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Land-Based Resistance, Civil Disobedience, and Resource Extraction in Canada

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This policy brief explores the growing phenomenon of land-based, blockade-style civil disobedience tactics employed by activists resisting resource extraction projects in Canada. While the federal government has publicly committed to reducing GHG emissions and tackling climate change, environmental activists including young people and Indigenous communities have been pushing back against extractive resource projects and the energy sector in highly visible ways. This brief examines the climate movement and the use of blockade and direct-action tactics of protest in Canada, and explores the overlaps between environmental activism and Indigenous sovereignty movements. The increased securitization and criminalization of these movements is discussed with reference to Canada's protection of "critical infrastructure". Though blockades and other direct action tactics are often sensationalized in the media or dismissed as the product of 'radical youths', the use of such tactics harbours a deeper reconsideration of extractive capitalism, settler colonialism, and status-quo socio-economic structures in the context of a worsening global ecological crisis.

Climate change and resource extraction in Canada

The impacts of climate change have become more visible in recent years as Canadians have seen an increase in environmental disasters, such as the 2021 flooding and heat dome events in BC, the record-breaking 2023 wildfire season in Quebec and northern Ontario, and ongoing challenges with permafrost thaw and sea ice loss in the Canadian Arctic (Beguín et al., 2023; Bush & Lemmens, 2019; Natural Resources Canada, 2023). These events have ignited climate activism and awareness by connecting climate change to Canadians' livelihoods and lived experiences. Research has shown an increased correlation between anxiety about the future and climate change, with 57% of Canadians saying that the government is doing too little to combat climate change, and 81% believing that climate change represents a major threat to their children's future (Abacus Data, 2021). The growing impacts of natural disasters, combined with increasing anxiety around climate change, has set the stage for greater public awareness of, and interest in, climate policy and fossil fuel extraction.

Many young Canadians have identified a contradiction between the federal government's climate-related targets and rhetoric and its actions. In March 2022, the Government of Canada released a roadmap illustrating how the country will achieve net-zero GHG emissions by 2050. Many Canadians see that, since 2016, the federal government has rolled out over 100 policy measures aimed at combatting climate change, including emissions reduction strategies, economic policies, and climate adaptation measures (Government of Canada, 2022), yet Canada is falling behind in its goal of reducing emissions by 40% from 2005 levels. Adding to questions about Canada's commitment and progress are reports by its own environmental oversight office that the progress of many emission reduction regulations and policies are unclear or lack proper evaluation (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023; Scarpaleggia, 2023).

In light of such reports, many Canadians feel the Trudeau government is not fully committed to tackling climate change, as it continues to support the construction of new pipelines and other oil and gas infrastructure (Corkal & Gass, 2020; Greaves & Tkachenko, 2023). Canada remains the sixth-largest crude oil producer in the world, and the oil and gas industry remains the highest contributor of domestic GHG emissions, making up 27% of Canada's total emissions (Canada Energy Regulator, 2023). A recent survey of youth climate activists in British Columbia (BC) showed that 87% of those surveyed were neutral or unsupportive of Canada's current climate policies (Greaves & Tkachenko, 2023). The vast majority of survey respondents expressed opposition to the current federal government's approach of putting a price on carbon while building new pipelines, with nearly 70% believing that it is impossible for Canada to effectively address climate change while still producing fossil fuels (Greaves & Tkachenko, 2023, p.14).

The contradiction between Canada's economic entrenchment as a fossil fuel energy exporter versus its commitments to combatting climate change through policy has led to widespread civil society mobilization. This lack of a well-defined and meaningful path toward addressing climate change coupled with the intensification of natural disasters and climate-related changes to everyday life has driven an increase in demonstrations and actions by climate activists. Though the lockdowns and restrictions implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic slowed the momentum of the many marches and demonstrations of 2019, climate-related protest, and particularly land-based civil disobedience, has been re-emerging (Rankin, 2020).

Land-based resistance and civil disobedience

Land-based resistance and civil disobedience are not new forms of protest, but recent events surrounding BC's forestry and pipeline activities has sparked a return to these tactics. Often, conventional protests and direct action tactics are designed to gain recognition from the state and appeal to government or legislative authorities. When protestors gather outside a legislative building or direct chants and shouts towards their elected officials, they are attempting to elicit a response and change the behaviour of their government. Conventional civil disobedience and protest appeal to lawmakers and state officials to change policies, use media attention to challenge social norms, and work towards change while leaving the overarching institutions of state governance unchallenged. However, a key feature of blockade and land-based movements is a refusal to acknowledge the state as a legitimate authority over the space being occupied. Blockade-style movements question the legitimacy of the state itself by rejecting its authority over protestors and their

occupied zone. With blockade and direct action tactics, the primary focus is on stopping industry activities and physically securing an area of land, rather than making appeals to authority.

Across Canada, many early and contemporary land-based conflicts have been led by or conducted alongside Indigenous Nations. Several Indigenous scholars including John Borrows (2016) and Glen Sean Coulthard (2014) have expanded on the connections between direct action and Indigenous resurgence, as both contest the legitimacy of state authority and center around the re-occupation of physical territory. Numerous high-profile examples illustrate the history of this connection across Canada, such as those which occurred at Oka, Grassy Narrows, and James Bay.

In 1971, the James Bay Cree and Inuit engaged in direct action to prevent the progression of an intensive hydroelectric power project in Northern Quebec. This conflict was partly driven by conflict between the Province of Quebec and the James Bay Cree regarding land rights and title, yet also reflected serious concerns about the environmental impacts of dam construction and river diversion (Borrows, 2016). The resistance of the Grassy Narrows First Nation to industrial logging of their traditional territories in northwestern Ontario similarly reflects joint environmental and land rights goals, with direct action beginning in 2002 and continuing to this day (Barker & Ross, 2017). In 1993, a protest at Clayoquot Sound known as the ‘war in the woods’ emerged in response to the provincial government’s plans to log old-growth temperate rainforest located on the west coast of Vancouver Island. That summer, over 850 people were arrested for blockading logging roads and preventing access to Clayoquot Sound, an event which was in many ways a precursor to subsequent blockade movements in the province (Tindall & Robinson, 2017). Since these early days of direct action, activists in BC and across the country have used blockade tactics to protest and prevent progress on resource extraction projects such as opposition from the Wet’suwet’en First Nation to the Coastal GasLink (CGL) pipeline and protests against logging of old-growth forest in Fairy Creek.

Blockade tactics generally involve groups of protestors physically blocking access to contested areas through the erection of camps and barricades, oftentimes placing their bodies directly in the path of industry. This type of civil disobedience can create ‘autonomous zones’ where activists set up physical spaces of exclusion that allow them to control and restrict passage through a designated territory (Chen, 2021; Klein, 2014). This contestation and control of specific physical spaces often leads blockade-style activism to be considered part of ‘land-based’ movements, because both their practical operation and political objectives are connected to the land they are occupying. This occupation of space prevents access to land and resources by industry and state officials, and is often accompanied by more conventional activist tactics such as mass protests and engaging the media. When blockade-style resistance is directed at extractive industries, activists often engage in highly visible and sometimes destructive forms of direct action, such as damaging equipment, chaining themselves to machinery, and sitting in lines to block police or industry movement (Chen, 2021).

In the summer of 2021, activists on the west coast of Vancouver Island made national news by chaining themselves to posts or buried pipes erected to block logging roads at Fairy Creek. People from across Canada travelled to this area of old-growth forest to protest and prevent continued logging by the Teal Jones Group. Fairy Creek activists set up multiple ‘autonomous zones’ where protestors camped in the woods, regulated

entry to certain areas, and physically blocked RCMP and logging industry vehicles and officials from accessing areas of old-growth forest. Techniques such as these significantly slow industry progress as workers often must wait for law enforcement to physically remove activists and any type of barricades from their positions using chainsaws, bolt cutters, and physical force. The Fairy Creek blockades of 2021 are considered the largest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history, with over 1000 activists arrested, and many more joining in peaceful demonstrations and protests (Marlow, 2023). With this, it seems that direct action will remain a feature of climate-related protest in the years to come.

Critical Infrastructure

Many land-based, blockade-style movements, such as Wet'suwet'en resistance to CGL and the protests at Fairy Creek, call into question the authority of the federal or provincial governments over the land and resources in question, and threaten what is often termed 'critical infrastructure'. Critical infrastructure refers to physical structures that are considered integral to the public safety, security, and economic stability of the state (Bosworth & Chua, 2021; Public Safety Canada, 2022), including key public infrastructure such as bridges, freeways, railways, and pipelines. The importance of extractive industrial infrastructures and the national economic security of Canada also leads to the classification of pipelines, forestry equipment, and transportation routes as critical infrastructure.

The federal government takes the security of critical infrastructure extremely seriously, beginning with the *National Strategy for Critical Infrastructure* published in 2010 and an accompanying *Action Plan*, both of which are updated regularly. 'Resilience to Insider Risk' is a key component of Canada's critical infrastructure security protection strategy. This connection between extractive environmental projects and the national security of Canada illustrates how deeply the anxiety regarding threats to the industry are felt. When viewed through the framework of critical infrastructure, land-based movements, such as blockades and direct action, and particularly those operating in solidarity with Indigenous sovereignty movements, represent a threat to the economic and national security of Canada. The disruption of critical infrastructure by direct action or blockade-style movements can threaten both the profitability of extractive industry and the effective functioning of certain federal or provincial services. For instance, when supporters of the Wet'suwet'en Nation's protests against the CGL pipeline blockaded train routes and rail service in Ontario and BC, federal agents considered classifying protestors as domestic terrorists due to the level of disruption to governmental and industry activities (Barrera, 2020; Forester, 2022). The development and implementation of critical infrastructure policies has enabled the federal government and policing forces to utilize powerful and expansive legislation relating to domestic terrorism to surveil and detain activists engaging in blockades and protests against extractive industry.

The federal government has a long history of labelling environmental and Indigenous activists and movements as instances of domestic terrorism. Crosby and Monaghan (2018) review the ways in which instruments from the 'war on terror' have been repurposed in recent years to focus on the surveillance and criminalization of environmental activists and Indigenous peoples who oppose critical infrastructure, energy, and resource extraction projects. A variety of regional and federal security forces, including the RCMP, local police forces,

and the RCMP, have been collaborating with federal entities such as the National Energy Board and industry partners including Enbridge, to conduct monitoring and data collection on a wide variety of individuals and organizations linked to critical infrastructure opposition. This has involved increasing criminalization and surveillance on movements and organizations such as Idle No More, a Global Day for Climate Justice, the Indigenous Environmental Network, and the Wild Salmon Circle (Crosby & Monaghan, 2018, p.84). In fact, “environmentalist groups” were identified in Canada’s first counterterrorism strategy as one of the top four groups of concern for exhibiting extremist beliefs and being potential perpetrators of violence (Greaves, 2021, p. 197). This collaboration between state security forces and industry highlights the priority that the Canadian government is placing on critical infrastructure, and the continued prioritization of industry despite its climate and emissions commitments and rhetoric.

Decolonial and radical overlaps

In Canada, blockades and land-based resistance to extractive projects often overlap and intertwine with Indigenous sovereignty and decolonial movements. Many extractive resource projects, such as the Alberta bitumen (oil/tar) sands and the construction of pipelines and energy infrastructure take place on the traditional territories of First Nations and Indigenous communities across the country. Opposition to such projects, therefore, may come from both environmental activists concerned about the ecological impacts of such projects as well as Indigenous Nations who contest the ability of industry and government to use their lands without consent (Canning, 2018). Indigenous claims to sovereignty and self-determination contest the legitimacy and authority of state and industry actors to conduct activities as Nations often invoke treaty and inherent rights to retain decision-making power over their territories (Crosby & Monaghan, 2018). This contestation is particularly pronounced in BC, where the majority of land is unceded and not governed by signed treaties. In fact, less than 20% of BC is covered by historical treaties and many disputed areas are outside of designated reserve lands, making jurisdictional conflicts in the province particularly contested (Hume & Walby, 2021).

The ongoing conflict in Wet’suwet’en territory over the construction of the Coastal GasLink (CGL) pipeline illustrates this intersection of land-based resistance, Indigenous sovereignty, and state anxieties surrounding critical energy infrastructure. The TransCanada CGL pipeline is intended to run 670 kilometers from Dawson Creek to Kitimat, BC, and is part of the largest private sector investment in Canadian history with \$40 billion invested in the project (Hume & Walby, 2021). Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs and all five Wet’suwet’en clans have expressed opposition to the project, maintaining that free, prior, and informed consent has not been given to industry or government officials (Gidimt’en Yintah Access. n.d.). Along with environmental activists, Indigenous communities expressed concerns about the potential for oil spills, impacts on wildlife and local watersheds, and increased tanker traffic on the coast resulting from the pipeline (Crosby & Monaghan, 2018). Beginning in 2018, the Unist’ot’en and Gidimt’en Clans have engaged in blockade tactics to prevent industry and RCMP access to the pipeline route, including constructing a cabin and barricading the primary access bridge (Ducklow, 2019). These two blockades, often referred to as ‘checkpoints’, have become prominent sites of conflict between Indigenous activists and industry and RCMP forces, as visitors are denied entry and asked to leave if they are not granted permission to enter the territory by Unist’ot’en Traditional Chiefs and

Matriarchs following the Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) protocol (Hume & Walby, 2021; Unist’ot’en Camp, 2017).

The significance of land-based, blockade tactics by both environmental and Indigenous activists has led to a strong response from the Canadian government and industry, who view this alliance as a serious threat to Canada’s energy and resource sector (Gelderloos, 2022). Embedded in Indigenous resistance and assertions of sovereignty is a questioning of the legitimacy of state authority and an acknowledgement of the settler colonial nature of the government of Canada and BC. The Wet’suwet’en and Fairy Creek blockades represent both a physical and ideological opposition to Canada, its policing and security forces, and the extractive industry and energy sector. The refusal by activists and Indigenous Nations to surrender land to the Crown and industry is being interpreted as a national security threat due to Canada’s energy and economic ambitions as these movements are calling into question the capitalist and settler colonial underpinnings of the Canadian state itself (Bosworth & Chua, 2021).

Resistance to resource extraction through blockades is not only about stopping an existential threat to human life and wellbeing, but provides an opportunity for activists to explore new systems and communities of practice to envision a different future with respect to other socio-economic issue areas. Since blockades create autonomous zones where groups of people often stay together, sometimes for long periods of time, activists often become a community, working together towards mutual goals (Tkachenko, 2024). Within many of these blockade sites, activists create alternative systems of organization, such as using techniques of direct democracy and consensus-finding to make decisions, or lending and donating goods and time to one another. In this way, the establishment of blockades and the disruption of industry activity also indicates a deeper opposition to status-quo systems of capitalism, extraction, and exploitation.

For many environmental and climate activist movements, particularly those strongly supported by young people, frustration around a perceived lack of meaningful action to mitigate climate change often intersects with other grievances and insecurities individuals are experiencing. Rising inflation, the increased cost of living, and the housing crisis in many of Canada’s most populous areas is creating a sense of insecurity for many which is further compounded by environmental concerns and exacerbated by increasing natural disasters and climate-related events. Young people in particular are facing a future characterized by uncertainty in the realms of climate, housing, and labour. Therefore, the rise in land-based activism, and particularly blockade-style movements, suggests that while Canadians are concerned about climate change and environmental security, and are also deeply craving a shift in other socio-economic systems and structures.

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