

COP 28 Was Different, Controversial, and Substantive – A Great Place for Canada

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The desert sun has set on COP 28. It was hosted by the United Arab Emirates, a powerful oil and gas producer. Accordingly, they invited the fossil fuel industry to participate and offer climate change solutions. Instead, they were met with calls for the industry to be phased out. The kingdom was exposed to the same pressures Canada manages every day in its resource development.

Canada's Oilsands Pathways Alliance was there. They explained their producers' plans for making their production net zero by 2050. They lamented, not unreasonably, that their industry should have been invited to these meetings a decade ago. It's difficult to say whether the hosts' goal in including the petroleum industry was achieved. Their presence did, however, bring fresh attention to the event.

Now it's time to return home and work on what everyone talked about. One important climate change solution offered by the Canadian petroleum industry is carbon capture, use, and storage or CCUS. This process pulls carbon from oil and gas production or in some cases, directly from the air. It is then returned underground where it can be kept for future use or sequestered indefinitely, thereby reducing, or counteracting emissions.

Supporters acknowledge this is a fledgling technology. The International Energy Agency (IEA) has warned it might not be quite as promising as some of its enthusiasts hope. Nevertheless, the IEA's leader, Fatih Birol, was asked on a visit to Canada this year, "If Canada could only focus on one climate change solution, what should it be?" His answer, "Carbon Capture". Canada has an abundance of geological formations well-suited to storing carbon dioxide. Moreover, we are leaders in drilling and pipelining. It's not surprising we are pioneers in CCUS with some of the world's first and largest carbon capture projects.

If the oil and gas industry is to reduce emissions, CCUS becomes critical. It may not be a viable technology everywhere, but it does hold promise for Canada, given a host of complementary reasons, unique to our circumstances. If each country plays to its strengths in combatting climate change, then CCUS becomes a priority for Canada. The oil and gas industry is, by many metrics, Canada's largest. It is well-capitalized and motivated to take on the challenge. Instead of trying to eliminate the industry, we have an opportunity to employ our strengths. It's about adjusting the direction of some of our strongest players instead of benching them.

Industry-government negotiations are underway to enable the large-scale investments needed for CCUS. Industry says governments must commit more; governments say industry should dedicate more of its profits. Back and forth. Don't be distracted or dismayed by the nature of these discussions. The parties are at least talking about the same thing. COP 28 was not wrong to introduce new ideas, unusual partnerships, and innovative approaches to addressing climate change. Canada is currently living this.

Skeptics will reasonably challenge the feasibility of any new technology. Some see the only solution as a phase out of fossil fuels. Canada not only tolerates differences of opinion but encourages them. This is a feature of a healthy democracy. Canadian energy development is held to account by customers, employees, indigenous people, governments, shareholders, courts, the media, communities, civil society, and many others - a list likely too long to fully name. If any country can encourage one its largest industries down new paths, it's Canada.

The Canadian petroleum industry was at COP28. It took criticism, but also offered solutions. Representatives made good faith efforts to promote feasible options like carbon capture, they were not there to deny, obfuscate, or confuse. While outcomes are difficult to immediately discern following such a meeting, it's fair to say new ground was broken and different conversations took place. Canada was well served by its large and diverse delegation.

Overshadowed by the fossil fuel debates was the fact that nuclear energy was declared a clean power option for fighting climate change. Canada is the world's second largest exporter of uranium and one of the world's most established nuclear power generators. It wasn't all about oil and gas. Canada is made of solutions.

COP 28 was different, controversial, and substantive - worthy of Canada's enhanced participation. No matter how the United Arab Emirates may feel about the intended or unintended results of the meeting, they should be commended for hosting it.