

### **East side the right side**

*It is immoral to block Hydro line and perpetuate poverty*

Elijah Harper / Bryan Schwartz

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New electrical generation projects will be built in the north and new transmission lines will be required to bring the power south. Should the transmission line be routed through the west or east side of Manitoba?

The east side route has three obvious and tremendous advantages compared to the west side route.

\* The east side route would be much shorter. That means, selling, instead of wasting, hundreds of millions of dollars of clean and renewable energy.

\* The clean and renewable hydroelectric energy wasted on the west side route would be would have to be replaced by other, more environmentally harmful sources.

\* The west side line would be close to existing lines. That means a single natural disaster, like an ice storm, or criminal or terrorist attack could destroy all of the main lines. By its physical separation from existing lines, the east side route enhances security of transmission and reduces the risk of calamity should the lines go down.

There is a fourth advantage, and it is no less important: the potential to bring development and self sufficiency to one of the poorest parts of Canada.

More than 95 per cent of the residents of the east side of Manitoba are First Nations citizens. The population is growing rapidly. Living conditions fall far below the standard expected for Canadians. Unemployment, poverty and disease rates are high. Essential public services, such as sanitation and water, are deficient. A few months ago, one opinion in a Supreme Court of Canada case noted that "the small community of God's Lake, consisting of fewer than 1,300 people, accounts for 10 per cent of all tuberculosis cases in Manitoba ... only about 10 per cent of the homes on the reserve have basic sewer systems."

From a First Nations perspective, hydro development in Manitoba has been flawed, and in some cases disastrous. There was little consultation with First Nations. Adverse environmental effects and the consequences for First Nations were drastically underestimated and the compensation provided was inadequate.

More recently, however, Hydro has been developing a new approach. The proposed Wuskwatum hydro generating dam is an example. From the outset, the NCN First Nation, on whose traditional territory the new dam will be built, has been a full partner in the design of the project. The consequence is that

environmental impact of the project will be greatly lessened. NCN First Nation members will have opportunities for training and employment in the dam's construction and maintenance. NCN can become an investor and equity partner in the project. The revenue stream will help it achieve self sufficiency and provide its citizens with high quality education and other social services.

An east side transmission line can further develop the model. Opportunities for partnership, and with it economic and social development, can be made available to all the First Nations on the east side, and not only to those whose territories are traversed by the line.

Yet a few years ago, the provincial government came close to shutting the door on the east side option. While Manitoba Hydro conducts studies of west side options, it currently will not publicly discuss the east side route.

What happened?

The east side of Manitoba is largely covered by a boreal forest that is largely untouched.

It is regarded as an environmental treasure. The Poplar River First Nation is working with the province to have a United Nations agency designate a large area on the east side as a World Heritage Site. Some local citizens were understandably concerned, especially in light of Hydro's past, that a transmission line might have an unacceptable impact on their way of life. Their concerns were echoed by outside environmental activists, such as Robert Kennedy Jr., who expressed their appreciation for the "pristine" nature of the east side forest.

Overall conditions on the east side are not "pristine." There is a magnificent natural forest that must be preserved. At the same time, the human population is afflicted by unacceptable levels of impoverishment and poor health. Any government or industry that created such conditions would be roundly condemned.

When there is a better choice available, there is no moral difference between creating such conditions and choosing to perpetuate them.

The principle of "sustainable development" is the law and policy in Manitoba and requires that all concerned find a way to harmonize environmental protection and economic development. Both must be considered in all decisions. Devotion to one and blindness to the other is a betrayal of the core principle.

With proper planning, and the full participation of First Nations, it should be possible to build a transmission line that promotes development while maintaining or even improving the natural environment. With increased resources and infrastructure, First Nations citizens can be in a better position to not only use, but to continue to safeguard the lands and waters that they cherish as their sacred heritage.

Respect for "aboriginal and treaty" rights is a must. But this is not achieved by having outside authorities, be they Canadian or international, urging or imposing their own bans on development. The meaning of aboriginal and treaty rights is that First Nations themselves have a major say in their own futures and the management of their own resources. Views within communities will differ. After a thorough debate supported by detailed scientific studies, the people of NCN voted by a clear majority, in

a referendum, to proceed with the Wuskwatum project. If, with the benefit of thorough studies and community debate, some First Nations on the east side of Manitoba are opposed, the plan could be adjusted accordingly.

Resolutions of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and several tribal councils on the east side unequivocally establish that there is a strong appetite to study and debate all the options, including an east side transmission line.

Politicians may be tempted to avoid or even foreclose such discussion in the interests of looking good at a distance that extends all the way to upscale out-of-province environmental groups in the United States. There is nothing "pristine," however, about closing one's mind to the real benefits and costs to the people of this province, including the First Nations citizens on the east side. The underdevelopment from which Eastside residents suffer has a profound cost in human potential, health and life. These losses should not be considered "sustainable" -- by anyone anywhere.

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