

## Energy Policy Briefing

# Canadians united in pessimism about energy decision-making

There is a tremendous opportunity to transform Canadians' views on energy decision-making from pessimism to optimism—but it's going to take individual and collective action by all governments on the policy, planning and project fronts. Here's to hoping they seize the opportunity.



Monica Gattinger

Opinion

OTTAWA—Canadians might not agree which energy projects should go ahead in the country, but on one thing they are united: Canada is performing poorly on energy decision-making. Results of a national survey

undertaken by the University of Ottawa's Positive Energy project are striking. On every measure polled, Canadians are pessimistic.

When asked how well the country is doing building public confidence in energy decision-making, only two per cent of Canadians responded "very good." Two per cent.

Asked how well Canada is doing balancing local community concerns about energy projects with broader regional, provincial or national interests, only two per cent responded "very good."

Providing a clear, predictable and competitive policy and regulatory environment for investors? Three per cent.

Developing a shared long-term vision for Canada's energy future? Three per cent.

Adding in those who responded that Canada's performance was "good" on these questions only bumps up the numbers to twenty per cent at most saying good or very good. The preponderance of opinion was pessimistic, with fully one-third to one half of Canadians saying the country is performing poorly or very poorly.

Grim stuff. What's worse, the opinions were broadly shared across the country regardless of region, gender or age—this is not a few isolated pockets of discontent. Canadians as a whole are pessimistic that the country is getting it right when it comes to energy decision-making.

So, what's to be done?

First, governments need to recognize that the context for energy



Natural Resources Minister Jim Carr, pictured on Nov. 22 heading into Question Period. At the level of policy, one of the biggest gaps is a long-term vision for the country's energy future, writes Monica Gattinger. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

decision-making has changed fundamentally in recent decades. Citizens don't trust government, industry or experts the way they once did (the survey findings reflect this, but the extent of negativity goes beyond standard levels of pessimism in surveys). People also want to be involved in decisions that affect them, and their line of sight is often focused on local and individual interests. Top-down decisions perceived to centralize benefits in the hands of a few just don't cut it anymore.

Second, governments need to be sure their actions are ameliorating—not deteriorating—confidence in energy decision-making. Governments often focus on individual energy projects—think Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain Pipeline or BC Hydro's Site C development—to the exclusion of the broader policy and planning framework for energy.

At the level of policy, one of the biggest gaps is a long-term vision for the country's energy future. Earlier public opinion research by Positive Energy reveals that almost all Canadians believe Canada can develop its energy resources while protecting the environment. What is lacking is a clearly articulated and credible plan of how to do it, the trade-offs involved and the ongoing commitment and support of governments to make it happen.

At the level of planning, governments need to strengthen the management of cumulative and regional economic, social and environmental effects of multiple energy projects. Canadians overwhelmingly support this, with the vast majority (81 per cent) saying they "agree" or "somewhat agree" with the need to better manage cumulative effects.

When it comes to projects, governments need to strengthen project decision-making. Canada's regulatory systems were built when citizens had far greater trust in government and limited expectations for local involvement. Regulators now face a very different context and, among other things, need to be able to undertake less legalistic and adversarial processes in addition to traditional hearings. Local and Indigenous governments also need greater roles in project decisions, along with the capacity to undertake them. Canadians support this, with half or more saying they "agree" or "somewhat agree" with strengthening capacity for decision-making of Indigenous (50 per cent) and local (61 per cent) governments.

Finally, governments need to ensure decisions balance multiple energy imperatives: economic imperatives for internationally

competitive, innovative and affordable energy markets, environmental imperatives addressing local impacts on land, water and air, and global climate impacts, and security imperatives for reliable, resilient and affordable energy services.

None of this is going to be easy. But the good news is these issues are on the agendas of federal, provincial, territorial, Indigenous and municipal governments across the country. There is a tremendous opportunity to transform Canadians' pessimism to optimism—but it's going to take individual and collective action by all governments on the policy, planning and project fronts. Here's hoping they seize the opportunity.

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