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Environment blog

Canadian campaign puts the spin on 'ethical oil'

Tar sands website promotes a binary world where Canadian oil is 'ethical' and the rest is produced by 'oppressors'

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You've got to hand it to [Alykhan Velshi](#): for such a tender age, he seems to be remarkably well-versed in the dark arts of spin and misdirection.

Many people outside of Alberta believe the Canadian state's [tar sands industry](#) to be the most environmental destructive energy extraction industry in the world. But not Velshi, a 27-year-old neocon political communications adviser, who, until a few months ago, was the right-hand man to Canada's immigration minister. This week, he has [relaunched a website](#) aimed at extolling the virtues of, ahem, Canada's "ethical oil".

The term "ethical oil" was first coined two years ago in a book by a conservative activist and pundit called [Ezra Levant](#). But Velshi has picked up the term and, well, not just run with it, but sprinted off towards the horizon at a pace that would shame [Usain Bolt](#). Click on to [EthicalOil.org](#)'s new homepage and you soon get a taste of Velshi's

reasoning as to why Canada's tar sands industry is so virtuous. He begins by framing it in the binary context of goodies and baddies, whereby Canada gets to play the good guy and any "conflict oil"-producing nation that isn't a "liberal democracy" gets to play the baddie:

Countries that produce Ethical Oil protect the rights of women, workers, indigenous peoples and other minorities including gays and lesbians. Conflict Oil regimes, by contrast, oppress their citizens and operate in secret with no accountability to voters, the press or independent judiciaries. Some Conflict Oil regimes even support terrorism.



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If that was too subtle for you, Velshi has mocked up some pop-up campaign ads for Ethical Oil which hit you when you first enter the site. For example, in one ad we get to learn that in "Conflict Oil" countries women are stoned to death, whereas in "Ethical Oil" counties women get elected as mayors.



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And another:



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A similar logic is applied when Velshi is challenging the "[myth](#)" that oil extracted from tar sands is a major emitter of greenhouse gases:

In an ethical country like Canada, we obviously take the environment a lot more seriously than the Chinese regime does: it's why we hear so much concern about the oilsands carbon footprint from NGOs, politicians and in the media. You won't hear nearly as much criticism in China, or Venezuela, for that matter. The fact that Canadians care so much about the planet - and that we have the freedom to express our concerns - is one of the many reasons that we know Canada is a more ethically minded country than most.

Canada's Globe and Mail also has some interesting quotes from Velshi in an [article profiling the launch of his new site](#). It quotes him saying:

When petroleum reserves were deposited around the world, it is unfortunate that they were all given to the world's bastards. With the exception of Canada, most of them are with the world's bastards. You need to recognize that when you are buying oil.

The Globe and Mail states that Velshi's website is just one cog in the wider effort now being promoted in part by the Canadian government which aims to challenge the popular notion that tar sands are an environmental disaster. But when quizzed about his website's funding, Velshi said: "I won't take money from any foreign corporations, any governments." He added, though, that, if offered, he wouldn't refuse Canadian corporate donations.

Velshi's efforts might well be somewhat transparent, but there also seems to be a rather inconvenient hole in his logic, too. China - one of the "bastards", according to Velshi - also happens to be a [major investor in Canadian tar sands](#). For example, just last week, CNOOC, China's largest offshore crude and natural gas producer, [offered to buy Opti Canada](#), an Alberta oils sands company, for \$2.1bn. And in 2009, the Canadian government [cleared the sale](#) of two other Alberta tar sands projects to PetroChina in a deal worth \$1.7bn. (An even larger acquisition by PetroChina [recently fell through](#) due to a disagreement over price, but analysts say the Chinese appetite for similar deals remains strong.)

Shouldn't this now mean that Canada's tar sands are labelled as "Conflict Oil", too?!

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