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Cutting through polluted public discourse

By [David Suzuki](#) in [Opinion](#), [Politics](#) | May 3rd 2018



Screen shot from film footage of tanker in Burrard Inlet by Zack Embree film 'Directly Affected'

"We're not going to get off fossil fuels overnight!" How many times have you heard that? Over the decades I've been hearing it, we've increased exploration and development, continued to build infrastructure that locks us in to fossil fuels for years to come, increased greenhouse gas emissions and pollution, and failed to conserve energy and develop clean energy to the extent necessary to prevent catastrophic global climate change. At some point, the phrase just becomes an excuse for procrastination.

People aren't terribly good at averting the biggest crisis humanity **faces, but left** we're masters at concocting excuses to do as little as possible about it.

Sometimes the excuses make little sense. The debasement of public discourse through poorly moderated online commenting platforms and unreliable media has spawned an army of people who don't concern themselves with facts or logical consistency or even with responding to the discussion at hand.

"We're not going to get off fossil fuels overnight" is one of the more reasonable responses. I've used it myself. It may have become an excuse for stalling, but with its grain of truth, it's better than a popular tactic employed by everyone from climate science deniers to political trolls: changing the topic. Known as a red herring or sometimes a *tu quoque* ("you too") logical fallacy, or more commonly as "[whataboutism](#)," it's been widespread in the discussion around Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain pipeline. No matter how thorough, valid and reasonable pipeline critics' statements are, they're met with comments like, "Victoria dumps raw sewage into the ocean!" or "B.C. is the major shipping point for coal in all of North America."

The implication is that objecting to increasing climate-disrupting fossil fuel development and shipping diluted bitumen across land, over rivers and onto ocean tankers is not valid because the people objecting are somehow responsible for or are ignoring other environmental issues. It's up there with the idea that [anyone who](#) uses any petroleum-based products has no right to express concerns about fossil fuels and climate.

It's true that Victoria dumps filtered sewage into the ocean — although the city is constructing a treatment plant, which the David Suzuki Foundation [supports](#) — but that has nothing to do with the pipeline discussion. I was accused of supporting coal because I wrote an article criticizing the pipeline. The Foundation and I often examine the [major problems](#) with coal, just not in an article specifically about a bitumen pipeline.

A lot of the comments levelled at me personally are about my many

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“mansions” or the island I own with an oil company or the Hummers I drive. Besides being [false](#), the comments avoid addressing the arguments by attacking me. It’s easier to sling *ad hominem* insults and distractions than to read and analyze a position and come up with a solid rebuttal.

Good, critical discussion of important issues is crucial. It builds greater understanding and leads to positive solutions. But, as PR expert and former David Suzuki Foundation board chair James Hoggan writes in his book *I’m Right and You’re an Idiot*, “polluted public discourse is an enormous obstacle to change.”

And change is absolutely necessary to overcome serious challenges like global warming, biodiversity loss, population growth, pollution and outdated economic systems. The overwhelming evidence, gathered over centuries by scientists from around the world and accepted by every legitimate scientific institution and every national government, proves we’re facing a climate crisis of our own making — that wastefully burning fossil fuels and destroying carbon sinks like forests and wetlands and relying on industrial animal agriculture is putting human health and survival at risk.

There’s no real debate about that. The conversation must be about how best to address the problem. If someone claims a bitumen pipeline is in the national interest and that it’s essential to plans to confront climate change, let’s see the evidence — although I have yet to hear a rational defence of such a contradictory position. If someone says global warming is at a point where we must adapt or [geoengineer](#) our way out, I will consider their perspectives along with ideas about other ways to proceed.

But those who can’t or won’t form a cogent argument about the topic at hand are just wasting everyone’s time, including their own.

David Suzuki is a scientist, broadcaster, author and co-founder of the David Suzuki Foundation. Written with contributions from David Suzuki Foundation Senior Editor Ian Hanington.

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