

# **Pinkwashing the Tar Sands – JUNE 20, 2012**

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## **INTRO**

I'm really happy to be here in Toronto, occupied Mississauga of New Credit land. I'd like to thank QuAIA for inviting me to speak on this panel. I've followed QuAIA since its founding in 2008, and I'm humbled to be included on this panel speaking out against the co-option of queer and trans identities by those who have never actually invested in our well-being.

Today I will be discussing a recent ad campaign launched by a former Conservative party aide that employs women's rights, worker's rights, and queer rights in order to promote oil extracted from Alberta's Tar Sands as “ethical”.

A little about myself: I'm currently based in Montreal, occupied KANIEN'KEHA:KA territory. I grew up in the industrial suburbs of Oshawa in a family of tradespeople. I'm queer and interested in environmental justice. I don't consider myself an expert on this topic, I'm just a queer person who got really pissed off when I saw the ads, so I wrote an article about it. I invite members of the audience to talk to me after the event, and to give me feedback.

First, I'm going to give a super brief description of the oil sands for those of you who aren't really sure. Then I'll explain who Alykhan Velshi is and what his EthicalOil campaign is, as well as how it is a pinkwashing project. From here, I will unpack his claims that the oil sands are “ethical” and Canada's role in LGBTQ pride. At the end of my talk, I will discuss what we can do to resist this pinkwashing in our communities. I will be doing this all through a queerly environmental lens, though I won't have much time to talk about environmental justice on its own – maybe we can do that in the Q&A.

## **WHAT ARE THE TAR SANDS?**

Located in Northern Alberta, the tar sands are the world's largest oil extraction project, as well as one of the world's largest capitalist investments. The area of extraction covers an area roughly equal to that of the state of Florida.

Tar sands consist of heavy crude oil mixed with sand, clay and bitumen. Extraction entails burning natural gas to generate enough heat and steam to melt the oil out of the sand. As many as five barrels of water are needed to produce a single barrel of oil.

While many policy makers want to convince us that tar sands are clean, The Indigenous Environmental Network, The Rainforest Action Network, Greenpeace, environmental scientists, and many others have spoken out against the project as the biggest environmental disaster on the planet.

## **ETHICAL OIL – ALYKHAN VELSHI'S CAMPAIGN**

### **So, who is Alykhan Velshi?**

Velshi is the former Conservative party aide to Jason Kenney, formally recognized by the state as the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, but better known to many as the Minister of Censorship and Deportation.

Velshi is well-spoken and can tailor any argument to sound legitimate. He is known for his attempts to “neutralize” opponents. For example, and very relevant in creating links here tonight, Velshi played a key role in preventing George Galloway from entering Canada. Of this, Judge Richard Mosley wrote that, “one might hope that a ministerial aide would exercise greater restraint,” in a passage critical of Mr. Velshi’s manoeuvrings (Freeze, 2011).

On the Federal level, it is not legally seen as a conflict of interests for former aides to lobby for policy change... I mean, not that Velshi needs too. Peter Kent, Canada's Minister of Environment, already uses the language of “ethical oil”.

### **What is the campaign?**

EthicalOil.org is a campaign run by Alykhan Velshi, who inherited the project from its original creator, political pundit and oil sands proponent Ezra Levant, most known for his book.

The campaign features a series of youtube videos, commercials, images, and blogs, all promoting tar sands oil as “ethical”.

In the article I wrote about the campaign for *The Dominion*, I focus on Velshi's several images, which each feature two images: on the left, a frightening scene from a state in which conflict oil is produced; on the right, a polished image of a happy while Canadian worker or pristine landscape. **\*images**

However, I originally felt inspired to write the piece after seeing a blog on Velshi's website entitled, “The Do Have Gays In Iran. And They Kill Them.” In reference to Iran's President claiming there are no gays in Iran. While I obviously would not condone the mistreatment, abuse, or murder of LGBTQ folks in any part of the world, this struck me as yet another attempt of a political leader to use queer identities and bodies in order to push forward their political agenda.

Much like Israel's co-option of queer identities and claiming it is a gay haven for queers in order to demonize Arab and Muslim people and states, Velshi is coopting queer identities in attempt to paint oil from Arab states as terrorist nations from which conflict oil comes from in order to sell oil from the world's most unsustainable and dirty environmental disaster.

So, let's try to unpack what Velshi is doing. From here, I will discuss Velshi's claim of Canada's oil as ethical, the impacts the tar sands have on Indigenous communities in Alberta, examine the history of Conservative participation in queer liberation, and suggest steps that we can take within our communities to resist this type of pink-washing.

## **CANADA'S OIL IS ETHICAL?**

### **For Who? Which communities are most affected by tar sands pollution?**

While Velshi might claim the Canada's oil is ethical, it is no coincidence that Canada's relationship with Indigenous communities is completely left out of the campaign.

### **Canada & Indigenous Communities**

The tar sands have polluted the air land and water in Alberta, including the Athabasca River, at a rate that is even higher than previously anticipated by scientists or the government. While the government continues to claim that these toxins are a result of natural sources, study after study concludes that this is a false claim, as the water is more polluted downstream from the developments sites. We are now finding metals such as Mercury, Arsenic and Cadmium in the Athabasca that are known to be cancer-causing, even in tiny doses.

From this, we see frighteningly high rates of cancer among Indigenous communities living in the area, specifically in Fort Chipewan, Fort McKay and Fort McMurray. Exposure to the hydrocarbon sediments is felt most by these communities, who have traditionally had diets rich in fish, moose, and birds that live in and around the water source. Moose particularly expose people to 33 times what is considered an acceptable level of cancer-causing toxins.

Because of the high rates of toxins in the animals and water, we can see a significant loss of native traditions & self-sustainability, with the loss of fishing and hunting abilities. People are no longer able to fish, swim in, or drink the water, and are forced to seek alternatives.

During a 2009 parliament disruption by youth environmental justice activists (both native and non-native) from across the country, people brought into public focus the government's unwillingness to sign the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was drafted in 2007, not signed until 2011. Even when it was signed, the gov't reminds native communities that the DRIP is not legally binding.

The truth is that, particularly if the DRIP were legally binding, Canada couldn't sign onto the agreement with its treatment of Indigenous folks in Canada – many folks pointing specifically to the tar sands, referring to the mega project as a colonial process of environmental genocide.

### **Furhter, Velshi's campaign has been slammed by oil unions**

About the TV ads specifically taking aim at Saudi Arabia, Dave Coles, president of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada said, “I think it has racist overtones. I don’t like it. I think it’s a cheap, inappropriate approach. It was only a few years ago that Saudi Arabia was the saviour of the world, the Iraq war, ‘Oh, look how great they are. They are defending the supply of oil in the world,’ and now all of a sudden, they are unethical? Doesn’t sit well with me.”

“Oil workers, whether they work in North Africa, Chile or Venezuela, are oil workers,” he

added.

Union leaders met with opposition MPs in Ottawa on Thursday September 22 2011 to oppose the proposed construction of the Keystone Pipeline from Alberta to the United States.

“Most Canadians would be shocked if they learn the truth about our lack of energy security,” said Gil McGowan, president of the Alberta Federation of Labour. “About 60% of the oil used in Ontario and the eastern provinces doesn't actually come from places like Alberta, it comes from places like Saudi Arabia, Libya and Venezuela.

These are exactly the countries that Quebec and the maritime provinces are relying on for the lion's share of their energy resources.” (Sims, 2011).

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I also don't personally know any queers who have directly benefited from the tar sands... though, I don't often rub shoulders with rich cis gay men in the oil industry.

### **CANADA: A SAFE HAVEN FOR QUEERS?**

I'm sure that it is obvious to many or most in this room that the Conservative party doesn't actually care about the well-being of queers in Canada, either at home or abroad. This is made clear by simply looking at the recent history of Conservative roles in dealing with queers. We see that:

1. Continued attempted repeals of same-sex marriage. I mean, not that I am down with marriage as an institution, but fuck off, seriously.
2. Jason Kenney removing LGBTQ presence from citizenship guides for new Canadians. This action is particularly, among many other things, hypocritical. I mean, Jason Kenney wants the entire world to buy tar sands oil because Canada has an impeccable track record of gay rights, but at the same time wants to invisibilize us? I mean, dang, at least be consistent!
3. Appointing an opponent of same-sex marriage to the Immigration and Refugee Board.
4. Conservatives overwhelming support the deportation of queer refugee claimants:
  - i. Queers here in Toronto rallied successfully against the Harper government's attempted deportation of Alvaro Orozco, a filmmaker who received significant media attention in 2007 when his refugee claim was denied because he “didn't look gay enough” according to the adjudicator.
  - ii. Manuel Sanchez, a Mexican gay man who was facing constant assaults from a police officer who he had previously been dating is scheduled for deportation tonight.
5. All but one Conservative party member voted in opposition of bill C-389, which proponents

argue would protect trans citizens from discrimination in work places, housing, and when dealing with police. There is currently a similar bill that has passed its second reading.

#### 6. The induction into law of Bill C-31

Via ASTTeQ: One extremely problematic aspect of Bill C-31 is the fact that refugees who are identified as coming from a “safe country” would have their refugee claim fast tracked, with no access to appeal. One Minister would have the sole discretion to designate these “safe countries” without consultation... Similar to (and sometime overlapping with), gender-based persecution, the violence and persecution facing LGBTQ refugees are oftentimes from powerful individuals and groups they meet in their everyday lives. Homophobic and transphobic attacks continue as hate crime reports attest and LGBT related complaints to the human rights commissions continue to increase.

7. The on-going cuts to sexual education programs in high schools, HIV/AIDS health programming, as well as support services for non-status and refugee people.

I'm sure that everyone in this room knows, it is not easy being queer or trans in Canada. Many of us struggle for survival, having trouble finding steady employment, housing, or access social support services that make us feel safe or respected. National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs and the National Transgender Discrimination survey show that trans women, people of colour, Indigenous queers and two-spirited folks, people with disabilities, non-status folks, and street youth continue to be the most vulnerable populations to violent hate crimes or murder. People from our communities continue to be disproportionately incarcerated for committing survival crimes, locked away in dangerously misgendering prisons, where they have little access to support, or healthcare. And, as we know, trans people are still required to submit to sterilizing surgeries in order to change the sex markers on our IDs.

Further, Canada is not a global safe haven for queers escaping violence and discrimination in their home countries – Canadian immigration policies make it really difficult to claim refugee status, and the types of homophobia or transphobia they experience through the claimant process.

All of these trends are reflected in the realities of queers living in Israel. While Israel touts itself as a safe haven for queers in the middle east, the government is intensely xenophobic and racist. While there are two annual Pride parades in Tel Aviv, it is not uncommon for spectators to verbally and physically assault participants with rocks.

There are many ways that Canada has lead

### **WHAT SHOULD WE DO?**

As queer and trans communities – I use “community” in its plural form, as we are not homogenous; we are a diverse group of people with different intersecting identities, abilities, and needs – we need to:

1. Reject the notion that Jasbir Puar refers to as *Homonationalism*. That is, we need to be queer across borders – we need to reject patriotism, challenge the invisible lines referred to as borders, and reject assimilation into institutions that uphold white, heteronormative, Western

values. For example, rather than seeking to be out and proud in the military, we should be speaking out against racist wars fought over oil and paid for in blood. We need to reject the two-tier wage system that privileges upper-class white bodies, and tell policy makers that if migrant labourers are good enough to grow our food, they are good enough to live here in safety and grow roots with their families with full access to healthcare and social services.

2. Reject white-supremacist, racist and body policing ideologies and institutions that teach us to hate ourselves and each other. We must embrace popular education, skill-sharing, and support networks that have always been staples in our survival as queer and trans people in a society that teaches us that we are all going to die and disappear.

3. Be intensely critical of administrative bodies that make decisions on our behalf and in our “best interests”. For example, we must question hate crimes legislation: Does the government really want to protect us, or are they using our safety as an excuse to build bigger prisons to lock us away in when we are forced to commit survival crimes.

4. Reject corporate citizenship. That is, we need to continue to fight for liberation struggles in our communities and spaces, rather than making way for gay consumerism. Pride has been a great example of this. Most of us know that Pride is meant to commemorate a riot that began when trans women, people of colour and street youth rose up to challenge the police violence that threatened their daily means of survival. But now, Pride has become a PR campaign, where every corporation from MAC to Pfizer, the Israeli government to the Toronto Police Department are given a platform to sell us their brand of citizenship that we are supposed to buy into.

5. Remember that we have never been given safe spaces or granted inclusion in national institutions by benevolent governmental bodies. We fought for those things through caring for ourselves and each other, building support networks, and when we had to, by taking to the streets.

6. Organize at the grassroots level. Continue to engage in conversations that make us uncomfortable, that challenge our privileges, and that work towards creating inclusive spaces where we can all get together and talk about the people who are fucking with us – and plot our revenge.

7. Organize against xenophobic and racist laws that attempt to incarcerate, detain, and dehumanize queers seeking asylum in Canada. Currently, this includes resisting C-31 and C-38.

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