

Reflection on *Alberta Next: Energy & Environment*

A Graduate Student Perspective on Canada's Energy Future

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Introduction: Setting the Stage

On September 22, 2025, members of our Sustainable Energy Development (SEDV) cohort were invited by the Calgary Chamber of Commerce to attend *Alberta Next: Energy & Environment*. The event featured a keynote address by **Dr. Robert ("RJ") Johnston, Director of Energy and Natural Resources at the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy**, followed by a fireside chat with **Gitane De Silva, former CEO of the Canada Energy Regulator and President of GDStrategic**.

As emerging professionals, we welcomed the opportunity to engage directly with senior thinkers at the intersection of policy, geopolitics, and the energy industry. Alberta's role in Canada's energy future is contested terrain, shaped by volatile global markets and domestic debates over sustainability. This event provided both timely insights and an occasion to test our own perspectives.

What? - Key Messages

A Post-Institutional World

Dr. Johnston began by situating today's energy debates within a broader geopolitical shift. As he put it, "We have moved from the age of globalization to the age of **economic warfare**." Where once trade expansion and institutional cooperation defined global relations, the primary instruments of statecraft are now sanctions, export controls, and tariffs. For middle powers like Canada, the weakening of institutions such as the WTO, WHO, and NATO strips away the scaffolding that once magnified our influence.

Market Diversification: Asia or Fortress North America?

While not strictly an either/or choice, Canada faces a critical dilemma: whether to expand ties with Asia or double down on a North American alignment. Johnston highlighted how China has overtaken the U.S. as the largest trading partner for most countries, underscoring the region's importance. Canadian oil and LNG, he argued, could serve as gateways to partnerships with Japan, Korea, and India. Yet he also raised the prospect of a "Fortress North America" model, where Canada aligns more closely with U.S. trade and security policies.

Both speakers cautioned that diversification is not just about finding buyers for hydrocarbons but about forging deeper trade and political partnerships that embed Canada in global supply chains. De Silva noted that calls for a "national energy strategy" can sound uncomfortably like the National Energy Program of the 1980s, a reminder that diversification efforts must avoid past mistakes and respect provincial autonomy.

Shifts in Oil Demand

Contrary to assumptions that oil demand is about road fuels, Johnston stressed that growth is concentrated in petrochemicals and aviation fuels. Canadian crude, therefore, must match the needs of "crude-to-chemicals" refineries in Asia. He suggested Canada could "*displace Russian and Iranian crudes (with some blending/creativity)*," but only if we adapt our strategies to refinery requirements.

LNG and the Coal Challenge

Johnston's equation was blunt: *"more expensive coal, less expensive gas."* Coal remains entrenched across Southeast Asia, driven by rising air-conditioning demand. For LNG to succeed, Canadian projects must not only compete on emissions but, more importantly, on cost and reliability.

Canadian Industry and Policy Options

Johnston also flagged that energy strategy cannot be separated from the emerging global competition for critical minerals. For Canada, this highlights the importance of integrating critical minerals into an energy-industrial strategy. As students, we recognize that Alberta's resource base, while known for hydrocarbons, also ties into the processing, supply chain, and value-added industries linked to lithium, rare earths, and other minerals needed for batteries, renewables, and digital infrastructure.

In the post keynote discussion, De Silva emphasized that Canadian energy exports are more than commodities, they are **signals of credibility** to global partners. Reflecting on her time as CEO of the Canada Energy Regulator, she argued that Canada must balance Alberta's competitiveness with federal climate commitments, noting that international allies watch closely whether our policies are stable and trustworthy. She emphasized that both federal and provincial actors must work in alignment not only to help Canada emerge from the current period of economic strain, but also to build long-term resilience and competitiveness for the future.

So What? - Why This Matters for Alberta and Canada

Canada's Exposure as a Middle Power

The conversations highlighted that Canada's reliance on global institutions has become a vulnerability. Without the predictability of rules-based systems, Alberta's producers must prepare for sudden policy swings: tariffs, sanctions, or political instability in the U.S. This exposure makes resilience, not "growth at any cost," the necessary strategy.

Canada's Emergence as a Natural Resource Based Economy

De Silva emphasized Canada's persistent productivity challenges and pointed to natural resource exports as a key growth engine. Framing energy as a strategic asset could strengthen both global influence and domestic resilience. Recent approvals of "nation-building" projects, such as LNG expansions, suggest momentum toward positioning natural resources at the core of Canada's economic strategy.

Importance of Interprovincial Collaboration

Both panelists underlined the need to reduce barriers to interprovincial trade and development. Attracting investment for infrastructure that supports trade diversification will require harmonized regulations and efficient permitting, factors addressed by the passage of Bill C-5. From our perspective, the *One Canadian Economy Act* is an important test case. It could accelerate clean energy projects, intertie development, and workforce mobility—but without consistent provincial buy-in, uneven implementation is a real risk.

We are also mindful of the debate around impact assessments. While some requirements are being rolled back to speed up permitting, sustainability demands more than efficiency. The challenge is to reimagine assessments so projects can move forward quickly without sidelining equity, environmental protection, and long-term resilience.

Asia as the Pivot, But Not a Guarantee

Johnston's case for Asia was persuasive but far from guaranteed. While Canadian crude might theoretically replace sanctioned Russian or Iranian supply, Asian refiners are price-sensitive, and face competing offers from closer

suppliers. De Silva suggested that Canada might first strengthen ties with existing free trade partners—fifteen countries where diversification could start more pragmatically.

Coal as the Real Competitor

The keynote reinforced that LNG's real competitor is not renewables, but coal. Johnston warned that "China's 'electro-state' [is] dominating power plant construction." This sobering reminder challenges the assumption that LNG will seamlessly displace coal. From a sustainability perspective, the key question is how to support coal-to-gas switching without locking countries into new high-carbon pathways.

U.S. Policy Spillovers

Johnson's question, "*Who wins?*", captured the unpredictability of U.S. energy policy. Canada cannot assume consistency. If the U.S. leans toward cheap domestic energy, Canadian exports may face price suppression. If it leans toward energy dominance, Canadian producers may find themselves undercut or squeezed. As De Silva reminded, policy volatility south of the border is itself a risk factor for Alberta.

Alberta's Dual Role

For Alberta, the challenge is to attract capital while maintaining credibility. Johnston noted that to double production, Canada would need pre-2014 levels of investment, which seems unlikely under today's ESG and shareholder discipline. This tension, between ambition and reality, requires Alberta to carefully balance growth aspirations with regulatory efficiency and sustainability.

Now What? - Student Reflections and Watchpoints

Systems Thinking in Uncertain Times

As SEDV students, we left the event humbled by the scale of uncertainty. Johnston himself conceded, "*the Asian market for oil is there but is evolving on the demand side.*" Our role is not to predict single outcomes but to prepare for multiple futures: Asia-first diversification, Fortress North America, coal resilience, or renewable disruption.

Credibility as Currency

De Silva's emphasis on trust resonated for us. For Canada, credibility on methane measurement, regulatory stability, and climate commitments are as valuable as the resources themselves. Our skepticism lies in whether Canadian governments, across political cycles, can deliver the policy consistency needed to sustain that credibility.

Equity and Justice

Hearing about Asia's coal dependency and cooling demand reminded us that energy policy is also about equity. Millions of people in Southeast Asia rely on affordable cooling for survival. Any Canadian push for LNG exports must grapple with this duality: addressing development needs without locking countries into high-carbon infrastructure.

Career Reflections

For us, the keynote was a call to duty to work at the intersection of **policy analysis and industry practice**. We see an urgent need to translate global geopolitical shifts into strategies that are both commercially viable and environmentally responsible. This keynote also reinforced that credibility, adaptability, and systems thinking will be core skills for sustainable energy leaders.

Conclusion: Preparing Without a Crystal Ball

Alberta Next: Energy & Environment underscored both the opportunities and uncertainties shaping Alberta's energy future. The keynote laid bare that while some of the factors shaping geopolitics are immutable, previous constants in the international order are changing. Growth in energy and resource demands continue to be fueled by population growth and climate adaptation, while the rules-based order faces disruption and unpredictability not seen in generations.

Alongside oil and gas, critical minerals will increasingly determine Canada's leverage in the global energy transition. Productive collaboration between different levels of government and Canadian producers, and cultivation of new international partners will determine whether Alberta emerges as a secure supplier, and how well Canada will weather the economic war to come.

As students, we left without illusions. We do not have a crystal ball. We cannot predict whether LNG will outcompete coal, whether Asia will embrace Canadian crude, or whether the U.S. will choose dominance or abundance. But we can prepare by strengthening systems thinking, cultivating credibility, and designing flexible strategies that anticipate disruption. That, ultimately, is the lesson of *Alberta Next*: our energy future is not preordained. It will be shaped by choices, our choices, as the next generation of energy and sustainability professionals.