



# Canada's brand: shining or tarnished?

**T**his time of year, I always find myself writing this piece from my fishing camp in Labrador. There can be no place on earth like Labrador and I often think what a huge shame it is more Canadians don't get to see how grand this country is. Unspoiled, majestic, powerful, awesome ... wow sums it up beautifully.

But those same sentiments of mine are mixed up in a potpourri of other, less favourable feelings. These relate to the internal divisions around energy development and related infrastructure, political bitterness, regional grand-standing and Canadians' long-standing embrace of complacency.

This is a time of huge global turmoil, from the Middle East, to Russia and its former satellites, to China and its maturation pains, to North Korea and its struggling dictatorship. It includes the disgraceful lack of leadership resident in Washington and the attendant enormous fiscal challenges facing the U.S., the realization in Europe that the experiment of unification in its present iteration has failed and must be reformed. Compare and contrast all this to the Canadian scene. This is a scene painted by responsible fiscal practices, an enormous inventory of resources which the rest of the world needs to live and grow and a federal government willing and able to make tough decisions.

The more exposed I am to global business types, the more I appreciate the high regard in which Canada is held. Canada is seen as a safe haven in a dangerous world. Canadians and Canadian companies are welcome around the world as investors, partners and tourists. Those looking to leave their own countries eye Canada as the place they most want to access.

So what is the issue? It begins with the extent to which many Canadians are suspicious, in some cases, downright negative toward the development of the oil sands. This is one of the world's greatest single stores of energy. It is located in northern Alberta where, prior to its development, there was very little population base. I recently had the opportunity to visit the area and was given a tour of the early and conventional extraction method (open-pit mining) and the other method where the extraction is via steam induced underground and the resulting improved viscosity allows the oil to be pumped to the surface.

I was struck by what I didn't see.

This was not an area scarred by large scale pollution. In fact, no pollution was evident (other than the ever present and disgraceful practice of discarded fast food containers by the roadside). I am told the entirety of the oil sands development could fit within the Cape Canaveral complex in Florida. The other striking feature was the extent to which the companies and their management teams are focused on reducing their footprint, investing in technologies designed to mitigate the carbon emissions associated with their activity and otherwise trying to earn a deserved stamp of responsible stewardship.

So it is very distressing when folks in B.C. raise their hands and threaten to block access to important Asian markets for this resource. When was the last time a pipeline killed anyone or when a spill caused any sort of lasting environmental damage? Do people not understand we already have hundreds of thousands of miles of pipelines crisscrossing North America, pipelines

which operate virtually without incident? Moreover, technology has improved to the point that new pipelines can be equipped with all sorts of fail-safe mechanisms to ensure any spill is small and quickly contained. What right does a small native community – or indeed any community – have to block the development of a national imperative such as this? Especially given the hearsay around environmental risk and degradation is just that: ill-informed and hearsay. This is a giant economic engine not just for Alberta, but for the whole country.

Why is that Quebec, for instance, has to champion its exploitation of hydro energy as somehow more responsible than that of western oil and gas? I doubt those in the West resent Quebec's luck in being so endowed. Why does B.C. feel it should be somehow threatened by energy exports through its territory when its own energy exports suffer no such stigma? And what is the end result of arguments to the effect that Alberta should "pay" for such rights? Are such arguments likely to extend to roads, railroads, airline traffic? It's ridiculous.

Why are we not able to have a healthy national debate around native issues or health care reform when such a debate and changes to policies in each are so badly needed?

Why are we so reluctant to learn from failed public policies elsewhere in the world?

Why are we so intent on fighting amongst ourselves when the rest of the world sees us as the land of opportunity?

The country should be focused on ensuring the next century is Canada's. Let's concentrate on reforming native policies, health care and education. Let's understand how we can improve productivity, become more innovative and competitive. Let's become less dependent on the U.S. as our trading partner. Let's support entrepreneurship and risk-taking and be more tolerant of failure.

Let's understand why the rest of the world thinks of us so highly and build on those strengths.

A great brand is a very valuable thing.

It can take generations to develop and polish, but it can also be lost. We need to be careful. | ABM

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The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of Atlantic Business Magazine. Feedback: dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com