social media. Its political mandate to fight perceived "misinformation" targets not just "anti-energy" environmental activists, but any person or group who does not share the most optimistic view on the future of fossil fuel. From its outset, the CEC has sought to take on the air of credibility associated with institutions associated with informational rigour, namely journalism and academic research. While its content follows the conventions of news reports or scholarly papers, the analysis here shows that in practice, war-room content is highly selective in the voices

and perspectives it incorporates, narrowly amplifying themes consistent with UCP rhetoric, and attacking, discounting, or excluding legitimate points of view. History has shown that political branding initiatives such as this, which seek to assume an air of authority, are met with derision and struggle to achieve legitimacy.

The First Eighteen Months: A Shaky Start Dogged by Controversies

The UCP campaigned hard on the notion that then Premier Rachel Notley's New Democratic Party (NDP), and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal government, had abandoned Alberta's prosperous energy industry by capitulating to radical socialists and environmentalists (see Graham Thompson's chapter). While federal and provincial environmental standards were tightened, Trudeau's government secured the future of the Trans Mountain (TMX) pipeline expansion by buying it for \$4.5 billion (see Jean-Sébastien Rioux's chapter).

At the same time, Notley was a tireless promoter and defender of Alberta's energy interests. She won the support of oilsands chief executives for her government's climate initiatives; she abandoned Trudeau's carbon tax provisions in the wake of the federal appeal court overturning TMX approval; and she launched a \$31 million nation-wide promotional campaign, "Keep Canada Working," aimed at winning support for TMX, a move which drew condemnation from the Green Party and environmental groups. The advertising blitz consisted of television, radio, print, and online spots making the case that the pipeline project would create jobs and boost the Canadian economy, and specifically targeted opposition from the NDP minority government in British Columbia.⁷ Public opinion polling by Angus Reid at the time showed the campaign had "moved the dial," according to Notley, to the point where 6 in 10 Canadians, and 53 per cent of British Columbians, believed "lack of new oil pipeline capacity is a national crisis."⁸ Her defence of the industry and its workers was as ardent as Jason Kenney's. However, low commodity prices, a shale oil boom in Texas, and newfound energy independence in the United States, left the industry in an extended price slump, and allowed the UCP to masterfully demonize Notley's energy bona fides.

Of course, Notley and the NDP claimed the top spot in the UCP's list of the unholy, those who had seemingly condemned Alberta's once thriving energy sector to a purgatory of climate change responsibility, divestment, and limited access to foreign markets. The UCP would exorcise the Greta Thunbergs, Justin Trudeaus, or HSBC Holdings (one of several European banks declining to finance oilsands projects) of the world by "standing up" to them. The UCP included plans to boycott institutional investors divesting from the Alberta oil patch, noting that "the investment community needs to be made aware that foreign oil regimes have horrible records when it comes to the environment, human rights, labour, the treatment of women, and democratic norms."⁹ They also offered support to "pro-development First Nations" litigating their rights to be consulted on energy projects, as well as companies "willing to challenge the campaign of defamation by anti-Alberta special interests," essentially engaging the courts with what are known as strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP), an unethical (and illegal in some jurisdictions) corporate strategy to silence critics.

The notion of challenging the public discourse critical of resource development was not entirely new to conservative governments in Alberta. When Ed Stelmach was premier, his government set up a website known as "For the Record" which published counter-narratives "usually over media reporting about the oilsands and climate issues."¹⁰ As with the proposed war room, its mandate was to "dispel myths and to provide more 'balance'" to energy discussions, or as Stelmach's press secretary, Tom Olsen, stated at the time, "It's not a forum to argue philosophy and spin . . . It's about factual information."¹¹ That same language, and that same Tom Olsen, would become integral parts of the CEC, eleven years later. It is worth acknowledging that *Calgary Herald* writer Chris Varcoe observed that For the Record "didn't last very long, nor was it particularly effective."¹²

References to journalistic terms such as balance, facts, and spin would also frame much of the language in the development of the CEC in the months after the UCP's election victory. Claudia Cattaneo, a retired, long-time columnist on energy issues for the *Financial Post*, was hired to develop the CEC. However, she did not stay on to lead the initiative as chief executive officer, and that position went to Olsen, another former journalist, who had also run unsuccessfully as a UCP candidate. A news

release on the day of the CEC's launch in December of 2019, reiterated the mandate and operational structure that had been discussed in the media for months. The war room would be comprised of three units working "together to tell Canada's energy story:"

A rapid response unit to issue swift responses to misinformation about Canadian oil and natural gas. A pro-active energy literacy unit that creates original content to elevate the general understanding of Canada's energy sector and help the country take control of its energy story. A data and research unit that centralizes and analyses data targeting investors, researchers, and policy makers.¹³

From the very beginning, the CEC's website and social media have assumed many of the conventions of journalism. Articles on the website have bylines and headlines; editorial copy is supported by photos and infographics; some articles are distinguished as "commentary," a distinction news organizations use to separate fulsome reporting from opinion, columns, and op-eds. However, the veneer of a professional organization committed to informational integrity eroded in short order. In his first piece for the website, Olsen mistakenly called the war room a "crown corporation." Following the journalistic protocol, a "correction" was added to the story, explaining that the CEC is in fact, "a provincial government corporation," an early blow in what would develop into a long list of shots to the war room's credibility. Despite Olsen's assurances that the CEC would provide "a fact-based narrative," the website's terms of use, as pointed out by Postmedia columnist Don Braid, initially included this statement: "We do not warrant the accuracy, completeness or usefulness of this information. Any reliance you place on such information is strictly at your own risk."¹⁴ As Braid observed, "Most big commercial and organization websites publish general terms of use, but it's unique for any agency to call BS on itself."¹⁵

Then the CEC drew condemnation and a rebuke from the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ) when it was confirmed that its writers had been identifying themselves as reporters when contacting sources. CAJ president Karyn Pugliese said journalists must operate at arms' length

from government, and for CEC staff to “blur the lines between truth and messaging” was wrong: “Don’t pretend that you’re doing journalism, because you’re not. When the government hires its own PR firm, that’s fine. But when you pretend that PR firm is journalism, that’s positively Orwellian.”¹⁶ A chef in Vancouver featured in a CEC article extolling the benefits of cooking with natural gas said he was furious the writer he spoke to never explained the agency’s connection to the provincial government and the UCP.¹⁷

While the backlash against the CEC’s methods unfolded, it also very quickly ran into trouble over its logo, being accused of plagiarism—not once—but twice. The war room’s initial design was an exact replica of the symbol used by US-based Progress Software. Olsen acknowledged it was a mistake and laid the blame on the Calgary marketing agency that produced the logo.¹⁸ However, when a second design was revealed days later, another US software company, ATK Technologies Inc., pointed out it was very similar to theirs, prompting a warning from the company that “[w]e have already consulted our legal team, and our legal team is on top of it.”¹⁹ A Vancouver company apparently could not resist and developed a spoof CEC logo-generator, churning out exact depictions of some of the most famous corporate symbols around (MacDonald’s, Nike, Twitter, NASA) with the caption “Canadian Energy Centre” and a rationale. For example, Apple’s familiar icon, as a CEC logo, is explained as representing “the importance of Nature Stewardship working in harmony with Commerce.”²⁰

The logo fiasco drew attention to another storm swirling around the war room: its organizational status as a provincial government corporation, living outside the usual accountability and access-to-information provisions. Corporate oversight falls on the CEC’s board of three directors, made up of Savage, Environment Minister Jason Nixon, and the then Justice Minister, Doug Schweitzer. Opposition politicians and journalists wanted to know the cost of developing multiple logos and any expenses incurred to scrub them from CEC documents but had no access to those details. Tom Olsen was asked why the war room was structured to avoid the transparency required of other government agencies, and stated that he supported the approach, “essentially FOIP [Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy] allows people who want you to fail to look at your playbook. . . . The media will hold us to account. . . . It made no sense

to allow our strategy to be seen in real time by people who want us to fail.”²¹ However, less than a year into its mandate, the CEC would come under fire from the provincial auditor-general, Doug Wylie, over concerns for \$1.3 million in single-source contracts.²² Savage’s press secretary stated in an email that “the Board of Directors [Savage, Nixon, and Schweitzer] of the Canadian Energy Centre are committed to ensuring that fiscal reporting is comprehensive and transparent.” However, when even the Allan inquiry dedicated space in its final report to the CEC calling its structure and reputation “seriously compromised,” Olsen and Savage both had to defend its existence, with Olsen stating the war room had “overcome its growing pains” and “hit its stride.”²³

Two months after launching the CEC, Olsen and his staff, were again issuing apologies. When *The New York Times* ran an article detailing the flight of international investment from the oilsands, the CEC Twitter account posted a series of tweets questioning the newspaper’s credibility, accusing it of bias, and oddly, given the topic, pointed out *The Times* had been “called out for anti-Semitism countless times.”²⁴ When the war room retweeted a post laden with inaccurate data on emissions from a proposed oilsands project, and University of Alberta economist Andrew Leach pointed it out, the CEC account responded with “Whoops. That was done in error. I was givener [sic] this morning and got a little carried away. Sorry about that.”²⁵

However, the UCP continuously defended the war room, and blamed the energy apostates who inspired the CEC in the first place. Savage asserted the war room was under attack by the very “environmental activists and green left” whom she accused of killing the Northern Gateway pipeline project and promoting harmful environmental legislation.²⁶ “I spent 13 years working in the oil and gas sector, and I saw that kind of organized campaign unfold,” she told reporters, “it was always going to be targeted.”²⁷ Nonetheless, the “green left” was joined by critics who could only be described as stalwart supporters of the energy industry, and the UCP. *Edmonton Sun* columnist Lorne Gunter called the CEC “amateur hour” and warned that “its incompetence reflects badly on both Kenney and our leading industry.”²⁸ A column in the industry publication *BOE Report* began by summing up the CEC era as “months lost in the advocacy wilderness” and urged war room staff to “go wait quietly in the cigar lounge

with all the others from whom we expect more.”²⁹ Kenney acknowledged there had been some missteps by the CEC, but when pressed on the sheer volume of gaffes Kenney replied, “Talk to me a year from now about the efficacy of the Canadian Energy Centre.”³⁰ Almost exactly a year later, at a time when the CEC had seen its budget reduced in response to COVID, the war room would be garnering its biggest headlines yet, aiming its rapid response team at a children’s animated film.

When *Bigfoot Family* was released on Netflix, a sequel to *Son of Bigfoot*, the CEC unleashed one of its most high-profile campaigns to date. The film tells the story of a Sasquatch, his human son, a racoon, and a bear trying to stop an evil company, Xtrakt, from destroying a pristine wildlife preserve in a bid to extract oil. The story takes place in Alaska, not Canada. Xtrakt’s drilling plan involves using bombs, a fictional storyline in today’s world, but based in fact: in the late 1950s, Alberta’s Social Credit government considered using a nuclear blast to extract oilsands bitumen in a plan named “Project Cauldron.”³¹ When a parent complained about the film, the CEC sprang into action, setting up an online petition and letter-writing campaign calling on Netflix to set the record straight, noting that the cartoon “inaccurately portrays the oil and gas industry” and “ignores the industry’s commitment to environmental stewardship.”³²

The story was picked up in national and international media, including *The Guardian*, the *Daily Mail*, and *The Irish Sun*. The war room’s efforts were lauded by UCP and federal conservative politicians, and by some columnists, such as David Staples in *The Edmonton Journal*. Olsen did media interviews defending the campaign. But once again there was also a good deal of ridicule, even from usually supportive pundits, in both mainstream and industry media. An Australian industry publication offered some cheeky comments on the controversy: “*Energy News* can’t recall any recent example of Australia’s petroleum association attacking children’s films, but we did dig up an old Andrew Bolt [a controversial political commentator] column that suggested *Finding Nemo*’s pernicious influence on promoting vegetarianism in children.”³³ The article included a subhead that read, “HOW do you annoy a Canadian? Make an animated children’s film targeting the US oil and gas industry, apparently.”³⁴ A parody petition was also created, referencing Kenney’s unpopular plan to

develop coal on the east slopes of the Rockies, urging Netflix to “make *Bigfoot Family 2: Kenney’s Coal Mine Boondoggle*.”³⁵

It remains unclear exactly what the CEC was trying to accomplish, but in the end, the controversy seems to have created so much awareness around *Bigfoot Family* that it became one of the top streamed movies in Canada, and the film’s director, Ben Stassen, thanked the Alberta government for the “silly” campaign against it: “It’s just entertainment. It has nothing to do with Alberta. Why they felt targeted by the film, that I do not know.”³⁶

Given its history, the war room seems to inspire a reaction almost anytime it is mentioned. When news of a plan to have the CEC lead a campaign on environment, social, and governance (ESG) standards in Alberta, even industry insiders wondered if the war room’s reputation undermined its chances of success. Well-known Calgary-based energy economist Peter Tertzakian pointed out the need for “trust-building,” and the CEC’s challenges on that front, because “they have never established trust with the public, so the public doesn’t believe it. Nor do environmental groups. Nor do people outside of Alberta.”³⁷ For an organization established to dispel myths and lies that statement should have amounted to an existential crisis, but the CEC continues to enjoy the support of the UCP and create content. A closer look at the body of work emanating from the war room illustrates the ways it frames information about the energy sector and the stories it tells, as well as the issues, voices, and points of view it dutifully excludes or attacks.

Canadian Energy Centre Media Content

The war room’s digital media is anchored by its website, canadianenergycentre.ca. Content is divided into sections: Environment, Economy, Community, and Research, then further broken down into subsections under headings of Indigenous, Innovation, Natural Gas, Oil Sands, Renewables, Jobs, LNG, Pipelines, Collaboration, and People. Content can appear in multiple subsections. Despite the “Renewables” section, the CEC’s focus is firmly on oil and gas development, and discussions of alternative sources are almost always in support of conventional extraction. Research has its own subcategories of Columns, Economic and Financial Data, ESG, First Nations, and Global Comparisons. Adhering to a digital

news site format, some articles are labelled as columns or commentary. There are research-based “Fact Sheets” and a regular feature titled “Matter of Fact,” which follows the format of fact-checking from the perspective of the staff at the CEC. These articles generally target “recent commentary” or specific reports from the media or other sources that the war room claims “misrepresent” or “mislead” the truth about the energy industry, such as this example from 12 February 2020, “A Matter of Fact: *New York Times* article on oil sands divestment misleading.”

Most of the content is text-based, including French-language versions of a few articles, though there are some video and audio items as well. The audio typically features interviews with the CEC’s executive director of research, Mark Milke, being interviewed by a sympathetic host, in most cases, Danielle Smith, at the time former Wildrose Party leader, on Global News Radio 770 CHQR. The articles, videos, and audio that appear on the CEC website are promoted and circulated—sometimes in re-versioned forms—on its social media accounts. Eighteen months after its launch, the CEC’s Facebook site had almost fifty-six thousand followers and seems to be its most popular platform. Videos posted on Facebook have generally garnered the most interaction; for example, one titled “A Message for Jane Fonda” garnered over 310 thousand views. The war room also has a YouTube channel; however, it does not seem to get nearly as much attention with only 161 subscribers and much fewer views than Facebook. The CEC’s Twitter account has just under 7,200 followers. For comparison, a parody account, Canadian Energy Centre War Room @AbWarRoom, is followed by 5,824.

Since much of the content associated with the CEC’s digital operations originates on its website, for the purposes of this chapter, a content analysis was used to throw into relief the core messages war room staff seek to share. Classic content analysis combined with the use of text-mining software was deployed to examine all the articles posted at canadianenergycentre.ca through its first eighteen months of operation. This did not include any audio content or video content, though typically those items were often connected to specific research reports. Text mining software Wordstat 9 helped identify keywords and phrases to further facilitate the deduction of categories and themes and address some of the subjectivity associated with content analysis methods. Table 11.1 provides a snapshot

Table 11.1. Themes in the Canadian Energy Centre’s Website Content

Themes	Associated Keywords/ Phrases	Headline and Subhead Examples
1. The energy sector provides Canada with high levels of employment, income, and taxes, and boosts the economy.	Jobs; Indirect; GDP; Direct; Impact; Output; Wages; Impacts; Responsible; Services; Broad; Significant; Economic; Canadian Economy; Canadian Oil; Canadian Oil and Gas Sector; Interprovincial Trade; Goods and Services Produced	Commentary: A healthy Canadian energy industry means jobs, revenue and opportunity <i>“The energy sector is not just about numbers. It’s about people and families and the benefits that accrue to all Canadians.”</i> A Matter of Fact: Mythbusting on Keystone XL Crucial pipeline project brings the promise of jobs and prosperity for thousands in Canada and the United States
2. Indigenous Peoples support energy development and are benefiting from it.	Indigenous Communities; Support; Development; First Nations; Benefits; Indigenous; Projects; Pipeline; Reserve; British Columbia; Coastal Gaslink; Trans Mountain; Indigenous Owned	Twenty B.C. First Nations and pipeline prosperity <i>Coastal GasLink project will provide employment and revenue for Indigenous partners</i> First Nations communities increasingly see oil and gas projects as pathways to prosperity <i>“To say that we are all against development is ludicrous. We’re in favour of prosperity”</i>
3. Global demand for oil will increase, it is not in decline, and Canada should take advantage of that.	Greenhouse Gas Emissions; Vaclav Smil; Complete Elimination of Fossil Carbon; Ignores Fundamental Physical Realities; Global Energy Supply; Foreign Oil Imports	Russia firing up massive oil project to meet growing global demand as Canada sits on the sidelines IEA’s “fantasy island” net-zero pathway risks oil supply shortfall, price spike: BMO <i>“We believe it is highly unlikely that oil demand will decline meaningfully over the next decade”</i>

Table 11.1. (continued)

Themes	Associated Keywords/ Phrases	Headline and Subhead Examples
4. Climate change policies will kill jobs and economic growth.	Climate; Change; Environment; Greenhouse; Policies; Emissions; Exercise in Wishful Thinking; Emissions in Canada; Energy Transitions; Greenhouse Gas Emissions Intensity	Green pivot would rob Canada's Indigenous communities of opportunity: B.C. MLA Clean Fuel Standard threatens Canadian jobs: Report <i>"Canada should not be going it alone, especially given its minimal impact on global GHG emissions"</i>
5. Canadian energy is better for the world than fuels produced in "not free countries."	Russian; Autocracies; Tyrannies; Germany; Dependent; Democracies; Russia; Opposition; Saudi Arabia; Freedom Rankings; Partly Free Countries; Degree of Freedom; Producing Countries; Territory Ratings and Statuses; Global Freedom Scores	Dependency on tyranny oil and gas in the G20 democracies <i>Five democratic G20 nations rely heavily on oil imports deemed to be "Not Free"</i> Commentary: Tyranny oil should be in the same category as blood diamonds <i>Attacks on Canadian energy sector ensure oppressive regimes will continue to thrive from oil and gas exports</i>
6. Lack of pipelines and LNG infrastructure are resulting in missed opportunities, and a need for Canadian energy imports, while other countries take advantage of the global market.	Flow; Crude; Decades; Security; Critical; Transport; Canada; Trillion; Energy; Billion; Pipelines; Energy Products; Petroleum Products; Refined Petroleum; Energy Trade; Natural Gas Development; Pipeline Ukraine; Tyranny Natural; Pricing Dispute; Russian Natural; Tyranny Oil; Alexei Navalny; German Chancellor Angela Merkel; Pipeline Transportation	Commentary: Weak oil and gas investment still plagues Canada <i>While oil and gas investment has grown substantially in other parts of the world, Canada has failed to keep pace</i> Commentary: The natural gas export boom—for Canada's competitors Canada's potential to join in the global export surge was hobbled by activists, politicians and red tape
7. Divestment, de-insuring of oilsands projects and companies is hypocritical.	Worldwide; Zurich; Swiss; Axa; Million; China; Billion; Insurance Coverage; Insurance Premiums Written; Billion in China; Russia; Tyranny Oil; Autocracies	Open letter to NY pension fund: Divesting from oil sands doesn't support ESG goals Divestment in Canadian oil and gas compared with their investments in "Not Free" countries

Table 11.1. (continued)

Themes	Associated Keywords/ Phrases	Headline and Subhead Examples
8. Energy workers are good, hardworking, intelligent, and ethical people.	Canadians; Albertans; Jobs; Wages; Responsible; Energy Sector; Indigenous Communities; Employment Income; Small Businesses	From pipeline protester to Indigenous energy advisor: The fresh and innovative perspective of Kaella-Marie Earle <i>A co-op education placement with Enbridge Gas changed her mind on the role energy can play</i> Looking to the future is the job description for transplanted Newfoundlander <i>Deidre Norman leading the way on innovation and next generation technologies for energy sector</i>
9. The energy industry is environmentally responsible, minimizes impact, innovates, and develops alternative sources.	Intensity; GHG; Emissions; Decline; Combustion; Falling; Reduction; Emissions Intensity; Environment; Environmental Protection; Environmental Spending; Alberta Spent; Oil and Gas Sector Spent	Commentary: Who spends the most on the environment? Oil and gas firms—and Alberta 10 environmental successes achieved by Canada's oil and gas industry <i>Characterizations by opponents that the sector is a laggard are incorrect</i>
10. Pipelines are safe.		Canada's oil and gas pipelines far safer than competitors <i>2019 government, industry data shows low spills compared to Russia and U.S.</i> Line 5 shutdown threatens thousands of jobs in Canada, U.S. <i>Planned replacement tunnel expected to create jobs and provide safety certainty</i>

Sources: The author.

of the findings, and a breakdown of the ten themes identified in the CEC content, the associated keywords and phrases, and the headlines and sub-heads from stories that fall under each identified theme.

The first theme is reflected in the detailed statistics compiled by CEC staff to demonstrate the energy sector's contribution to the Canadian economy. The assertion is made often and with conviction. The second theme is represented in stories that counter the narrative of Indigenous opposition to resource development. Typical stories bear headlines such as "Calgary 'Indigeneer' shaping the future of Canadian Energy" or "Indigenous-owned pipeline and construction company sees explosive growth." In the third theme identified in the analysis, CEC staff argue the demand for oil is *not* going to decline in the coming years. In ten separate articles in the research section, either in the text or endnotes, the same expert, Vaclav Smil, is referenced, and on nine occasions the same quotation (in whole or in part) from one of his papers appears: "Designing hypothetical roadmaps outlining complete elimination of fossil carbon from the global energy supply by 2050 is nothing but an exercise in wishful thinking that ignores fundamental physical realities."³⁸

While war room content recognizes climate change as an issue, a fourth theme emerges on the threat of climate change measures to prosperity (see Duane Bratt's chapter on an evaluation of the Kenney government's climate policies). It manifests in articles critical of carbon taxes, the incorporation of alternative sources of energy, and international conventions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Theme 5 takes the form of the argument made by *Rebel News* founder Ezra Levant in his book *Ethical Oil: The Case for Canada's Oilsands* that the environmental and financial cost of developing synthetic crude ought to be balanced against the human rights records of totalitarian oil producers. The CEC features its own "Tyranny Index" to assess "worldwide oil and natural gas production and market share over four decades for countries in three categories: nations (or territories) that are Free, Partly Free, or Not Free."³⁹ "Not Free" countries are producing more and more energy, the report asserts. The sixth theme makes the case that Canada is missing out on economic opportunities due to a lack of pipelines and LNG infrastructure, while other countries—including the Not Free nations from the tyranny index—are taking advantage of global demand. The argument is frequently made in CEC

content that Canadian natural gas could displace more GHG-intensive fuels in other parts of the world, if it could only get to market.

The seventh theme also has ties to Levant's ethical oil argument, whereby the CEC argues that the divestment and de-insuring of oilsands development is ill-informed, disingenuous, and an exercise in hypocrisy. Companies that cut ties with Alberta's bitumen producers come under fire for business ties to Not Free countries. And if there was any doubt about who the victims of divestment are, an eighth theme emerges in articles that characterize energy workers as down-to-earth, nature-loving, and honest folks who come from a variety of backgrounds. A number of these feature-style reports focus on Indigenous Peoples.

A ninth theme coming out of the analysis challenges the perception of the oil and gas industry as "dirty" by repeatedly offering evidence to the contrary. A recurring argument is the idea that the *intensity* of greenhouse gases from oilsands production is dropping. However, the reduction frequently cited is actually a ratio to GDP. In the sample period for the content analysis, there appears to be no reference to total greenhouse gas emissions or the fact that they have increased.⁴⁰ The last theme, pipelines are safe, appears in abundant coverage on the CEC website. When the state of Michigan sought to shut down Enbridge's Line 5, which carries oil and natural gas liquids from western Canada through the Straits of Mackinac between Lakes Michigan and Huron, the CEC published stories contending the pipeline had never leaked in its sixty-eight years of existence. However, contrary to the CEC articles, Line 5 has leaked dozens of times, and has "violated safety standards," according to court documents filed by the state of Michigan.⁴¹

Outside the thematic analysis, there are other observations of note that emerge from examination of CEC content. While journalistic conventions are followed throughout much of the website, research articles, fact sheets, and briefs take on elements associated with the rigour required by academic publications. This includes detailed references, endnotes, and appendices, all of which provide fulsome support for the analyses and arguments published. There are also allusions to peer review in notes at the bottom of the research items, such as this one: "The authors and the Canadian Energy Centre would like to thank and acknowledge the assistance of Philip Cross in reviewing the data and research for this Fact

Sheet.” Cross is a former chief economic analyst at Statistics Canada, worked for the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, a columnist for the *National Post*, and a senior fellow at the Fraser Institute,⁴² where Milke also worked as a researcher. In the majority of Fact Sheets, Cross is the only person credited for review, though sometimes there are one or two “anonymous reviewers” or one of a handful of other individuals. Cross also appears on the website as the author of an article headlined “Guest commentary: A response from Philip Cross to a CBC story; ‘Clearly, Canada’s energy sector is extremely important to Canada’s economic well-being.’”

Peer review in academia is founded on notions of independence and impartiality. Typically, authors and reviewers are anonymous to each other to ensure an unbiased, critical appraisal. There can be no circumstance where a reputable publisher would ask the same reviewer to evaluate the same authors almost two dozen times in the span of eighteen months; nor with someone with whom you might have had a previous research relationship. In another clear break from conventional peer review, University of Calgary economist Jack Mintz receives thanks for reviewing a CEC fact sheet that extensively references his own research and arguments.⁴³ Mintz too, is associated with the Fraser Institute and a frequent contributor to the *Financial Post*, sits on the corporate board of Imperial Oil, and is a UCP appointee to the board of Alberta Health Services and the Premier’s Economic Recovery Council (as chair). Mintz’s economic analysis on reducing corporate taxes as a catalyst for job creation has been often cited by UCP officials to justify their cuts to the corporate rate early in their mandate.⁴⁴ In addition to his consistent fiscal, free-market conservatism, Mintz’s flirtation with Alberta separatism, and his assertion that “‘diversity’ makes countries weaker—not stronger,”⁴⁵ align with the social conservatives in the UCP ranks. His views on the economics and politics of energy are clear, and he and his work are featured in several CEC articles.

On the whole, war room content pursues a narrow range of discourse, so resolutely pro-oil and gas in its outlook that there is no room for the slightest nod to dissent. Activists, motivated by an increasingly dire climate crisis, are one-dimensional villains bent on “the death of one of Canada’s largest, best-paying industries which benefits everyone from First Nations to blue-collar workers to government coffers.”⁴⁶ Throughout CEC copy, the word activist is routinely qualified with “anti-oil,” “anti-oil and gas,”

“anti-reality,” or “anti-energy”; activists have “hobbled” or “hamstrung” energy exports and production. United Nations or International Energy Agency discussions on fossil fuel reduction scenarios are dismissed in their entirety. A story on wood bison “thriving” on a reclaimed oilsands site, thanks to a partnership between the Fort McKay Nation and Syncrude, only quotes a Syncrude executive, no one from the First Nation, no biologists, and no wildlife officials.⁴⁷ While the representation of Indigenous Peoples is positive, it is narrowly focused on those who support energy development, ignoring legitimate opposition, the concerns of First Nations peoples impacted by resource projects and climate change, or those living on unceded territory. The analysis of CEC content here underscores the limited range of facts the war room is willing to accept and disseminate, and an overt bias against the perspectives it dismisses as “anti-reality,” myths, or “fantasy island.”

Discussion

The CEC’s key themes are not only in lockstep with the UCP’s “standing up for Alberta” campaign platform, they promote and reinforce the Kenney government’s energy policies, uncritically. The UCP backed TC Energy’s Keystone XL project with a \$1.3 billion stake and loan guarantees; the CEC followed the lead with articles detailing the economic benefits of the pipeline and attacking its opponents and US president Joe Biden. Both Kenney and Savage frequently reference tyranny oil and have compared crude imports from countries such as Saudi Arabia or Venezuela to blood diamonds, a theme picked up in a CEC commentary,⁴⁸ a notion that seems to have garnered little traction outside Alberta. UCP policy announcements find space on the CEC website too, as when the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation was launched and went into operation, and the CEC provided coverage. Whether it is attacking divestment, asserting the long-term growth and viability of the energy sector, or burnishing the industry’s record on the environment, the CEC and UCP are synchronized in their messaging.

This was always going to be the case, given the barriers to access to information erected by the UCP, and the background of the CEC’s two most prominent employees. Olsen’s ties to the party include a failed bid as a UCP candidate and working for former Premier Stelmach. Milke is

a well-known conservative and author, and on his personal website he is described as “the lead architect of the United Conservative Party election platform and principal policy advisor to UCP leader Jason Kenney.”⁴⁹ The website also promotes his book *Ralph vs. Rachel: A Tale of Two Alberta Premiers* with an article titled “Why did Ralph Klein succeed where Rachel Notley failed?”⁵⁰

The CEC invites others to republish its material, “unaltered . . . with attribution to Canadian Energy Centre Ltd.” and many like-minded publications do so. These include both news and energy-focused websites such as Resource World Magazine, Troy Media, Todayville (out of Red Deer), Nanaimo, BC-based Business Examiner, and the Post Millennial, a news outlet with ties to the federal conservatives and the UCP.⁵¹ Postmedia sites and newspapers have published a lot of UCP material, mostly commentaries and analysis by Milke and CEC chief research analyst Lennie Kaplan. After the UCP election victory in the spring of 2019, Postmedia hired Kenney’s former chief of staff and campaign manager, Nick Koolsbergen, to lobby the UCP to consider the company as a potential source of content for the war room.⁵² No deal was ever struck, but the *Financial Post* continues to publish CEC pieces.

As with so many UCP policy decisions, from pandemic measures to betting on Keystone to the review of the K–12 curricula, the CEC was established on questionable ideological assumptions. The Krause work cited by Savage has not stood up to scrutiny, not even from the Kenney government’s own investigation. As Andrew Nikiforuk pointed out shortly after the CEC’s launch, the five environmental groups targeting the oilsands sat down with four executives from bitumen producers and agreed to a plan to “to limit emissions as opposed to production, which, rightly or wrongly, largely derailed the campaign.”⁵³ Similarly, the assumption that the energy sector struggles to have its message heard, despite the communications budgets at multi-billion-dollar energy corporations, and well-resourced industry associations, is contradicted by research. Studies have repeatedly shown that at the intersection of energy development and the environment, the reporting is “particularly susceptible to corporate influence.”⁵⁴ A recent Canadian analysis of 173 newspaper articles about the five biggest oil companies found that just nine featured an interview with an environmentalist.⁵⁵

Canadian governments have often acted on the temptation to create their own press narrative by embracing the concept of news-styled agencies for communication. Ed Stelmach's "For the Record" initiative, referenced earlier in this chapter, is one such example, as is Ontario Premier Doug Ford's Ontario News Now (ONN). The similarities between ONN and the war room are striking. ONN operates outside access-to-information provisions as it is funded by Progressive Conservative caucus services and falls outside disclosure legislation.⁵⁶ As with the CEC, the presentation is consistent with journalistic conventions, "raising concerns about whether the government is purposefully trying to blur the lines between partisan messaging and journalism."⁵⁷ Stephen Harper's Conservatives rolled out a video service called "24 Seven" that promoted his government's policies but also ran into controversy, as when it broadcast the faces of Canadian special forces soldiers during a prime minister's visit to Kuwait and Iraq.⁵⁸ 24 Seven, ONN, and the CEC all share the dubious honour of drawing heavy criticism from the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, an organization once led by Jason Kenney.

Marland, Lewis, and Flanagan point out that governments will use "controllable media to get unfiltered brand messages to target audiences" and specifically reference Harper's 24 Seven approach, which they also note, "bordered on propaganda."⁵⁹ To protect the political brand, they write, "government departments operate 'detect and correct' activities to push back against misinformation and to spin a more favorable slant."⁶⁰ While the strategy "reduces the potential for misinformation or a blunder rocketing across social media," it comes at a cost, accentuating "politicization of governance and simplification of information."⁶¹

Alberta's energy war room can best be understood as an exercise in political branding, regardless of the veneer of informational rigour. Its content is perfectly in line with UCP rhetoric, whether the subject is climate change, corporate taxes, or pipelines. Its body of work is a consistent, one-sided, pro-oil-and-gas perspective highlighting the Kenney government's policies, legislation, and actions, attacking anyone not fully on board with the next big oil and gas boom, whether they are "anti-energy" activists, the news media, academics, or the producers of children's cartoons. As an entity operating as a so-called energy centre, it really is more of a "war room."

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