**Political Climate**  
By Caroline Ailanthus

It was a cold day in Washington DC, on February 17th, the day of the first major march and rally against climate change. Some might find the cold weather ironic, but of course, climate is not weather but rather a pattern of weather. In recent years, the pattern has gotten scary. The raw, spitting wind doesn’t deny the reality of climate change, and it couldn’t keep tens of thousands of impassioned people away.

At issue, front and center, is the proposed extension of TransCanada’s Keystone pipeline, both because of risks associated with the pipeline itself and because of what the pipeline could mean for the entire issue of climate change going forward. This is one of those rare cases where the decision of a single person really could be pivotal; the one person in question is President Barack Obama. The entire rally was organized simply to ask him not to sign a permit.

The Keystone Pipeline currently carries crude oil from the Canadian tar sands deposits south as far as Oklahoma, but the owner, TransCanada, wants to increase capacity and build several new sections, including one section that would reach to the Gulf of Mexico, in Texas. This project, the Keystone XL, or KXL, requires a permit signed by the U.S. President, because the work crosses a national boundary. President Obama has previously rejected the application because of concern over environmentally sensitive areas, but he encouraged TransCanada to reapply after adjusting the route. TransCanada already has the state permits it needs, and has already begun work on portions of the project that do not require the Federal permit, so Mr. Obama’s signature is currently the only thing they are still missing.

Rerouting the pipeline does not resolve the concern, however, because an oil spill does not have to be in a particularly sensitive area to be very bad. Any oil spill is a problem, and the oil KXL would carry is from the Alberta tar sands, which is, for various reasons, dramatically more toxic than ordinary crude oil. TransCanada does not have a very good safety record; the existing Keystone pipeline has leaked at least fourteen times in the past three years. Last summer, another TransCanada pipeline, one that had been in operation less than six months, exploded. But while TransCanada could improve their safety record, they cannot remove the threat of accident completely. As one of the speakers at the rally, Chief Jacqueline Thomas, pointed out, “oil will spill, it’s just a matter of when.” No matter how low the risk of accident gets, as any Lottery player knows, if enough people take a chance day after day for long enough, sooner or later the unlikely thing is going to happen. Even more important for many is the economic impact of more Canadian oil. Sooner or later, the world is going to have to transition away from fossil fuel, but a cheap supply of Canadian oil could mean the end of funding for American innovation in sustainable technology. That would mean America gets left behind, or, worse, that the transition does not happen at all, not until supply problems or worsening climate problems force the issue.

The pipeline extension would make the fight against climate change much, much harder.
For American participants, the rally and protest march were mostly about climate change as a whole, the KXL pipeline being only the most immediate example of a large and complex problem. Most of the signs reflected this larger concern, their messages ranging from the cute (“I miss snow days” on one side, “hell no, we want snow!” on the other) to the dire (“Is CO2 the gas in the chamber of our future? Are we our own executioners?”). Some signs referenced Hurricane Sandy, or even hydraulic fracturing, better known as fracking, a natural gas extraction technique that has nothing to do with the Alberta tar sands and associated pipelines, other than being equally scary (“frack you, fracking frackers!” was particularly noteworthy).

But just as the pipeline extension is an international project, so are the protests against it. In Canada, the issue is far more focused on the water pollution associated with both oil spills and tar sands mining. Both humans and wild animals have sustained horrific injuries and illnesses, apparently caused by contaminated oil. Some of this contamination is due to the activities of TransCanada, but other companies, particularly another energy giant, Enbridge, which is attempting to build its own pipeline across Canada for tar sands crude. Recently, a former Enbridge employee revealed serious attempts by Enbridge to cover up the extent of the health problems caused by their spills. Many protesters carried signs supporting the whistleblower’s website, HELPPA.com. A number of the speakers referred to Enbridge and its ethical violations. Like fracking, Enbridge is not directly related to the Keystone pipeline, but is part of the larger issues that demonstrators hope to address by defeating the pipeline extension.

Much of the contamination is in or near First Nations communities, where the ethical and environmental problems associated with oil extraction are compounded by continuing violations of indigenous land rights. Not surprisingly, these communities are in no mood to believe that this time the oil companies will share their profits with the people whose land they use and damage. Some protestors carried signs supporting Idle No More, a group of women who have taken the lead in protesting pending Canadian legislation that threatens indigenous rights. Several of the speakers at the rally were representatives of First Nations who spoke movingly about their responsibilities to both the land and their people. Chief Jacqueline Thomas of Saik’uz First Nation, and a member of the Yinka Dene Alliance, admitted that this is the first time in her life that white people have really worked alongside her. For many in her mostly white audience, this may be the first time they have engaged in any endeavor with Native American leaders. When Chief Thomas graciously thanked her host nation for allowing her and her colleagues to operate here, she didn’t mean the United States; she meant the tribal group whose traditional lands include Washington D.C. It was probably the first time most of her audience had been exposed to what seemed like a parallel world. When she asserted that, after generations of attacks, “my traditional government system continues to be alive and well, and will continue to be alive and well into the future,” the crowd roared support.

Throughout all this, the sound system was poor, so while most of Chief Thomas’s words were clear enough, some speeches were all but impossible to hear. The crowd remained upbeat, and when other people started cheering we assumed there was good reason and we started cheering,
too. T-shirt salesmen and people giving away buttons and informational literature worked the crowd while a little group of people pushed around a huge skin drum on wheels, pounding on it like a vast heartbeat to the sweet scent of sage smoke. Dry little fits of snow swirled out of the sky, alternating with bright winter sunlight and the periodic flyovers of seagulls and police helicopters, the latter getting headcounts of the crowds. When a helicopter flew over, everyone directed their signs upward and cheered.

The official estimate is 35,000 attendees, though some news stories have included estimates as low at 20,000 or as high as over 40,000 people. From inside the crowd it was impossible to tell how big the crowd was. Once we got moving, marching along a loop from the rally at the Washington Monument, past the White House, and then back to the Washington Monument again, it was also impossible to tell what was going on at the front of the line. Sometimes the whole march would stop in place for a few minutes, and no one seemed to know why. Then it would start again. Sometimes people would start shouting instructions—something to do with which way our signs were supposed to be facing—but nobody knew if these instructions were really coming from the organizers or had gotten muddled by the crowd, and nobody knew what the point of turning our signs at certain times was, anyway. Given the number of people present, some minor disorganization was probably inevitable, but the mood remained playful and flexible, and from inside the crowd a kind of leaderless, chaotic order began to assert itself. Cheers or chants erupted for no apparent reason and moved like waves along the river of people, often stopping as quickly as they had started. Some of the chants bordered on the silly (“hey, Obama! Listen to the Dalai Lama!”) and some are old favorites for progressive rallies on whatever issue (“The People! United! Will never be defeated!”) but most addressed climate change or the pipeline in a general way. The whole protest was curiously friendly in tone, probably because President Obama has explicitly stated that he intends to do something about climate change. It’s just obvious to everyone that he needs the political support to let him, even to make him, do what he basically wants to do anyway.

Even 40,000 people is not a very large protest, as such things go in Washington. Some events draw over 100,000. But organizers, who include groups such as 350.org, the Sierra Club, and the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), describe it as the largest climate rally yet. The event was much larger than the crowd in D.C., for there were also coordinated solidarity rallies in at least half a dozen other states, including Florida, the state where Mr. Obama actually was on Sunday. Some states, such as California, had several protests in different cities. It appears public momentum for this movement may finally be growing. There is also an online campaign to ask people, especially those who could not go to the rallies in person, to email the President to ask him not to approve the pipeline. This is his opportunity to prove he is serious about climate change.

And lest anyone think that the cold weather was an ironic touch, it should be pointed out that earlier in the month temperatures were unseasonably warm. On the day of the rally, many of the silver maples and American elms on the mall were blooming. These trees do not produce large,
showy blossoms the way the cherry trees do, so perhaps few people not particularly fond of botany noticed, but little, inconspicuous blooms were there, and obvious from the street to all who knew what to look for. Spring is coming several weeks early this year. Again.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/17/forward-on-climate-rally_n_2702575.html


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