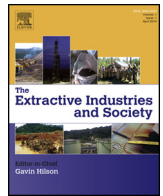




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

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### Original article

# The town that said “No” to the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline: The Kitimat plebiscite of 2014

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article history:

Received 19 July 2016

Received in revised form 23 November 2016

Accepted 23 November 2016

Available online xxx

##### Keywords:

Pipelines  
Northern Gateway  
Kitimat  
Plebiscite  
Politics of scale

#### ABSTRACT

In April 2014 the residents of the district of Kitimat in northwest British Columbia voted in a plebiscite to oppose the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline designed to transport bitumen from Canada's oil sands to the west coast for export to Asia. This was remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, exercising direct democracy through the holding a plebiscite is a rare event in Canada, even more so for a project over which the district actually has no jurisdiction even though Kitimat is the proposed pipeline's terminus. Secondly, the planned industrial town, built in the 1950s to support Alcan's smelting operations, has historically been a “pro-industry” town. This paper examines (i) how Kitimat became the only community on the proposed pipeline route to hold a plebiscite; (ii) how a small, local NGO opposed, and defeated, the world's largest oil pipeline company in the plebiscite; and (iii) the implications of this case for our understanding of scale and jurisdiction.

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### 1. Introduction

“It's just like we don't exist sometimes”, declared then Mayor of Kitimat Joanne Monahan in August 2012 upon hearing that the federally appointed Joint Review Panel charged with reviewing the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline proposal would not visit Kitimat during its final hearings (as quoted in Anon., 2012b). The small, remote community on British Columbia's northwest coast, and the terminus of the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline designed to transport bitumen from Canada's oil sands to the west coast for export to Asia, felt excluded.

In April 2014, however, the District of Kitimat,<sup>1</sup> held a plebiscite on the pipeline, the only community in British Columbia (BC) or Alberta, the two provinces through which the pipeline would pass, to do so and its results certainly put the views of the people of Kitimat on the map in Canada and internationally. The *Montreal Gazette* reported that:

“While First Nations objections pose the greatest legal constraint, the views of B.C. residents are crucial. Enbridge has shown how much it cares about public opinion with its recent wave of media ads and its campaign to win a Kitimat plebiscite. But that vote, in a traditionally pro-development community that stands to benefit most from the project, resulted in a stinging rebuke. Almost 60 per cent voted against the project.” (O'Neil, 2014).

A similar point was made in the *New York Times*: “As the final destination of Northern Gateway and home of its planned ship terminal, Kitimat stands to gain the most in the long-term jobs from the pipeline. But the remote community, which is dominated by an aluminum smelter, rejected Northern Gateway in a plebiscite, 58.4 percent to 41.6 percent in April. The town's district council then passed a symbolic motion against the pipeline.” (Krauss and Austen, 2014).

There has been research on the broader Northern Gateway project and on oil sands pipeline proposals,<sup>2</sup> but in this paper we focus on the community of Kitimat and address two central questions: how did Kitimat become the only community to hold a popular vote on the pipeline? And, how did a small group of volunteers in a local NGO, Douglas Channel Watch, manage to win

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<sup>1</sup> There are four classes of municipalities in British Columbia: village, town, district and city. These definitions are population based although the authorities of each are the same. Technically, Kitimat is a district. In the title of the paper we use the (technically incorrect) term ‘town’ in a more generic sense simply to convey to the reader, at first point of entry to the paper, the small size of the community that is being discussed.

<sup>2</sup> On the Enbridge Northern Gateway project see, for example, Veltmeyer and Bowles (2014); for analysis of oil sands pipeline proposals see, for example, MacLean (2015).

the vote against corporate giant Enbridge?<sup>3</sup> In answering the first question, we highlight the role of unintended consequences and the messy politics of the local. Although the municipality of Kitimat itself has no formal jurisdiction over the pipeline, the message that its vote sent reverberated far beyond this small, remote community. The ‘symbolic’ motion referred to in the *New York Times* report reflects the lack of legal standing but also its political symbolism.

With regard to our second question, we analyse the strategy of Douglas Channel Watch and use it to illustrate the complexity of the ‘politics of scale’ in resisting pipeline development. Both jumping scale and ‘de-scaling’ both played important roles while the framing of the plebiscite debate by the ‘No’ side enabled it to win the vote but on terms which proved problematic in some other respects.

In the next section, we provide a brief overview of Kitimat’s history which sets the context for part of the debate over the pipeline. In section three, we trace how the District of Kitimat council came to hold the unique plebiscite. The fourth section discusses the plebiscite campaign itself focusing on the strategy pursued by Douglas Channel Watch (DCW). In the fifth section, we analyse what this case means for our understanding of the complex dynamics of fossil fuels, scale and jurisdiction.

In making our arguments we draw upon both primary and secondary material. In September 2015 we conducted interviews in Kitimat with the Chief Administrative Officer (who was the District’s Electoral Officer at the time of the plebiscite), the Mayor (who was a councillor at the time of the plebiscite), four incumbent councillors (three of whom were on council at the time of the plebiscite), and two of the core members of Douglas Channel Watch. We also make use of official District council minutes and press reports from the town’s main newspaper, *The Northern Sentinel*, from 2004 to 2014.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Kitimat: “A marvel of industry and nature”

As noted in the media reports above, Kitimat is a remote, traditionally pro-development town that owes its origins to the opening of an aluminum smelter run by Alcan in the 1950s. As a planned community, Kitimat was touted by Alcan as “Tomorrow’s City Today” (Anon., 2010a: 5). Part of a post-war province building project, the smelter was located in Kitimat to take advantage of the abundance of low cost hydroelectricity the province was developing. Bauxite was shipped from around the world to the port of Kitimat for processing and re-exported to world markets. The town’s modern origins and subsequent fortunes were therefore premised on industrial development based on the use the region’s locational advantages and resources and integrating them into global markets. The town, of some 9000 people, has as its official motto “a marvel of industry and nature” referring to its support for industry and its spectacular coastal setting.

The modern origins of the town in the 1950s also relied on the removal of the area’s first inhabitants, the Haisla, and relocating them to Kitimaat Village, some six kilometres up the shore from the settler community of Kitimat. Relations between the two have

been strained and problematic for much of the subsequent period although one outcome of the Enbridge pipeline debate and plebiscite has arguably been to open the opportunity for a slow process of exploring the basis for improved relations. This role of the Haisla in opposing the pipeline is central to any wider account of resistance to the pipeline but, in this paper, we focus solely on the plebiscite, the voters in which were restricted to the residents of Kitimat.<sup>5</sup>

Kitimat’s economy, being resource based, has been subject to the typical fluctuations of such economies and swings in population leading to concerns over the future sustainability of the town, concerns which have continued into the present. In the 1990s the desire of the largest industrial employer, Alcan, to sell hydroelectricity to the U.S. (especially energy-short California) rather than use it to produce aluminum raised exactly this concern and resulted in the council pursuing legal action against the company and the province (which supported Alcan selling ‘surplus’ electricity). The council argued that Alcan should honour the terms of a 1950 agreement which, in council’s interpretation, allowed the company access to hydro only in return for the commitment to industrial development. In short, this was a time when Kitimat was worried about the sustainability of its industrial workforce. This concern was not reduced during the 2000s when Alcan decided to modernize its smelter, a process which eventually led to thousands of temporary jobs and a work camp associated with the renovation in the early 2010s, but in a reduction of around 500 permanent jobs thereafter.

In 2005, Methanex announced that it would be closing its doors in Kitimat with the loss of more than 90 jobs (and 10 per cent of the town’s tax revenue); the methanol and ammonia plants were the company’s first and had been established in 1982 and 1987 respectively. The high price of natural gas was blamed for the Kitimat closure. In 2010, the town’s second largest industrial employer, Eurocan pulp and paper mill, shut its doors too, resulting in the loss of about 500 permanent jobs. That year taxes went up 20 percent and the town closed one of its two ice rinks.

By the early 2010s, however, there was some optimism associated with the liquefied natural gas projects which the province had been aggressively pushing. The promise of permanent jobs associated with the various projects that have been proposed still remains elusive as plunging energy prices since mid-2014 and regulatory processes have led companies to delay any decisions about whether they will proceed with implementation. As of January 2016, none of the LNG companies have announced final decisions.<sup>6</sup>

The boost to short-term employment provided by modernization at Alcan and prospective LNG development has had an impact on Kitimat not least in the housing market. In January 2014, council passed a motion for a letter to the provincial Minister of Natural Gas Development and Minister Responsible for Housing to be written “outlining the challenges Kitimat is experiencing due to the increase in industrial activity and development and invite him to Kitimat to discuss these issues.” (District of Kitimat, 2014e).

In short, for at least the last decade and a half, a major concern of council has been the ability of the town to continue to provide the well-paying permanent industrial jobs that the town’s modern origins and growth had relied upon. As recently as 2010, district manager Trafford Hall was warning that plant closures could see

<sup>3</sup> Enbridge is the company behind the Northern Gateway Project. As the two press quotations above show, sometimes it is the company and sometimes the actual project that is identified. In common discourse in Kitimat, Enbridge and the Northern Gateway Project are synonymous.

<sup>4</sup> These sources provide us with a rich source of qualitative data. Nevertheless, there are limitations in terms of explaining why the outcome of the plebiscite vote was negative, that is, we have no direct evidence of why people voted the way that they did. This inevitably leaves open the question of causal relationships and, in the case of this study, the extent to which the DCW campaign was responsible for the outcome of the plebiscite. We discuss this further below.

<sup>5</sup> “Residency” was defined in this case as having lived in the District for 30 days. This was a controversially short time-period with opponents of the pipeline fearing that the eligibility of many temporary workers would boost the ‘Yes’ side. This fear subsided when it transpired that residency meant needing to show ID with a Kitimat address; temporary workers, for the most part, kept their home addresses.

<sup>6</sup> For a list of the LNG projects currently being considered in Kitimat see <https://engage.gov.bc.ca/Inginbc/lng-projects/kitimat-lng/>.

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