

**Minister of State for Mining Bill Bennett  
Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources**

**Address to the Action Canada Fellows, along with the Centre for Native Policy &  
Research, Unisféra, and the Centre for Public Policy Research  
at Simon Fraser University  
May 8, 2006**

Thank you.

As an MLA from a rural riding where we have mining, forestry, tourism, the service sector and real estate development, I know a little about the interaction between community and industry.

In my Riding of East Kootenay, we have five working coal mines, the Flathead Valley (home to the highest density of grizzly bears in non coastal N.A.), one of the most popular ski resorts in N.A. at Fernie, world class fly fishing on the Elk, Wigwam and Fording rivers, a thriving forest industry, small scale mining, coal bed methane exploration, new golf courses and huge real estate pressure from Alberta!

I've spent all of my life living in or close to wilderness - over 20 years in the fly in fishing and hunting business in remote parts of northern Canada. I moved to the East Kootenay because of the easy access to wilderness we have in the southern Rocky Mountains.

I am a *conservationist*, as opposed to a *preservationist*

A few years ago, I came across an article by Candis Maclean where she distinguished between "Preservation" as opposed to "Conservation

Preservationism, she said, is based on the assumption that humans do not belong in nature and that any interaction with nature by humans is inevitably negative.

Conservation, on the other hand, is based on humankind being part of nature, that far more plants and animals are reproduced each year than can survive and that these excess plants and animals are resources to be harvested, within a careful context of responsible regulations and practices.

If you listen to the public debate around the environment, I think you will find that today's mostly urban population sees resource issues through a preservationist lense.

I can't tell you how many times I have heard people exclaim, that all would be fine, if only the humans would just stay out.

The philosophy underlying this view, in my opinion, is a version of 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism that is nostalgic for a less mechanized time and it is a view that conveniently avoids the many scientific advances related to resource extraction that have benefited the world over the past 100 years.

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This, I believe, is the context within which mining takes place in 21<sup>st</sup> century British Columbia.

One of the main reasons for this context is of course that society has little appreciation for where the raw materials come from.

Farmers will tell us people don't know where their food comes from and loggers will tell us people have no clue how paper and wood products arrive at their suburban door.

This is even truer of minerals and mineral products.

It is actually quite simple: every inanimate object in this room come out of the ground or are grown from the ground.

Your lap tops consist of multiple minerals, our tooth paste, our clothing, our cosmetics, sidewalks and streets, our automobiles, houses and offices – it all comes from the ground.

In other words, it must be mined or grown.

There is no industry in the world, other than agriculture, that is so fundamentally requisite to our way of life, our standard of living, our social safety net and our future prosperity, than mining.

So having established my own philosophical bias, what can I say about starting the conversation between....

Well, there's the first question...who is the conversation actually between?

I think it's important to consider who is best suited to have a dialogue with communities about proposed mining development.

Smart mining proponents establish a permanent presence in the nearby community and do their best to explain how the proposed mine can be built, operated and reclaimed, including a full discussion of impacts.

Local people have right to expect benefits, so that discussions must take place as well.

Mining usually takes place out of sight, so even those who live in an area like the East Kootenay often know little about how mining actually works.

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The point is, communities will fill the gaps in their understanding with whatever information is readily available, bearing in mind there is poor basic understanding of the science of mining.

Now in addition to the proponent, government has an obligation to make factual information readily available to communities and this information should be communicated at the earliest possible stage of a proposed development.

In an ideal world, communities would have better scientific literacy about mining methods and reclamation, in addition to understanding the benefits and the need for minerals in their lives.

Government and industry work together to ensure that our mostly urban population understands the benefits from mining. That is actually one of my jobs as minister.

But bear in mind which group of people are the least trusted in Canadian society – politicians.

And bear in mind that politicians belong to partisan political parties and that at least half of the people in any given community don't subscribe to the same political viewpoint and will oppose any initiative that the government politician talks about.

So if you think politicians are the best suited to communicate the benefits and risks of a project to communities, you might want to rethink that.

Frankly, I think the stigma associated with politicians extends to government corporately.

I had an experience in the East Kootenay with CBM where we made extensive efforts to provide unbiased information to the public but because we were late getting started and because of the early efforts of opponents, all the resources expended on this communications and education effort went for naught.

Within weeks of the industry deciding to not bid on the CBM leases in the Crowsnest field, Shell came in to discuss their exploration for CBM in a different area, left government out of their meetings and there was barely a whimper from anyone.

I think the approach that companies like Polaris Minerals and Nova Gold Resources have taken to early, direct community consultations independent of government, is the best approach.

I know of some examples of where a company started working on their project, before community engagement. and all this did was allow the opponents to paint a negative picture that incited fear and opposition.

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The professional ENGO's watch carefully and are nimble and quick at getting into a community before a proponent or government get around to establishing what they believe the facts are.

If a community is spooked, it's like trying to rebuild a person's reputation after the rumour mill has had its way with it.

Now as for the province's project evaluation, I believe that the BC Environmental Assessment process is a good process and I know the process has integrity – people can trust that it is not political or biased.

The process really includes two formal stages, pre-application and application (180 days).

Long before a company's application is accepted for the 180 day evaluation, it must spend a lot of time and a lot of money to show the EAO that it has properly studied potential impacts on the environment, that it has developed ideas for suitable mitigation, and that it has consulted with local people.

Many companies don't ever get to the actual 180 day assessment stage, because they either cannot deal adequately with the estimated impacts, or did not realize the extent to which they would be required to do baseline studies, to develop a complete business model, and to engage with local communities.

For me, the most difficult part of the government process is actually not in the evaluation of environmental impacts and mitigation, but in the response to the local community who just does not want the development, despite the fact the mine can be built with acceptable environmental impact.

As an aside, I think it is important for me to state that there is always going to be some environmental impact from mining. The lay of the land changes with any kind of mining, even though proper reclamation and closure protects against contamination.

At every opportunity, I believe we should challenge the naïve assumption that mining can be done without *any* impact, and I believe this must be balanced with the fact that only .03% of BC's actual land base is used for mining.

Society makes a choice to allow an impact on this .03%, but to absolutely minimize any environmental harm, in return for the benefits to society that come from a mine.

It is this choice that we make that we should discuss with communities, rather than pretend that mining or any resource extraction can be done without leaving a footprint

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So what does government do when a local community simply does not want a project, even though the project can be built without significant long term negative impact on the environment.

Well, to start with, the resource is owned by all the people of the province, not just the local community.

The project evaluation process is founded on the assumption that if potential negative environmental impacts can be mitigated, that if communities are consulted, and that if all aspects of the proposed project can be developed in a responsible way, the project should proceed.

The exception of course is on FN traditional territory where the FN community has legal rights that require additional consultation and accommodation.

So what does government do if a community or multiple communities oppose a project because perhaps their view of themselves does not include an industrial activity, or perhaps they moved to the area because it is sparsely populated and they don't want more people. Perhaps they are concerned about their real estate values. Perhaps they believe a mine will undermine their efforts to build a world class tourist destination.

I think part of the answer is to ensure that local people get the facts they need to assess the impacts of a project on their community.

I know that people are often against a project because they do not understand what the *real benefits* will be and because they do not understand what the *real impacts* will be.

However, there are situations where a community just does not want the development for its own reasons. I have such a situation in my own riding with the Flathead Valley.

There are other examples around the province.

For these situations, the province must make a decision that is in the best interests of the province generally. We will hold up a project, frankly, to allow the proponent and government staff to work with local people.

But ultimately, our government takes the position that we want new mines in British Columbia, for the high paying jobs, and for the tax revenues we receive to pay for our social programs.

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This of course means that theoretically a project can be approved that does not have the support of the local communities and frankly that is something that does not sit well with us in government and should not sit well with the proponent company.

I'm going to make one final observation and it's about the mining industry's unique culture of equity fund-raising for projects.

I am referring to the situation of a company issuing news releases about a new mine before any meaningful engagement with communities has taken place – let alone applications for permits.

A mining company usually needs to sell shares to the public, often the public in other countries, to raise the capital for exploration and mine development.

To inform potential shareholders of the opportunities that lie beneath the ground, some companies issue news releases and do interviews about their grand plans, before they have even talked to the community or provincial government.

If these public communications are not thoughtful and careful, they can make the eventual community engagement much more difficult for that particular project, and can undermine the industry's relationship with communities in general.

The way that Polaris Minerals and Nova Gold Resources have avoided getting ahead of their public consultations, is, without question, the model to follow.

Our government recognizes the importance and the difficulty of balancing the benefits from mine development with protection of the environment and with the need to respect the people who live close to the proposed project.

Most communities and most individuals focus primarily on the perceived impact on them, personally, and on their neighbourhood.

The province has an obligation to not only care about the project-specific implications, but on the implications for the province generally.

From a provincial government perspective, it is the balance of the local and provincial interests that is most challenging.

I encourage your discussion here over the next day and look forward to any advice you have for me on how to do a better job of engaging communities.