

Right, Left & Center

The Week in Cartoons



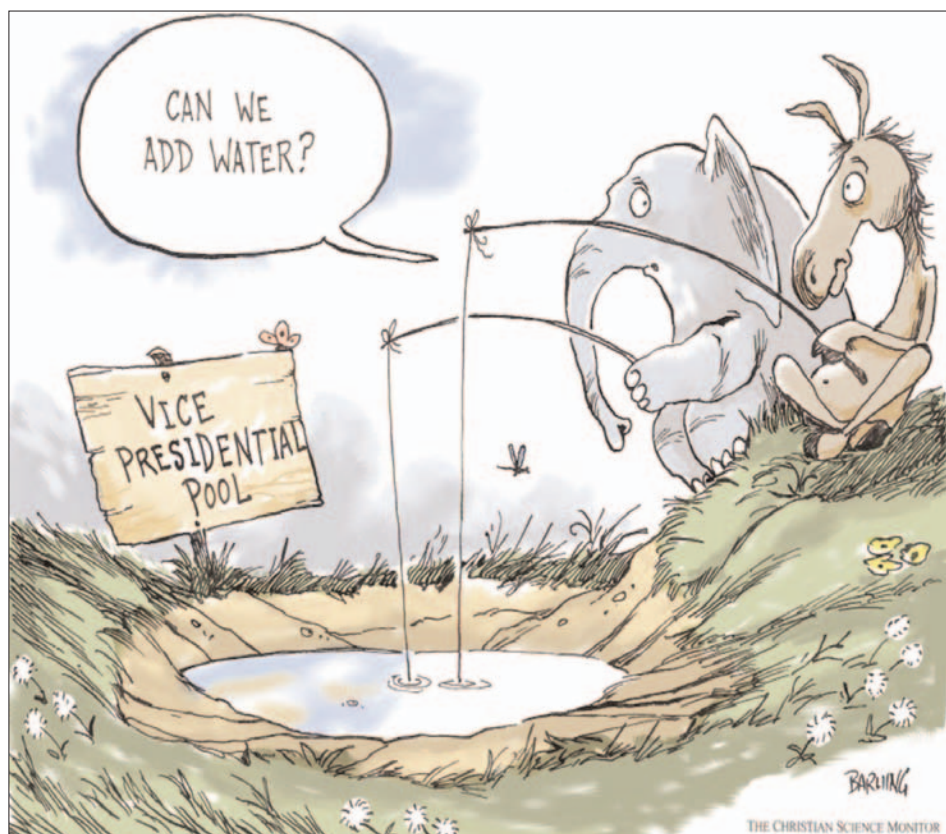
By Paresh - India



By John Cole - Scranton Times-Tribune



By Patrick Corrigan - The Toronto Star



By Barling - Christian Science Monitor



Bill Arthur

Trust, lust and disgust in the run-up to a Minnesota non-ferrous metals mine

According to the late sociologist, Erving Goffman; "Who defines the situation, controls it." The application of this succinct axiom in human affairs is really in our faces in this election year, as candidates dance frenetically on the public stage to define themselves, their opponents, and what's best for the nation and the world. Defining what's best for us is the lubricant in the art of persuasion. It's the stuff of speech writers, peddlers and paid skills for special interests. And we, the audience, are usually hypnotized by the hype.

Abe Lincoln described this process in his folksy way: "You can fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time; but you can't fool all of the people all of the time." In this Information Age, when more folks can access more facts, the dance to define what's best for everybody gets a little trickier.

With that in mind, consider the current run-up to the PolyMet mining project proposed for Northeastern Minnesota.

Geologists describe "Ore" as "a substance that can be profitably extracted." Canadian mining interests have submitted evidence for the existence of valuable minerals (gold, nickel, platinum, cobalt) in the sulphide-bearing rock beneath our local environs. The Canadians are quite experienced in navigating the social and political complexities associated with mining ventures. Local sale of speculative stock in the proposed venture, the promise of local jobs and the backing of local politicians are all factors now in play. The natives are restless and engaged.

In a region with a mining legacy, passions are easily stoked by the promotion of a new "strike". Passions, nowadays, include both pro and con for exploiting the alleged find. The mere mention of one group's name to their opposing number has - in the past - served to define the battle lines of dissent. It's like taking the measure of a resident's world view based on whether they use the term "swamp" or "wetlands". Miners versus Environmentalists, Sierra Club and Friends of the Boundary Waters versus Conservationists with Common Sense. Sound familiar?

Experience should teach us that -- once that scrimmage line is drawn -- emotion, not reason, rules the game. When that happens, we hand over control to those outsiders who can pump the most steroids into their gang of local supporters. While we're all watching the field and rooting for our team, the real deals are made in the clubhouse.

In a reasoned examination of the Canadian venture planned for our

Watching Moss Grow

and other observations

Deciding what's best

neighborhood, economic benefit must be carefully balanced with environmental stewardship. That's not fodder for argument, just good business. Although many assurances about managing the AMD (acid mine drainage) and protecting water resources are given before the digging starts, these need to be backed with enforceable performance guarantees and tangible, recoverable surety that can be used to mitigate damages, should PolyMet's projected environmental protections fall short in actual practice. We have learned that a mining company can cause considerable damage and escape financial accountability by declaring bankruptcy. Having been victimized by that maneuver before, let's insist on hard cash in a deposit account this time. No offense to our Canadian friends, just a responsible business agreement based on experience.

The prospect of good-paying jobs has a powerful appeal that project backers are using to whip up a veritable frenzy of local support. With the national and state economies said to be entering a prolonged slump, it's a powerful pressure tactic to encourage rushing the PolyMet project forward.

Self-proclaimed Captain of Minnesota's environment, Congressman Jim Oberstar, has stunned his Green supporters by slipping a measure into the hopper (HR 4292) to grease a proposed land sale from the Forest Service to PolyMet. Captain Jim claims the bill would eliminate unnecessary duplication of Environmental Impact Studies and unnecessary public commentary; but he knows that isn't the whole story. Senator Amy Klobuchar, inheritor of the late Paul Wellstone's mantle, has also shocked supporters by introducing a companion measure to Captain Jim's bill in the Senate. So what's the problem with trying to fast-track this land sale to PolyMet?

When PolyMet acquired underground mineral rights from U.S. Steel, the separate deed to surface land held by the U.S. Forest Service -- purchased under the Weeks Act of 1911 - was bound by covenants that may conflict with aspects of the extraction process initially planned by PolyMet. This is the interpretation of the Forest Service and independent legal professionals. PolyMet, by necessity, disagrees with this interpretation, which establishes protections in perpetuity for the surface land and water of the Superior National Forest. The covenants aren't meant to "preserve wilderness" (which the land isn't) or prohibit mining (which they don't); but were wisely included to check undue deleterious effects that might be caused by just such a project as PolyMet proposes.

Captain Jim's bill would permit merging the mineral and surface rights for 6700

acres of the Superior National Forest into a single deed, following which Forest Service protections for the waters and surface features could be eliminated by PolyMet without any public review or comment. This is a slightly different strategic intent than Oberstar's "avoiding unnecessary duplication" explanation.

It's understandable for our Congressman to be a friend of the mining industry (job creation and all) but, in this case, disingenuously tilting the table away from a deserved public hearing on long-standing environmental protections means Jim doesn't get to wear his sulphide-stained Captain Environment Outfit for a while. He could redeem himself by withdrawing the offending legislation to allow a public vetting of the land use issues. Unless he's really in PolyMet's pocket, that would be the difficult, but courageous thing to do. As they've been working in tandem, Amy should follow suit and withdraw her companion bill in the Senate.

The real problem is times have changed for industrial development and mining, in particular. Folks over fifty probably never heard the word "ecosystem" in high school. We need mining and jobs, but we also need to remember the hard lessons learned to prevent long-term bad effects (like mesothelioma and harmful pollution) by incorporating preventive features into design of safe extractive methodologies.

PolyMet has options. Yes, other approaches can reduce investor profitability, and howls about "delays" can be expected; but the alternatives aren't show-stoppers to profitable mine operation and more so than in the past -- environmental safeguards are part of the cost of doing business responsibly in the 21st Century.

What's truly best for us is what's also best for future generations who will inhabit the place we leave them. Our predecessors realized this in including protections for the Superior National Forest, and so should we as times and land uses change. We can expect mining companies to try and use the cheapest extraction methods, but we need to be assured that risks to the environment are truly minimized.

PolyMet's project would be stronger for a public vetting of the land use issues, and could enjoy support from all quarters as a welcome Canadian neighbor, engaged in a win-win local enterprise.

September action is expected on Jim and Amy's legislation for the PolyMet sale. Call and give them your opinion (or leave a message).

Captain Jim's phone number: (202) 225-6211; Amy Klobuchar: (202) 224-3244

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