

Big Oil in City Hall

Climate and Energy Politics in the Queen City

Simon Enoch and Roxanne Korpan



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The Regina Public Interest Research Group (RPIRG) is a student funded resource centre at the University of Regina committed to social and environmental justice. Providing the resources and funding necessary to enable students to organize around issues through research, education, and action.

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Introduction

In the battle against climate change, city governments across the globe are increasingly at the forefront of climate action, often adopting and advocating for climate policies far more ambitious and aggressive than their subnational or even national government counterparts (Watts, 2017; van der Heijden et al, 2019). However, as local governments adopt more aggressive climate policies, they inevitably begin to come into conflict with the fossil fuel industry and its political allies. Indeed, we are already seeing municipalities across Canada and the United States become the sites of a new political battle over the push by some local governments to end natural gas hook-ups in new buildings (Mufson, 2021; Klein, 2021a). These conflicts will become even more acute in oil-producing regions, where the fossil fuel industry wields substantial political, economic, and cultural power. In western Canada’s ‘petro-provinces’ of Alberta and Saskatchewan, the oil and gas industry enjoys immense material and rhetorical support from the provinces’ respective governments. Unsurprisingly, both provincial governments show little enthusiasm for any climate action that might upset the industry (Carter, 2020; Carter and Eaton, 2019). Moreover, as these provincial governments actively fight to prevent the adoption and implementation of federal climate policies, cities in these regions often become the only viable avenue for concerned citizens to press for climate action. The end result is that municipal governments in the oil-producing regions of western Canada are positioned to become the primary sites where we will see national-level conflicts over energy politics play out in the future.¹ By investigating how one of these disputes unfolded—in the City of Regina in January of 2021—we hope this report can provide some insight and understanding for city governments, politicians and citizens on how best to navigate these coming conflicts.

Background

Understanding the potential for political conflict on issues of energy and climate between provincial and municipal governments in western Canada’s ‘petro-provinces’ helps us set the stage for the events that would transpire in January 2021. As the capital city of the second largest oil-producing province in Canada and home to a provincial government often hostile to any environmental policy that they perceive as imposing undue costs on the oil industry, it has been left to Regina’s city council to advance climate policies that have often been more ambitious than those of the provincial government. In 2018, the City committed to end its reliance on fossil fuels with a pledge to become 100 percent renewable by 2050 (CBC News, 2018). The subsequent municipal election in 2020 saw city council transformed with a new slate of progressive councillors, some of whom had run specifically on more ambitious environmental platforms (McCormick, 2020).

¹ The fact that municipalities in Canada are often considered “creatures of the provincial government” and subject to provincial government intervention in municipal affairs further compounds the potential stakes and power imbalance in these coming conflicts (See Lightbody, 2006 39-40).

On January 20, 2021, one of those newly elected councillors, Dan LeBlanc, proposed an amendment that would add fossil fuel companies to the list of industries that cannot advertise with or sponsor City of Regina events or buildings.² Councillor LeBlanc argued that the City's recent commitment to become 100 percent renewable by 2050 would be perceived to be in conflict with accepting sponsorship money from those very same fossil fuel industries from which the City was trying to wean itself. "Sponsorships are associative in nature and therefore alignment with predetermined city values is necessary," LeBlanc explained, "We cannot allow that to happen with fossil fuel companies, whose financial interest is to push the continued use of carbon-heavy technologies, carbon-heavy fuel sources. We need to distance ourselves from that and not allow them to gain legitimacy through their association with us" (Cited in Djuric, 2021). Among councillors that supported the amendment, many felt that it was hypocritical to accept sponsorship money from the fossil fuel industry while committing to ending the use of fossil fuels by 2050. "We needed to put our money where our mouth is," one councillor we interviewed stated. The amendment was debated and informally adopted by a 7-4 vote, but would not become official City policy until passing a full city council vote seven days later.

What followed in the intervening week was a wave of opposition to the proposed amendment that Regina Mayor Sandra Masters described as "an avalanche response from citizens and industry," kicked off by the Premier of Saskatchewan himself (Salloum, 2021). Over the next seven days, city councillors would be subject to an advocacy campaign and lobbying effort on behalf of the oil and gas industry and its allies that is rarely seen at the municipal level. In the end, all the councillors who initially supported the amendment would rescind their support, with Councillor LeBlanc withdrawing the motion at the January 27th city council meeting. LeBlanc, who introduced the amendment, would be terminated from his employment at the law firm of Gerrard Rath Johnson LLP "without cause" two days later (Atter, 2021b).

This report seeks to understand the key players in this advocacy campaign, the arguments they marshalled and the techniques they employed to successfully pressure city council to rescind the amendment. As city governments become more enmeshed in the highly volatile politics of energy and climate, they can expect to be targets of campaigns like these in the future. Understanding how these campaigns work and what arguments and appeals they make to the public and policymakers may provide us with lessons for how best to successfully advocate for more ambitious climate action in western Canada at the local level in the future.

About the Report

The following report does not seek to argue the validity of the sponsorship amendment, but rather to investigate the overwhelming, and in some cases, coordinated response to it by the oil industry and its allies. Nevertheless, this report proceeds from the premise that urgent measures are required to address the climate emergency, and that understanding the strategies and tactics of a fossil fuel industry that has long lobbied to block such measures will be an essential part of successful climate action, particularly in western Canada.

The data contained in the report comes primarily from an Access to Information Request (Fossil Fuel FOI # 2021-010) for correspondence to the Mayor and city council regarding the

² The existing policy restricts sponsorship, naming rights and advertising to be pursued with companies or organizations that compromise the City's reputation or contradict any law or City bylaw. Specific restrictions are in place for companies or organizations: Whose business is derived from the sale or production of tobacco, cannabis, pornography or sexual services, or from armaments and weapons manufacturing or other unsafe products or sale of such weapons excluding recreational firearms. See "Sponsorship, Naming Rights and Advertising Policy." Available here: <http://reginask.iqm2.com/Citizens/FileOpen.aspx?Type=1&ID=4171&Inline=True>.

amendment between January 20th and January 28th.³ We also conducted interviews with five city councillors about their experience during this period. In light of the abuse and threats that many of these councillors were subjected to during the controversy, we have decided to keep their identities confidential to the extent we can and have not attributed any remarks to the specific councillors we interviewed.⁴ These interviews were supplemented with media reportage, social media records and transcripts of the January 27th city council meeting. Using this data, we identify the politicians, industry leaders and associated industry advocacy groups that mobilized to oppose the amendment along with the key arguments they made. We will also assess the impact of this campaign on policymakers and the public alike as well as provide recommendations for how city government and concerned citizens can be better prepared to anticipate and navigate these sorts of lobbying campaigns in the future.

“Regime of Obstruction”

The events of January 2021 provide a case study for the many ways the fossil fuel industry can marshal and mobilize its substantial economic, political and cultural power to obstruct challenges and threats to its interests. William Carroll describes this mobilization as the oil industry’s “Regime of Obstruction.” Importantly, Carroll notes that the regime operates on “distinct scales,” from households and families up to local, sub-national and national political and economic leaders (2021, 481-482). As we will see, these distinct scales were certainly on display during the events of January 2021 as allies and advocates of the industry both great and small were mobilized in this “avalanche” of opposition to the amendment. Indeed, the scope and intensity of the campaign on behalf of industry over a relatively mild sanction made by a municipal government is what makes this case study so intriguing. National lobbying and advocacy campaigns such as these seldom target municipal governments (Weschler, 2016). In our interviews with councillors, those who supported the amendment viewed the policy as a logical consequence to the City’s 100 percent renewability commitment and most were taken aback by the scale and vehemence of the opposition. As one councillor quipped, “it was not a sensational amendment, it became sensational.” Understanding how and why the amendment became “sensational” is a central aim of this report.

3 The full LAFOIP request can be viewed on the City of Regina open data portal at: <http://open.regina.ca/dataset/fossil-fuel-foi-2021-010>.

4 We wish to emphasize that it was the decision of the authors, not the councillors, to keep the interviewees’ identities confidential primarily due to the abuse and threats that some of these councillors received.

Oil in Saskatchewan

To understand the events of January 2021, it is important to situate the role of the oil and gas industry within Saskatchewan’s political economy and political culture. Saskatchewan is the second-largest oil producer in Canada and the sixth largest onshore producer in Canada and the United States. In 2020, the province produced 159.2 million barrels of oil (Government of Saskatchewan, 2021). While the province has been producing oil since the 1940s, the advancements in new extraction techniques such as horizontal drilling, multi-stage fracturing, thermal extraction and flooding techniques allowed for record-breaking production during the “boom” years from 2006 to 2014. As the oil boom fueled private investment in the province and filled government coffers, government officials came to regard oil as the province’s “No. 1 industry” (Carter, 2020, 57).

Scott Moe in full oil worker regalia addresses an energy rally sponsored by Canada Action, Rally 4 Resources and the Regina Chamber of Commerce.

Certainly, the Saskatchewan Party government—in power since the dawn of the oil boom in 2007—has sought to maintain oil and gas as the province’s premier industry. Through a mixture of low taxation and royalty rates coupled with generous economic incentives often developed in partnership with industry, the Saskatchewan government has done everything in its power to encourage the growth of the industry in the province. The government has been equally persistent in removing potential costs to the industry, instituting a regulatory regime that has been described as “the wild west,” characterized by minimal enforcement, monitoring or assessment of the industry’s impact on the environment (Carter and Eaton, 2016; Olive and Valentine, 2018).



Photo Credit: Brian Zinchuk

Beyond creating the most favourable economic and regulatory climate for oil and gas, the Saskatchewan government is also one of the industry's most vocal political champions. Former Premier Brad Wall and current Premier Scott Moe have taken every opportunity to boost oil and gas, often tying the prosperity of the province and even the country to the health of industry. Similarly, both premiers regularly vilify critics of the industry, often characterizing them as hypocritical, dangerously misinformed or even maliciously bent on the destruction of the industry and the province's economy (Eaton and Enoch, 2021b).

In the wedge-issue politics practiced by the Saskatchewan Party, support for oil and gas often functions as a loyalty test, with those deemed insufficiently supportive accused of failing to stand up for the province's interests, what Martin Olszynski has called "conflating dissent with disloyalty" (Enoch, 2015; Olszynski, 2021).⁵ However, as our past research has shown, these sentiments are not exclusive to the government of the province; they have been carefully cultivated by the oil industry for decades and shape how a significant segment of the population understands both energy and climate politics in our province (Eaton and Enoch, 2021a; Eaton and Enoch, 2021b). Suffice it to say, the oil industry enjoys tremendous economic, political and cultural support in Saskatchewan, with the industry bound up in the province's political imagination in ways unlike most other economic sectors.

Yet, despite the power the industry enjoys in the province, it also portrays itself as an industry under siege, with its legitimacy and social license to operate constantly called into question by powerful outside forces (Eaton and Enoch, 2021a; Gunster and Saurette, 2014; Gunster, Neubauer, Bermingham and Massie, 2021; Sinclair, 2017). Shane Gunster describes this industry propagated narrative as "extractive populism." As Gunster explains, extractive populism contains three key claims, portraying oil, gas, and mining as: [1] Constituting the core of the Canadian economy and providing a wide range of benefits to everyone in the country; [2] Despite bringing economic prosperity, oil gas and mining are under attack, threatened by a small but highly vocal and surprisingly powerful constellation of political forces; [3] Collective political mobilization (such as the advocacy campaigns launched against the amendment in Regina) are necessary to defend the "national interest" from the forces that threaten it (2019, 14-15). As we will see, these claims of extractive populism will be reproduced repeatedly in the arguments made by various individuals and groups against the sponsorship amendment.

Indeed, viewing the events of January 2021 through the lens of extractive populism gives us some sense of why a municipal sanction against fossil fuel sponsorship would invite such a concerted response on behalf of the oil industry and its allies. The industry and its supporters have been primed to view their industry as constantly under threat. The fact that this particular threat to the oil and gas industry's legitimacy came from within one of the supposed provincial strongholds of support for the industry appears to have only compounded the perceived severity of the threat. Indeed, Craig Lothian—owner and CEO of a group of oil-related companies in Regina—opined that it was "the attacks from within that bewilder us the most."

It is against this conflicted backdrop of an industry simultaneously powerful enough to shape the province's economic and environmental policies but also believing itself to be at the mercy of more powerful outside critics that the politics of January 2021 need to be understood.

⁵ A "wedge-issue" is an intentional political strategy designed to divide or polarize a political faction or part of the electorate over a particularly controversial issue—such as "jobs versus the environment" (See Wiant, 2002).

The Politicians

Given the highly supportive role of the Saskatchewan government to the province's oil and gas industry described above, it is no surprise that Premier Scott Moe would be the first politician to rush to the industry's defense as news of the sponsorship amendment came out. Indeed, Premier Moe's initial statement on social media left little doubt about whose side the Saskatchewan government favoured in this dispute, going as far as to threaten the City of Regina with punitive economic sanctions if the amendment were to pass. Calling the amendment an "absurd" and "hypocritical attack," Premier Moe warned:

Should this motion pass Regina city council next week, our government will seriously consider the future of sponsorships to the City of Regina from provincial energy companies like SaskEnergy and SaskPower. I would also note that the City of Regina receives about \$29 million a year from the municipal surcharge on SaskPower bills and \$4.3 million from the municipal surcharge on SaskEnergy bills. If these Regina city councillors have such a strong aversion to accepting money from provincial energy companies, I assume they will no longer want to receive these funds, which could be distributed to other Saskatchewan municipalities (Moe, 2021).

While opposition politicians immediately questioned whether the Premier had overstepped his authority, that nuance may have been lost on most Regina residents (Horseman, 2021). Indeed, the economic threats by the Premier were regularly cited by residents in their communications with councillors as one of the reasons to rescind the amendment. One councillor told us that those threats "loomed large" in their constituents' minds with many asking, "Are you going to raise my taxes to make up for this money Scott is going to withhold?" Another told us that constituents cited the Premier's threats "note for note." Moreover, several of the councillors we interviewed felt that the Premier's threats stoked a lot of the "fear and anger" that would ultimately be directed against them. Indeed, one councillor remarked that they believed Moe's threats "controlled the narrative," shaping how both the public and the media viewed the controversy from the outset.

In addition to the premier, federal Conservative Party Members of Parliament Andrew Scheer and Michael Kram also publicly weighed in. Andrew Scheer submitted a petition to the Mayor that called the amendment a "hypocritical attack on the thousands of struggling workers in Regina and across Saskatchewan who depend on the oil and gas industry for their livelihoods." Similarly, Michael Kram addressed an open letter to all seven councillors who supported the amendment accusing them both of hypocrisy and dishonesty and urging them to reconsider their vote. We will address some of the recurring arguments made against city council and the amendment in a subsequent section. What the above emphasizes is that the industry was not



House of Commons
Chambre des communes

To: City of Regina
Queen Elizabeth II Court
2476 Victoria Avenue
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3C8

Dear Councillor,

On behalf of the residents and voters of Regina—Wascana, I wish to express my dismay at the City's executive committee decision to ban fossil fuel companies from City advertising or sponsorship.

Throughout this issue, there has been much talk about democratic mandates and voting with one's values. I do not doubt for a moment that the voters, in the last municipal election, voted for change and that you therefore received a legitimate mandate within your area of jurisdiction. However, yours is not the only democratic mandate. When I was elected in 2019, I campaigned explicitly on three principles: building pipelines, eliminating the carbon tax and reducing the public debt. Premier Moe and his Saskatchewan Party MLAs likewise explicitly campaigned in the 2020 election - mere weeks before your election - on principles of supporting our petroleum industry.

These are many of the same voters who voted for you. The difference is that, at the federal and provincial levels, we made our intentions on these issues clear. I stand to be corrected but, as I recall, many of the new councillors campaigned on issues such as protecting park spaces, improving housing and promoting more cultural events. To the extent that you discussed energy issues, you spoke of them in terms of transitioning the city's operations to renewable energy. In this context, I would submit to you, with respect, that any presumption that you received from the voters a mandate to undertake this recent initiative is disingenuous and intellectually dishonest.

It is difficult to minimize the degree to which this proposal is an insult and an affront to thousands of people in this city. I expect, in your mind, this proposal represents a principled attempt to stand up to what you likely conceive as "evil corporations". But, in so doing, you are also insulting all the employees of SaskPower, SaskEnergy, the Co-op Refinery and numerous junior oil companies and petroleum supply chain companies in the city. You are, effectively, telling all these people that they should be ashamed of their livelihoods.

It is also difficult to overlook (as Premier Moe has noted) the sheer hypocrisy of this proposal. The City receives tens of millions in revenue from SaskPower, SaskEnergy, the Refinery and others, and tens of millions more from property taxes and other revenue from their employees. These enterprises go further by voluntarily donating millions of dollars to cultural, recreation and charitable initiatives across the city. The taxes they pay also help support healthcare, education and social services, not only in Regina but across the province. At the risk of making light of what is a very serious issue, I would suggest that this proposal would be akin to the City of Las Vegas resolving to ban all advertising from casinos.

I urge you to listen to your constituents and the broader community before this matter comes up for Council vote next week and to reconsider your position on this issue.

Regards,

Michael Kram, MP



*Member of
Parliament for
Regina-Wascana,
Michael Kram's
January 22nd
open letter to
Regina City
Council.*

without powerful political friends, who immediately came to its aid—even against the duly elected representatives of another level of government. This is not to imply these politicians responded at the behest of the industry, but rather that certain Saskatchewan politicians—in particular Scott Moe—have so invested their political identity and brand with defense of the oil and gas industry that it would have been difficult for them not to have reacted with the vehemence they did given their past rhetoric. What is certain is that the very public threats by Premier Moe raised the profile of a municipal amendment to the level of a provincial concern that would very soon become a national issue.

National Industry Advocacy Organizations

The raising of the amendment into a national issue was aided and abetted by the oil and gas industry itself. Indeed, by far the most coordinated and organized of the players involved in the events of January 20th to 27th were the oil industry's national level advocacy organization and its allies (see Glossary for a detailed description of each group). Tim McMillan, the president and CEO of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), the premier lobbying organization for the upstream oil and gas industry in Canada, harshly criticized the amendment:

"I find it offensive... Our industry is one that is very integrated into Saskatchewan. We want to be very involved in the communities where we operate. We operate with the highest environmental and safety standards and this looks like some cheap virtue signalling" (Cited in Sheppard, 2021).

Canada's Energy Citizens urges supporters to email Regina City Council.

However, CAPP's involvement with the issue didn't end with harsh statements. Through its Canada's Energy Citizens group, CAPP encouraged its followers to voice their opposition to the amendment via a pre-scripted advocacy email campaign promoted on the group's social media that would be sent directly to city council.

The image shows a digital advocacy form titled "Email Regina City Council" and "Take Action". The form is set against a background image of an oil pumpjack in a field of yellow flowers. The "Email Regina City Council" section contains text explaining the context of the amendment and urging citizens to voice their opposition. The "Take Action" section is a red form with input fields for "First & Last Name", "Email", "Address", "City", and "Postal code", followed by a blue "Next" button. A checkbox for consent is located below the "Next" button, and a "Powered by OneClickPolls" logo is at the bottom.

Canada's Energy Citizens

Email Regina City Council

On the same day Canada received the devastating news that Keystone XL was cancelled, 7 members of Regina's City Council [decided to include Canadian natural gas and oil companies on a list of businesses to be prohibited from advertising with the city.](#)

This list includes firearm manufacturers, tobacco companies, and pornography companies.

Can you believe this? We can't.

Thankfully, Mayor Masters, Councillors Findura, Bresciani, and Shaw voted against this absurd motion.

Canadian natural gas and oil companies are proud corporate citizens and strong supporters of the communities in which they operate. To include them in the same list as weapons manufacturers, pornography companies, and tobacco companies is nothing more than cynical politicking.

Canadian oil and gas companies provide good-paying jobs for hundreds of thousands of Canadians – including over 30,000 right here in Saskatchewan.

We risk every single one of these jobs when we let these motions go unchecked. So will you send an email to Regina's Mayor and Councillors letting them know you oppose this ill-conceived motion? It only takes a minute and when Councillors hear your voice it makes a difference.

Take Action

Fill out this form to tell Regina's Mayor and Council that you support Canadian energy.

First & Last Name

Email

Address

City Postal code

Next

By entering your email address you consent to join our mailing list and to our collection, use and disclosure of your personal information as described in our [privacy policy](#). This will allow us to digitally communicate with you through messages that are considered commercial electronic messages as defined in Canada's Anti-Spam Legislation. You can [unsubscribe](#) at any time. This message is from the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) (2100, 350-7th Avenue S.W. Calgary, AB, T2P 3N9, phone 403-267-1100).

Powered by OneClickPolls

TELL REGINA CITY COUNCIL TO SUPPORT OIL AND GAS

On Wednesday, January 27, Regina City Council will be holding a vote to ban advertising from the oil and gas sector on city properties. Make sure councillors hear from you.

JOIN MORE THAN 1717 SUPPORTERS IN SENDING THIS LETTER

First Name

This call to pressure city council via advocacy emails was also taken up by a coterie of industry-friendly supporter groups. Canada Action, the Regina Chamber of Commerce and the Alberta government's Canadian Energy Centre all encouraged their supporters to send pre-scripted electronic messages to city council. To give a sense of the scope of this initiative, we estimate that each city councillor potentially received upwards of 1,000 email messages generated by these campaigns on behalf of the oil and gas industry alone.

These calls to action were further promoted and disseminated within the wider network of industry advocacy groups, with groups like Oil Respect and Oil Sands Action as well local industry leaders and politicians sharing links to the advocacy campaigns via their social media.

These types of advocacy campaigns that enlist online supporters to advocate on industry's behalf are indicative of the oil industry's shift from its traditional behind-the-scenes lobbying to more public outreach designed to solicit and showcase the support of oil workers and citizens for the industry (Wood, 2018; Gunster, Neubauer, Bermingham and Massie, 2021). In this "amalgam of corporate public relations and citizen political participation," individual supporters are mobilized to support the industry—using their own voices—but through organizations, platforms and messages crafted, funded and often directed by the industry itself (Wood, 2020, 76). These "corporately directed political coalitions" effectively subsidize political participation by allowing supporters to easily register their support or opposition through pre-scripted messages offered via industry-sponsored social media (Ibid, 78).

Conventionally, these types of advocacy campaigns are thought to overwhelm elected officials with a flood of oppositional or supportive messaging that makes them believe an issue has widespread, grassroots opposition/support and convinces them to vote accordingly (Beder, 1998). While these campaign-generated messages did attempt to disguise themselves to a certain extent, offering up different headers so as not to appear too mass-manufactured, all the councillors we interviewed claimed they were easily identifiable as part of an advocacy campaign. One councillor stated that they "could smell the lobby effort a mile away."

Despite the extent of the campaign, all of the councillors we spoke to told us the messages from these campaigns had little if any influence on them. Instead, these councillors gave much more priority to communications from actual Regina residents. While some of the councillors believed the advocacy campaigns may have had more impact on newer council members, or

The Alberta government's Canadian Energy Centre claims more than 1717 supporters have sent its advocacy letter to Regina City Council.

on councillors that were already pre-disposed to oppose the amendment, we were surprised by the degree of unanimity among the councillors we interviewed regarding the campaign's lack of effectiveness on them.

However, it may be that persuading individual councillors to change their vote was not the primary impact or even intent of these advocacy campaigns. Tim Wood argues that this model of subsidized citizen participation employed by the oil industry aims to "make previously invisible citizen support more legible in public debates" (2018, 83).⁶ The "avalanche" of opposition that the industry campaign contributed to should perhaps be better understood as a public show of force by industry that signalled to the community that this issue would not only be intensely opposed, but would also be emotionally charged and politically contentious.

Among the councillors that we interviewed who initially supported the motion, several told us that the voices they found most persuasive in their ultimate decision to rescind their support were Regina residents that agreed with the council's climate goals, but felt that the amendment had become too controversial for a place like Regina. "Don't poke the bear," "Too much too soon," and "Don't fuck with these people" was how one councillor characterized some of these constituents' views. It may be that the industry campaign's greatest impact—intentionally or not—was to create so much controversy around the amendment that these "climate moderates," who would otherwise support city council's climate goals, were intimidated by the hyper-politicization of the debate around the amendment.⁷ Faced with the loss of this support—support that council will ultimately need to implement their renewability framework in the years to come—many councillors concluded the amendment wasn't a "hill worth dying on."

It may be that the more adversarial climate politics that succeed in other places have less purchase in Saskatchewan, where climate politics are still somewhat novel, climate movements are still fledging and public deference to the oil industry is widespread. While many in the city are in favour of climate action, they appear reluctant to support actions that they view as divisive or counterproductive. The vast majority of residents in the city don't yet see the oil industry as an obstacle to climate action, which is what the underlying rationale of the amendment implied. This may change, particularly as climate politics and activism become more established in the province and the industry's record of climate obstruction becomes more widely acknowledged (and experienced).⁸ However, for the time being this sentiment is something that politicians, policymakers and citizens will have to reckon with, even when advancing climate arguments and policy in Saskatchewan's more climate-friendly urban centres.

6 Wood argues that these campaigns may not even be trying to persuade critics or the public, but may more importantly serve to recruit, mobilize and engage supporters and inform industry of the extent of support they can rely on for future campaigns (See Wood, 2018, 83).

7 The term "climate moderates" for these constituents was coined by one of the councillors we interviewed.

8 Climate obstruction refers to the large-scale, organized effort on behalf of corporate interests to oppose emission-reduction efforts, most notable in countries with powerful fossil fuel industries (See Brulle and Dunlap, 2021).

Oil Advocacy Group Glossary



Canada's Energy Citizens

Canada's Energy Citizens is the creation of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers designed to "act as the face of its citizen mobilization campaign" (Wood, 2018, 76). It describes itself as "the largest oil and natural gas advocacy organization in Canada, with a membership of over 500,000 grassroots Canadians." Committed to fighting the "misrepresentations" and "misinformation regarding Canada's oil and natural gas sector" the group provides tools to supporters to advocate for Canada's energy industry (Canada's Energy Citizens, n.d.).



Canada Action

Canada Action describes itself as "a grassroots organization that encourages Canadians to work together to take action in support of our vital natural resource sectors and the communities and families they support." Founded in 2010 by Calgary realtor Cody Battershill the non-profit group declares it "combats misinformation about Canada's natural resource industries and promotes pride in our nation's world leading performance on environmental, social and governance metrics." It is also the source of much of the "wearable oil pride" that is ubiquitous in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Despite its grassroots veneer, Canada Action is "supported by a broad network of individuals with deep ties to the oil and gas industry and the Conservative Party of Canada" (The Narwhal, n.d.).



Oil Sands Action

A subsidiary group of Canada Action, Oil Sands Action appears to be more exclusively focused on issues specific to the Alberta oil sands. This group was also created by Cody Battershill.



Canadian Energy Centre

The Canadian Energy Centre is a controversial initiative by the United Conservative Party government in Alberta to combat what it views as "misinformation" about Alberta's oil and gas industry. An "independent provincial corporation," the Centre was launched in December of 2019 with \$30 million in funds from the Alberta government. At that launch, Premier Jason Kenney praised the Centre, saying it would "quickly and effectively rebut every lie told by the green left about our world-class energy industry" (Graney, 2021).



Oil Respect

Oil Respect is a campaign of the Canadian Association of Oilwell Drilling Contractors (CAODC) designed to “empower regular Canadians to voice support for the Canadian oil and gas industry” (Campbell, 2016). Speaking to the need for the Oil Respect campaign, CAODC president Mark Scholz has stated it was in response to a growing concern that the industry was being painted in a negative, untruthful manner. “We have to start really educating people in a way that says, ‘Look, these are just regular, hard-working Canadians who are losing their jobs in an industry that all Canadians benefit from,’” Scholz stated, “Yet, we still get the rhetoric from radical environmentalists, grandstanding politicians and foreign celebrities who come out here and present untruthful, misguided information about the industry” (Cited in Zinchuk, 2016).



Regina Chamber of Commerce

Self-described as the ‘voice of business’ in the Regina community, the Regina Chamber of Commerce represents local businesses across various economic sectors in the city. Nevertheless, it has been a particularly vocal supporter of the province’s oil and gas industry, sponsoring a rally in support of the oil and gas industry in partnership with Canada Action and Rally 4 Resources in January of 2019 as well as its e-mail advocacy campaign in opposition to the sponsorship amendment in January of 2020.



Canada Growth Council

The Canada Growth Council describes itself as “a group of motivated individuals that are simply fed up with anti-growth propaganda, foreign-funded activist groups, and the absence of strong voices that advocate on behalf of free-enterprise and prosperity in Canada.” Its website states that the group “believes in free enterprise, small government, low taxes, trade, wealth creation, and supporting key economic industries in Canada, especially in western Canada—particularly oil and gas, mining, agriculture, and technology—that contributes significantly to Canada’s wealth but is often under-appreciated or outright demonized.”



Advance Regina

Advance Regina describes itself as “dedicated to advocating for issues important to the citizens of Regina.” There is no public information on who created or funds the group. Its Facebook page was created January 26th, 2021. It does not appear to be very active since the controversy around the amendment subsided.

Local Industry Leaders and Organizations

The next level or “scale” of response would come from local oil and gas industry leaders as well as other local business representatives. The most vocal of these would be a group of local business leaders led by Craig Lothian, President and CEO of the Keystone Group of Companies, which consists of two distinct oil-related businesses. Executives from all the companies within the Keystone Group including Lothian himself spoke to city council at the January 27th meeting. We will address the content of those arguments in the next section on industry discourse. What is important to note is the wider conservative political advocacy network that Lothian is associated with. As Press Progress reports, Craig Lothian and his companies are significant financial donors to the ruling Saskatchewan Party, with Lothian himself appointed to Enterprise Saskatchewan by the Wall government (Press Progress, 2019).⁹ Craig Lothian is also the top donor to the Canada Growth Council, a free enterprise and pro-oil and gas group that has sponsored efforts to defeat Liberal Party politicians in Western Canada through its WestWatch campaign (Press Progress, 2021). On the day of the 27th council vote, WestWatch promoted a video from a previously unknown organization calling itself “Advance Regina” that warned “Regina’s new city council is in danger of being overrun by Left-wing activists,” encouraging supporters to “SHARE this



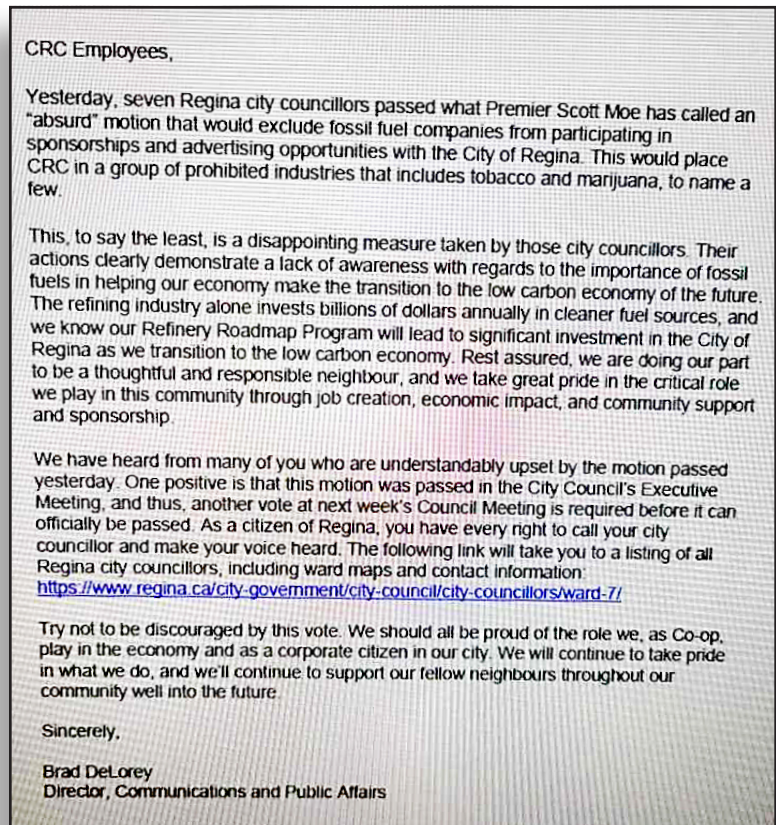
WestWatch promotes Advance Regina's video.

⁹ Enterprise Saskatchewan was a government agency created by the Wall government designed to remove the function of economic development from government and outsource it to the private sector. The ultimate goal of the agency was to keep Saskatchewan “among the most competitive and attractive business climates in Canada and the world.” The agency was discontinued in 2018 (See Enoch 2012, 20).

video to make sure Regina city council remembers who they represent.”¹⁰ There is no public information yet available on who created or funds this group, which appears to be largely inactive save for a few Facebook posts since the events of January 2021. What these connections demonstrate is that Craig Lothian and his associates were not neutral or inexperienced actors in energy politics in the province.

More direct interventions from the local business community came in the form of the Regina Chamber of Commerce’s mass email campaign targeted at city council. This appears to be the first of the advocacy email campaigns in response to the amendment controversy and was widely shared, including by Premier Scott Moe. Other business interests appear to have worked more behind the scenes. Federated Cooperatives Limited (FCL), which operates the local refinery and was often cited by other advocacy messages as the true victim of the amendment, opted for a more subtle lobbying strategy. While FCL’s Vice-President Strategy Pam Skotnitsky

Screenshot of an email to FCL Co-op Refinery employees encouraging them to contact their city councillors.



¹⁰ Tyler Willox, a board member of the Canada Growth Council also spoke in opposition of the amendment on January 27th, but not on behalf of the organization (Press Progress, 2021). The video can be viewed on the Advance Regina website: https://advanceregina.ca/?fbclid=IwAR1oKZYE1GIraH_qaae4v7mtkIL6dJrmIPNLC4eHBLFeMyWTxceHEr8-g0

contacted the Mayor and spoke at the January 27th council meeting to register FCL's opposition to the amendment, FCL also encouraged employees at the refinery to contact city council. Brad DeLorey, Director of Communications and Public Affairs at the Co-op Refinery Complex, sent an email message to employees calling the amendment "absurd" and claiming the policy demonstrates a "lack of awareness with regards to the importance of fossil fuels in helping our economy make the transition to the low carbon economy." Mr. DeLorey further encouraged employees to "call your city councillor and make your voice heard."

The actions of these individuals and groups demonstrate the varied tactics employed by local business and its representatives to lobby against the amendment. Taken together with the other individuals and organizations identified in this report, they demonstrate the various scales or levels upon which the industry's 'regime of obstruction' can operate. From national industry advocacy organizations, to federal members of parliament, to provincial premier, to local business owners, down to individual employees, the scale and scope of the response to the amendment demonstrates the degree of power and influence the oil and gas industry can marshal when sufficiently challenged.

Once again, this is not to imply that all of this action was coordinated at the behest of industry—although there is no doubt some of it certainly was—rather it speaks to the economic, political and cultural power of an industry that has become so enmeshed in the political identity of the province of Saskatchewan that any threat deemed serious enough to its legitimacy—particularly a threat from within—activates and mobilizes a vast swathe of allies in almost an instant. As one councillor described to us, the industry has enjoyed "absolute hegemony" in the province, and the amendment "blindsided them" as they "couldn't imagine actual dissidents in positions of power in Saskatchewan." In this councillor's understanding, the shock of being challenged from "within," after decades of mobilizing support against enemies from "without," contributed to the scale, scope and intensity of the advocacy campaign.

Equally important to understanding who advocates for industry is what they advocate. While we have encountered some of the arguments made by many of the individuals and groups opposed to the amendment, we now move to consider those arguments in greater detail.¹¹

¹¹ Unless otherwise indicated, quotes are derived from transcripts of the Wednesday January 27th Regina City Council Meeting. Video of the proceedings are available here: <http://reginask.iqm2.com/Citizens/Calendar.aspx>.

Industry Talking Points / Discourse

The arguments made by politicians, industry leaders and industry advocacy groups were remarkably uniform, relying on a distinct set of arguments and talking points, many of which have been a staple of the industry's public relations campaigns for the past decade. Indeed, the events of January 2021 demonstrate how durable this discourse has been, suggesting that climate advocates can anticipate fairly equivalent arguments in future conflicts. Here we identify some of the most prevalent arguments made by industry and their advocates during the events of January 2021. It is not our intent to evaluate the accuracy or merit of these arguments, merely to catalogue them and provide context where possible to better explain how they fit into the industry's well-established communications strategy as well as existing scholarship on the industry's discourse.

Mobilizing Workers as the Face of Industry

The argument that the amendment would hurt oil and gas workers—both economically and psychologically—was reproduced in the vast majority of messaging from industry and its advocates. Premier Scott Moe spoke of the “hypocritical attack on workers,” Craig Lothian told of the “psychological blow to our employees,” and Canada's Energy Citizens warned the amendment would put over “30,000 jobs at risk.” The use of workers as the face of the industry has been part of the evolving public relations strategy employed by the oil industry over the past decade. Faced with increasing public scrutiny of their operations, particularly the international attention on the Alberta oil sands, the Canadian oil industry sought to “make its employees more active partners in championing the virtues of oil and gas development” (Gunster, Neubauer, Bermingham and Massie, 2021, 200; also see Turner, 2012). Campaigns like CAPP's Energy Citizens aimed to empower natural supporters like oil workers and their families to speak out in favour of an industry that felt like it was unjustly and undeservedly under attack by a vocal and powerful minority (Ibid, 201). Obviously, the public relations benefit of having the public view the industry as its workers, rather than a group of privately-owned, profit-driven, politically-powerful corporations is invaluable. It simultaneously allows the industry to humanize itself through the more authentic and relatable voices of their employees, while conflating the interests of owners and workers as commensurate (Massie and Jackson, 2020, 54).

Oil as Prosperity

Often in conjunction with the prioritizing of workers and jobs was the emphasis on the economic prosperity that the oil industry is said to bring all of us. As mentioned earlier, this is a key claim of “extractive populism”: that the extraction of oil and gas constitutes “the core of the

Oil and Gas in Saskatchewan

EMPLOYS NEARLY
30,000 PEOPLE

\$10 BILLION
IN ROYALTIES TO FUND HOSPITALS,
SCHOOLS AND ROADS

PAYS HUNDREDS OF
MILLIONS
OF DOLLARS IN ROYALTIES AND
TAXES, PROVIDING FUNDING
FOR IMPORTANT SERVICES LIKE
HEALTHCARE AND EDUCATION.

Canadian Energy Centre

SOURCES:

STATISTICS CANADA, CUSTOM DATA SET, CONTRIBUTION OF THE OIL AND GAS SECTOR TO THE CANADIAN ECONOMY IN 2016
[HTTPS://WWW.CAPP.CA/WP-CONTENT/UPLOADS/2020/09/OIL-AND-NATURAL-GAS-PRIORITIES-FOR-A-PROSPEROUS-SASKATCHEWAN-375289.PDF](https://www.capp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/OIL-AND-NATURAL-GAS-PRIORITIES-FOR-A-PROSPEROUS-SASKATCHEWAN-375289.PDF)
[HTTPS://PUBLICATIONS.SASKATCHEWAN.CA/API/V1/PRODUCTS/81263/-FORMATS/95219/DOWNLOAD](https://publications.saskatchewan.ca/api/v1/products/81263/-formats/95219/download)

Canadian Energy Centre enumerates the economic benefits of oil and gas in Saskatchewan to its Facebook audience.

Canadian economy,” with its economic benefits flowing to everyone in the nation. Gunster calls this “symbolic nationalization.” By this, Gunster means the industry represents itself as if it was a nationalized public enterprise with its revenues re-distributed across the country to provide public services rather than a “corporate-driven, for-profit capitalist enterprise managed and operated first and foremost in the interest of (often global) shareholders” (Gunster, 2019, 14).

This focus on the industry as a fount of prosperity for all was reproduced repeatedly. Canada Action’s scripted email message to city council states, “In addition to being our countries [sic] largest export and creating hundreds of thousands of jobs, Canada’s oil and gas industry has generated a half-trillion in revenues for governments since 2000.” E-mails generated through Canada’s Energy Citizens’ campaign claim, “The refinery alone employs thousands. Billions of dollars in economic activity are generated every year in Saskatchewan. This helps fund our schools, hospitals and roads. All services we rely on every day.” Similarly, the emails from the Canadian Energy Centre argue the industry “pays billions in royalties to the government which is then used to do things like hire teachers and nurses or build schools and hospitals.” The implicit message in these types of arguments is that imposing constraints or costs that threaten the industry’s profitability will only serve to reduce industry revenues and all the public goods they pay for.

Industry Under Attack

The second claim of extractive populism cited by industry and their advocates is the notion that the oil and gas industry is under attack, often by powerful outside forces.¹² As we have seen, this claim is a key organizing principle for how many oil and gas advocates view the state of the industry. Indeed, one councillor believed that this siege mentality, promoted by both industry and government, was a key contributor to the intense emotional debate the amendment ignited:

And I do think that it probably comes on the heels of the fact that the [oil and gas] sector has already created a divide, that they have already communicated publicly that they're under attack. And that we also already have the Saskatchewan government that had already set up this divide around the carbon tax, right? I think it's seen that any slight against that sector was part of a strategy or some kind of evil intent to attack that sector. So I think that the public already had been conditioned by the Saskatchewan government and by that sector that they were under attack.

While this argument that the oil and gas industry is under attack was prolific during the amendment controversy, what is interesting is how it was often repurposed to shame city council, suggesting those councillors who supported the amendment were adopting the ignorant and ill-informed critiques of outsiders. For instance, Andrew Spagrud, CEO of Villanova Energy, observed that the amendment was “the type of criticism the oil and gas industry is far too accustomed to hearing,” but “from politicians in Ottawa, Quebec and coastal urban centres.” Spagrud suggested that while those regions have the excuse that the industry is “out of sight and out of mind, Regina city council doesn't have this excuse.” Dean Popil, CEO of Lex Capital, remarked that “hatred for our oil industry is a popular thing,” but due to misunderstanding and ignorance of the industry's actual record. According to Popil, the council shares in this ignorance, and is unaware of the environmental progress the industry was making “in your own backyard.” Similarly, Tim MacMillan of CAPP noted that “we expect to see this in places where elected municipal officials may not know how the oil and gas industry operates. We do a lot of work in Montreal (and) in Ontario ... That this would come forward in a community like Regina, that is so integrated and knowledgeable about the resource sector, is shocking” (Cited in Sheppard, 2021). However, Craig Lothian captured this sentiment the best. Noting the “powerful political forces faced by our industry,” Lothian remarked that for the “past five years, federal Liberals, B.C. and Quebec have taken every opportunity to vilify the industry and attempt to impair its development.” Lothian further claimed that it is “the attacks from within that bewilder us the most,” adding that “if a member of your family criticizes you publicly, it cuts a little deeper.” There is almost a tenor of disappointment in these statements, a concern that our elected officials shouldn't be so susceptible to ‘outsider’ arguments that have traction in places like Toronto or Montreal. Full-throated industry support is so often the minimum expectation of Saskatchewan politicians, that criticism of the industry is met with a kind of astonishment. It is not surprising then that councillors' concerns were not treated as legitimate by industry representatives. Rather, according to this understanding, they must be the result of council's ignorance or naivety that could only be resolved through education and working in closer concert with the oil and gas industry in the future.

¹² An important aspect of this line of argument is that the industry is an otherwise passive actor, under attack due to its critics' ignorance or maliciousness, not due to the industry's own actions to deny, delay and dilute climate action through its intensive lobbying, advertising and public relations efforts over the past three decades.

Hypocrites/Oil as Modernity

Another equally ubiquitous argument made against the amendment and the councillors who supported it was that it is hypocritical to support the banning of fossil fuel sponsorship and advertising while they themselves still consume fossil fuels. This style of argument is described by Jen Schneider, Steve Schwarze, Peter Bsumek, and Jennifer Peeples as “the hypocrite’s trap”—a rhetorical strategy that attempts to disarm critics of the fossil fuel industry based on the critic’s own consumption of or reliance on those same fossil fuels (2016, 107). This notion is succinctly summed up by one councillor in their correspondence with a constituent, “My belief is until you turn off your heat and ride a bike you have absolutely no room to talk against fossil fuels.” Certainly, the fact that Regina relies overwhelmingly on fossil fuels to heat its businesses and homes was cited by many as proof of the hypocrisy of the amendment. These selected excerpts from email messages to Mayor Sandra Masters capture this sentiment:

I challenge each and every one of the councilors that think we should condemn and shun the companies that extract, use or sell fossil fuel to shut off their power and energy and light candles for warmth and light instead. I challenge them to dress in animal skin. instead of store bought clothes and shoes because those contain petroleum products.

The fact that this is happening in the middle of winter makes this vote especially repugnant. What heats the houses of the 7 [seven] who voted against oil and gas? Greta Thunberg’s anger I suppose.

I hear the council wants to band [sic] energy advertising! I sure hope they have thought and research [sic] this long and hard, I also hope they walk to work and heat there [sic] house with good intentions.

Gunster, Neubauer, Bermingham and Massie describe this argument as the “energy lifeworld,” where the pervasive use of oil in our everyday life is used to attack opponents as hypocrites for condemning an industry that enables their quality of life (2021, 219). The power of such arguments is that they ask us as individuals to try to “live without oil” in a society that is designed around and saturated with fossil fuel energy. It is an impossible task for an individual alone; it requires the types of society-wide transformations in energy, heating and transportation that we can only accomplish collectively. For example, in a Saskatchewan winter, fossil fuel energy can be quite easily presented as essential to “our very survival” to use Craig Lothian’s words, particularly if there is no recourse to alternative ways of heating and insulating our homes and businesses that are often beyond the ability of the individual and require more collective solutions.

Industry as Environmental Leader / ‘Part of the Solution’

The last argument that we identified as particularly pervasive during the amendment debate was the idea that the oil and gas industry is already a world leader in environmental innovation and that critics of the industry’s emissions are either unaware or misinformed about the progress industry has made in reducing its carbon footprint and the strict regulatory requirements the industry operates under.¹³ Indeed, nearly every business leader who spoke in opposition to the amendment at the January 27th council meeting used some version of this argument. Tim MacMillan of CAPP presented the clearest encapsulation of this argument to council:

¹³ It is important to note that these industry arguments are usually premised on the reduction of what are referred to as “Scope One Emissions” or those emissions derived exclusively from extraction. Emissions from refining and final consumption are generally not included in these claims (which if included would problematize claims of “net negative emissions”). For a more detailed discussion see Israel, 2020.

Canadian oil and gas producers safely and responsibly produce the products we use every day. Today we produce more, with a smaller footprint on the land, with less water and less emissions. We have set aggressive targets to continue to drive our performance. How have we done this? Well, with strong and efficient regulatory systems and relentless technology development. In fact, in Canada, one out of every two dollars spent on clean tech, is spent by the oil and gas industry.

As other scholars of industry discourse have noted, these types of arguments seek to position fossil fuel companies as already at the forefront of technological innovation and environmental responsibility, making further regulation or constraint unnecessary and even detrimental to future innovation (Schneider, Schwarze, Bsumek and Peeples, 2016, 95). They also lend themselves to the wider “ethical oil” argument promoted by industry that positions Canadian oil and gas as morally and ethically superior relative to other oil-producing regions with less robust labour and environmental standards (Gunster, Neubauer, Bermingham and Massie, 2021, 218).

What appears to be a new wrinkle in this discourse is the marshalling of this purported environmental expertise to assert the need for the industry to be an essential partner in any future energy transition. Increasingly, fossil fuel companies are marketing themselves and the industry as “part of the solution” to climate change as governments begin to adopt concrete policies on energy transition (Johnson, Blakemore and Bell, 2020; Influence Map, 2021). Indeed, we saw this argument raised a number of times in the presentations to the city council, with industry advocates proposing that city council would not be able to achieve its environmental goals without working in partnership with industry. Andrew Spagrud of Villanova Energy proposed that “Regina city council seek representation from the fossil fuel sector in its endeavours to be 100 percent renewable by 2050. This fossil fuel sector should have a seat at that table.” Tyler Willox, speaking to the 100 percent renewable commitment, stated that “this is a lofty goal, that needs actual plans to help achieve this—and do you know who is trying to execute plans to help achieve these types of goals? Oil and gas companies... Canadian oil and gas companies aren’t just focused on lowering emissions, many are actually net negative today.” Similarly, Pam Skotnitsky of Federated Co-op wrote in a letter to Mayor Sandra Masters that she hoped the “motion was a misstep and isn’t a signal of the intent to disregard the important role the energy sector can play in the transition to a low carbon economy.”

It appears industry is increasingly concerned that they will not be able to exert the kind of influence over future climate policy that it has in the past. Attacks on the legitimacy of the industry—particularly whether it can be considered a good faith actor in the coming energy transition given its well-documented history of climate obstruction—may be more keenly felt now than ever before (Enoch, 2021). Ensuring a “seat at the table” has never been a problem for the industry before, and the realization that transition policies could move ahead without their input may be another motive for the scope and intensity of the industry’s advocacy campaign against council. Indeed, one councillor we spoke to believed this was the biggest “win” for industry that came out of the controversy, as it convinced some people on council that “oil and gas doesn’t currently have enough influence, and they are the ones who are best positioned to solve the climate crisis so we got to follow their lead.”

Discussion

The above goes some way to answering our initial questions about how and why this amendment became “sensational.” Certainly a national advocacy and lobbying campaign of this size and scope and with the backing of the province’s political and economic leaders could make even the most anodyne issue front-page news. But if the *how* is self-evident, the *why* is less so. To conclude our analysis, we identify what we believe to be the three factors that best explain why industry and its allies reacted so vehemently to this particular amendment and conversely why industry’s arguments found such fertile ground among the majority of the public.

“Under Siege”

The Canadian oil and gas industry and its allies have been promoting and publicizing the idea that the industry is “under attack” as part of its wider public relations strategy developed over the past decade. As part of this strategy, the industry has cultivated and subsidized a network of supporters who can react and respond to these perceived threats with overwhelming speed. Councillors who supported the amendment underestimated how much the industry would perceive the policy as a direct challenge due to this “siege mentality.” Indeed, many councillors did not see the policy having much of an effect on industry because of the fact that industry sponsorship, naming rights or advertising with the City of Regina itself were almost nonexistent (Atter, 2021a). One councillor told us “we weren’t stripping buildings of their signs,” noting how “disinterested the oil industry is in sponsoring things [with the City of Regina].” Given this disinterest, it may be that these councillors didn’t quite apprehend how interested the industry would be in opposing the amendment.

But as our previous research has documented, sponsorships, naming rights, donations and other forms of corporate philanthropy are an essential means through which the oil industry in Saskatchewan secures its social license to operate—particularly in the oil-producing regions of the province (Eaton and Enoch, 2018). In an environment where the industry views its very legitimacy as constantly under attack, it is likely it would view the ban of some of the most important tools it uses to bolster that legitimacy as a significant threat. Furthermore, there is the fear of a “demonstration effect”; that even if sponsorships were negligible with the City of Regina, the precedent of passing such a ban—particularly in what is supposed to be a stronghold of support for the industry—could motivate other places to consider adopting equivalent policies. This threat would be particularly salient given the recent growth in calls for bans on fossil fuel advertising worldwide (see Klein, 2021b). In either case, we think there was a misappraisal on the part of city councillors of how this amendment would be received by industry and its advocates and how much traction industry arguments would have with the public—even among those sympathetic to the City’s climate goals.

“Resource Nationalism”

Part of the cultural power of the industry’s “under siege” narrative is that it draws on the deep historic well of western alienation in Saskatchewan.¹⁴ Just as central Canadian industry and politicians exploited and underdeveloped the west under the wheat economy of 100 years ago, so is it imagined to continue today under the oil economy. Through this rhetoric of “resource nationalism,” oil companies are understood as victims of the sometimes ignorant, sometimes nefarious designs of Ottawa and/or urban environmental interests that seek to undermine or constrain the development of the oil and gas economy. Governments and citizens alike are implored to mobilize and defend against these attacks on “the lifeblood of our economy,” from these ‘foreign,’ outside interests (Eaton, 2017, 11).¹⁵ Those who are not perceived as adequately supportive in their defence of industry—and hence of the province—can thereby be tarred as insufficiently patriotic or even of working in collusion with outside interests (Adkin and Stares, 2016; Eaton and Enoch, 2021b). This potent mixture of provincial patriotism and industry boosterism can often act to restrain and restrict criticisms of industry—particularly in oil-producing regions (see Eaton, 2017 13-16). The events of January 2021 demonstrate that it was not understood how widespread and deeply-held these sentiments are in the province, even in urban centres like Regina. Remarks made by one councillor noted that even residents who had no connection to the industry viewed the amendment as “an attack on them directly,” and that they believed that the industry narrative that conflates a threat to oil and gas as a threat to the province is a pervasive idea embedded in the public.

“Climate Change is Not a Political Problem”

As Councillor LeBlanc stated, the concern the amendment was trying to address was that the oil industry would continue to promote reliance on fossil fuels and obstruct real climate action under the cover of the legitimacy that city sponsorships and/or advertising can confer (Cited in Druric, 2021). The industry’s record of denying, delaying and diluting climate policies for the past thirty years has been well documented and speaks to why some climate advocates view attempts to constrain the industry’s political power and influence as an essential part of any serious climate change strategy (Aronoff, 2020; Paul, Skandier and Renzy, 2020). As a recent investigation into why global carbon emissions have failed to fall over the past thirty years plainly states:

Political action to mitigate climate change has also been slowed at the regional, national, and international levels through direct lobbying by fossil fuel companies and through the funding of political actors. Regions that rely on fossil fuels for jobs and revenues find it particularly difficult to withstand such lobbying attempts. Research by InfluenceMap shows how fossil fuel companies have lobbied to weaken climate policies around the world and have continued to do so while claiming to support the Paris Agreement (Stoddard et al, 2021, 662).

However, the argument that the amendment was an attempt to try and restrain the political power of the fossil fuel industry was not adequately communicated to the public, if at all. Indeed, the record of the industry in obstructing climate action was barely mentioned in public debate during the events of January 2021 as far as we can tell. Rather than viewing the

¹⁴ Western alienation arose out of the settler wheat economy with the perception that western farmers were exploited by being forced to purchase high-price tariff protected goods from central Canada while selling in unprotected international markets (Eaton, 2018, 11).

¹⁵ Adkin and Stares’ discussion of the discourse of resource nationalism in Alberta is equally appropriate for Saskatchewan. As they note, while this is not a ‘nativist’ discourse in the typical sense, it does “portray Albertans as a group with settler roots and credentials whose ownership of provincial resources and the rights to benefit from them are constantly threatened by envious or hostile outsiders” (Adkin and Stares, 2016, 220).

industry with suspicion, it appears residents were much more comfortable with the idea of the City and industry working together to accomplish climate goals. Indeed, calls for “unity” and “dialogue” between the City and industry were often expressed in concert with concerns that the amendment was unnecessarily “divisive.”

Certainly, this idea of industry and government working in unison towards shared climate goals corresponds to the industry’s recent efforts to be seen as “part of the solution” to climate change. But it also has deeper roots in what has been described as the “win-win” ideology of corporate environmentalism that has been promoted by industry and politicians for the past thirty years (Enoch, 2009, 200-201; Brandtner and Bromley, 2021). In this understanding, the interests of industry and the interests of the environment can always be made commensurate. There is no need for hard decisions or difficult choices, both industry and the environment can “win.” Obviously such rhetoric can be tremendously appealing, as it promises “pain-free solutions”; we can expand oil and gas production and eliminate our carbon emissions in tandem (King and Pucker, 2021, 38). The danger with such thinking is if there are no solutions that are equitable to both industry and the environment, if it actually is a zero-sum game where someone has to lose, then “win-win” environmentalism can prevent us from making those hard choices. As of yet, Regina does not appear ready to recognize the possibility that such decisions may need to be made—that is, decisions to either favour industry interests or environmental wellbeing. One councillor, relating this sentiment among their constituents, described it as follows:

So what they wanted to say instead, I think, is, “Can’t we all work together? No one is going to disagree about me changing light bulbs in my house, so can’t we all stay together? Basically for as long as we can on this stuff? Do we need to be so divisive?”

This councillor further explained that they thought residents mostly viewed the climate issue as “a technical or scientific undertaking, rather than a political one.” In this understanding, solutions to climate change are primarily about transforming systems of energy, not systems of power; climate change is not viewed as a political problem. From this perspective, attempts to constrain the political power of the fossil fuel industry—as the amendment made a small attempt to do—would appear unnecessarily divisive and pointlessly polarizing. From the standpoint of most Regina residents, the City’s attempts to achieve greater renewability and emission reductions require technical solutions like solar panels on roofs and EV charging stations, not confronting the political influence of the fossil fuel industry. It is not surprising then that multiple councillors told us that residents characterized the amendment as “purely symbolic,” which is exactly how it would appear to someone who views climate change as a distinctly technocratic problem.

In all these respects, the terrain for such an amendment in Regina was not promising—at least not without substantial prior education and mobilization. There are deep-seated popular attitudes towards energy and climate that have been carefully cultivated and promoted by both industry and government that can and will be strategically exploited in these kinds of conflicts. Even under the most favourable circumstances, the prodigious lobbying and advocacy apparatus of the fossil fuel industry and its allies make any future encounter unlikely to be an equal contest. Both of these obstacles to climate progress will have to be anticipated and navigated if climate advocates want to claim any victories in the battles to come. To conclude, we enumerate some of the key lessons that can be learned from the events of January 2021 that can better prepare local politicians, activists and concerned citizens for the future.



Canadian Energy Centre ✓



28 January at 07:38 · 🌐

Thank you for standing up for Canadian oil and gas!

After receiving thousands of your emails, Regina city council voted down banning oil and gas sponsorships.



LEADERPOST.COM

City council rejects fossil fuel ad ban amendment after backlash

👍❤️😄 962

98 comments 74 shares

The Alberta government's Canadian Energy Centre claims credit for the defeat of the amendment.

Conclusion

Despite only being a little more than a week in duration, the events of January 2021 offer us a potential window into the future of energy and climate politics in the urban centres of western Canada. As cities like Regina press for more urgent climate action and bolder climate policy, they will run headlong into the entrenched political, economic and cultural power of the oil industry.

As this report demonstrates, that power can be formidable. In Regina, it mobilized allies large and small to its defence, successfully defeating the sponsorship amendment in the span of seven days. It may have also convinced elements on city council that the industry doesn't exercise enough influence over climate policy and may have ultimately contributed to the termination of Dan LeBlanc from his place of employment. For all the talk of jobs at risk and economic livelihoods under threat, it was only Councillor LeBlanc—as the author of the amendment—who actually suffered these imagined fates. With such a thorough defeat you might imagine that city councillors would be pessimistic about the potential for future climate action in the city given the forces arrayed against it. Yet the vast majority of councillors that we spoke with who initially supported the amendment did not believe this was the case. Most believed that the lessons they learned from the experience would better prepare them to advance climate policy in the future. In this final section, we distill some of the key lessons that local politicians, activists, and concerned citizens might consider to best meet the future challenges of climate politics in our cities.

Organizing Popular Support

There is no doubt that the events of January 2021 may have played out very differently if there had been an equal level of popular support and mobilization for the amendment as there was opposition. While there were attempts to counter the oil and gas industry's online advocacy campaign by SaskForward, a local civil society coalition, this campaign was primarily directed at the Premier's threatening actions to another level of government and not specifically in defence of the amendment. In any case, the initiative of a small local coalition could not hope to match the scope and scale of industry's efforts.¹⁶ Multiple councillors who supported the amendment lamented that their side did not have equivalent organization to that of industry and its political allies:

One of the things...is the difference in response time of the lobbying between the Chamber of Commerce and, say, SaskForward, highlights is that the [political] Right just has much more capacity for this sort of stuff.

¹⁶ The authors wish to disclose that Simon Enoch was a past member of SaskForward. He is no longer active in the group.

Similarly, another councillor explained:

What we really need is the sort of mobilization that we've seen from the [political] Right from those who wish to see progressive change in our community. So what's commonly referred to as the [political] Left is quite disorganized and like, you know not necessarily united or working together. And it's critical that there is an effort to mobilize, to organize some of these existing groups and create new ones, if needed, around certain goals.

Ensuring that popular support is mobilized in advance of proposing new climate policies was also a recurrent theme among some of the councillors we interviewed:

I think that the majority of council will support environmental initiatives. So it's a matter of making sure that we prepare properly, we get lots of public support, as much as public support is possible, that we're strategic, that we bring the right people to speak to council on the issues.

A different councillor felt that it would have helped if supporters had been forewarned to anticipate the backlash:

And so what I think that means tactically is we the councillors need to let our people know ahead of time if we're anticipating this right-wing backlash to give our people the heads up so they can come out as soon or sooner than the predictable right-wing response. And I think that could have made a difference here.

And yet, even if there had been better strategizing and mobilization on behalf of the sponsorship amendment, there is no doubt it would have still faced significant public resistance without an equivalent education campaign that could convince the public that the policy was necessary. As we mentioned in the previous section, many residents viewed the amendment as largely symbolic because why the amendment was needed to advance the City's climate goals was not successfully communicated to the public. Rather, residents expressed a desire to see more concrete actions on renewability and sustainability. Multiple councillors expressed this sentiment to us on behalf of their constituents, and hoped that when the time came to implement other future climate proposals they would be able to rely on this support.

Certainly the development of immediate and tangible renewability initiatives could help garner wider support for the city's climate goals. There would be a lot of value in advancing what could be described as a "demonstration project" that could showcase how the city could successfully run on renewable energy. Perhaps the most ubiquitous argument made during the controversy was that a place like Regina that experiences extreme cold in the winter simply cannot exist without fossil fuels. Demonstrating to the public that these sorts of challenges can be met with existing technologies in a city building or sponsored housing development would go a long way to defanging what was the most pernicious critique levelled at city council.

Strengthening Local Representatives' Capacity

There is no doubt that municipal politicians are much more under-resourced than other politicians. They have no party organization, communications staff or research expertise to assist them during a controversy like this. Indeed, due to this lack of capacity local elected officials may be more susceptible to lobbying by organized interests, while city government may not be well-equipped to handle the types of intense political and industrial lobbying that the City of Regina experienced (Weschler 2016; van der Heijden, Patterson, Juhola and Wolfram, 2019). Reflecting on their experience during the amendment controversy, many councillors spoke of being overwhelmed with voicemails and emails to the extent that they did not have the

capacity to respond in time. One of the community supports that one councillor appreciated was a volunteer who helped them go through their messages to sort out the abusive and threatening from the legitimate that required a response.

Lastly, perhaps the most important vulnerability that needs to be addressed is the exposure of city councillors to financial threats. Due to the fact that the position of city councillor in Regina is not considered “full-time” and is remunerated as such, most councillors have to maintain other employment.¹⁷ This leaves them particularly vulnerable to threats of economic retribution. Indeed, multiple councillors received threats claiming to target their employer or place of business, with some receiving threats via their private workplace email addresses. In fact, Councillor LeBlanc was terminated from a local law firm two days after the defeat of the amendment.¹⁸ It remains to be seen if the precedent of Councillor LeBlanc’s firing will have a chilling effect on city council’s appetite to tackle controversial issues in the future, but certainly some of the councillors we spoke to feared it would. One told us that “you have to think of the before and after of council, you don’t want to make decisions that might impact your future.” Another feared having to make the choice between political principle and their economic security:

After this incident, yeah, you know what, there might be something that would come across Council I might walk away from and walk away from a position from rather than give up everything I’ve ever worked for. I’d like to think that there wouldn’t be but I didn’t come into [this job rich]... I still have responsibilities, you know.

This represents a significant vulnerability for our local democracy that urgently needs to be addressed. A move to full-time employment with commensurate salaries would go some way to alleviating the potential to influence councillors via their employer. The LeBlanc firing can set one of two possible precedents. Either it acts to intimidate councillors to forgo hot-button issues like climate and energy in the future, or it can serve as an early warning that we need to shore-up our democracy by ensuring that our elected representatives are protected against such threats. If we wish to advance more ambitious climate policies in our cities in the coming years, only one of these routes lends itself to success.

There is no doubt that the political, economic and cultural power of the oil industry in our province is formidable. In any future conflict with industry, advocates of climate action will often find themselves out-matched and out-gunned in money, resources and capacity. Nevertheless, it is our hope that as a consequence of this report they won’t find themselves out-manoeuvred. There is no doubt the scale and scope of this campaign caught many off-guard. Yet, we believe that this was only the first skirmish in what will be a much longer climate battle in our cities, particularly in western Canada. Indeed there are already hints that the City of Regina’s Energy and Sustainability Action Plan, which is slated to be released this winter, may include a proposal to ban fossil fuel heating in new buildings.¹⁹ We can fully expect the same coterie of interests that opposed the sponsorship amendment to push back on this proposal as well. By understanding the strategy, tactics, arguments and lessons from the events of January 2021, perhaps this next encounter won’t be as one-sided.

17 In 2020 city councillors earned \$45,530. Increases over the next three years will bring it to \$57,760 by 2023 (See Salloum, 2020).

18 On Jan. 29, LeBlanc was terminated from his job as a lawyer at GRJ Law (Gerrard Rath Johnson LLP) “without cause.” “GRJ said in a statement that the circumstances of his departure are confidential and every employee has the right to confidentiality regarding their employment” (See Atter, 2021b).

19 The City of Regina’s Energy and Sustainability Framework can be found here: https://beheard.regina.ca/energy-sustainability-framework?tool=news_feed#tool_tab.

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