

April 18, 2019

Kenney's "green-left war room" could waken a sleeping dragon



In his victory speech to the party faithful, Alberta Premier-elect Jason Kenney, in what is likely a Canadian first (alongside rolling into the party in a Dodge Ram pickup truck), declared war on a handful of charitable, non-profit organizations

who oppose or critique further expansion of Alberta's oil sands and pipelines. It was red meat for a hungry crowd who feel victimized with the petroleum industry having been the perennial subject of scorn from environmental non-profit, non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These groups are a handy target in a context of shrinking global prices and North American markets that have seen a precipitous drop in demand for Alberta oil. The anti-NGO gambit is an oddly caustic vendetta, made even stranger when one considers Kenney's broader take on the role NGOs in the public sphere.

Speaking last year to a Cardus-sponsored event in Calgary, Jason Kenney waxed eloquent about the vital role of civil society in our democracy: "Civil society addresses the bonds that people form around common missions and common goals... Indeed, society writ large is not something that we encounter as often as the numerous societies in which we live, our families, schools, companies, faith communities, sports teams, music groups, fraternal associations, social clubs, charitable ventures."¹

These associations are where everyday citizenship is nurtured, where we step outside our comfortable households and take interest in the world around us, from volunteering and fundraising to coalescing and amplifying the voice of citizens outside of the formal structures of government and party politics. Kenney frequently riffs on the great Irish conservative philosopher Edmund Burke's notion of "little platoons", groups that are vital to creating public affection, from which flows love of our

country, our planet, and the many peoples that inhabit it.

Civil society is indeed the oxygen of democracy, as many observers have remarked, from Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1800's to Harvard Kennedy School scholar Robert Putnam. Without a strong, diverse and active civil society, democracy is but a pale shadow, where no breathing room exists between isolated individuals and their state. Such an association-starved society is prone to corruption, contracts don't have a bedrock of social trust, we tend to fear both change itself and people who aren't like ourselves, and authoritarian personalities find fertile ground for their populist but often poisonous ideas.

In my line of work, where it is often depressing to experience how shallowly we think of charities and non-profit organizations, it is novel and refreshing to hear a major political figure such as Kenney talk in-depth about civil society. Speaking to journalist and writer Jen Gerson a few weeks back, Kenney said "civil society should come before the state, and the intermediary institutions of family and volunteer organizations and local communities have their own sovereignty, and the state should give space to those things to allow for human flourishing."²

I couldn't agree more. Social innovation, which is pre-occupied with the space and ideas to promote human flourishing, depends initially on outliers, typically with little or no government funding. The suffragette, civil rights and environmental movements are examples. The most effective philanthropy is thinking generations into the future, well beyond election cycles or shareholder reporting periods, as the co-director of the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, Rob Reich, notes in his new book *Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better*.

And yet, there is an irony to Kenney's embrace of civil society that must be called out. It is true that Kenney speaks of civil society from a particular social conservative perspective, where organizations like Cardus, who advance faith-based perspectives on family, science and social policy are more

¹ <https://www.convivium.ca/articles/serving-god-and-neighbour>

² <https://thewalrus.ca/the-great-myth-of-alberta-conservatism/>

emblematic of what he has in mind. I can respect that many such organizations foster a sense of community and belonging, and have a legitimate role to play in public discourse and the plural marketplace of ideas that makes our country vibrant. Much more disturbing is Kenney's full-frontal desire to attack environmental charities.

Speaking to the party faithful last year, Kenney vowed "we will go to court if necessary to get the federal government to strip charitable status from bogus charities like Tides Canada and the David Suzuki Foundation."³ He doubled down on this pledge in his election victory speech. He has further committed to creating a "war room" to bankroll companies who want to take these charities to court.

Kenney has also protested the appointment of former Pembina Institute executive director Ed Whittingham to the Alberta Energy Regulator, precisely because of his association with Pembina, a homegrown nonprofit society that has worked constructively with industry for decades to ensure responsible and innovative energy development practices.

In demonizing these groups, Kenney is using the familiar red herring of "foreign funding", part of the playbook of politicians the world over. Setting aside the fact that we welcome foreign investment in every other aspect of the Canadian economy, or that we incentivize thousands of Canadian donors to support environmental, human rights or other charitable causes abroad, this is a favorite device of Putin, Duterte, Bolsonaro, Orban, Erdogan and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. It was also a treasured tactic of Kenney's former leader, Stephen Harper.

In a gushing interview conducted with the armchair conspiracy theorist Vivian Krause⁴, Kenney riffed on the narrative of big US oil interests bankrolling Canadian charities to front a faux-grassroots campaign, a strategy known as "astroturfing". Amusing on the face of it, this bizarre thesis has been amplified through Postmedia's many outlets throughout the country, as well as through social media and party propaganda.

For what it's worth, the vast majority of the evil David Suzuki Foundation's revenue comes from Canadians, and mainly from *individuals* who (shockingly) care about the state of our planet, not shadowy shell foundations funneling US oil dollars, as Krause has proffered.

If Kenney is elected Premier, let us hope he skews toward the pluralist and generous version of civil society he spoke about at the Cardus gathering. If, however, he reveals himself to be a studied enemy of civil society, setting up his war room to go after environmental charities (and whichever as-yet unnamed groups are next in the crosshairs), then all charities in Alberta, and Canada, should speak out against such spiteful cowardice. If a few niche ecological citizens groups get under Kenney's skin, imagine a chorus of 86,000 charities, 170,000 nonprofits and countless other groups standing in solidarity.

If civil society is the oxygen of a democratic fire, all politicians should watch where they light the match.

James Stauch is the Director of the Institute for Community Prosperity at Mount Royal University.

³ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/jason-kenney-ucp-agm-1.4650521>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hYFUagLnnU>