

# Kootenay “geezer gang” Caravan meets groundswell of opposition to Enbridge pipeline

**From July 19-26, 2012 the Kootenay to Kitimat Caravan took a message to communities on the proposed route: Stop the pipeline!**



**Report from organizer Keith Wiley**

**W**e're on the road home now, driving past the glacier that hangs off Hudsons Bay mountain over Smithers. For once the Kootenay to Kitimat Caravan “geezer gang” is quiet. We are tired, and reflecting on ten days of travel, rallies, and above all, meeting people opposed to the Enbridge pipeline. Each of us has been surprised by the impact encountering these activists has had on us. Right off, our first night in Kelowna, we were welcomed with a picnic at Karen's place. There were Council of Canadians folks and about a dozen others who are actively fighting the pipeline. Mae Jong-Bowles was there all the way from Prince Rupert with salmon she'd caught and smoked herself. Karen put us up for the night, fed us breakfast the next morning and sent us off to a loud and energetic rally outside the Kelowna mall.

**The “geezers” meet John Ridsdale (Wet'suwet'en Chief Namox) and Smithers Mayor Taylor Bachrach.**

That was just the first night of the trip, but the pattern of hospitality and enthusiasm persisted as we hit Kamloops, Williams Lake and Prince George. Our geezer gang is only four guys, but everywhere many more people came out to meet us. They came to hear our message that people in the southern interior, nearly a thousand kilometres from the pipeline route, wanted to support them and stop the pipeline. Everyone is appalled at the prospect of bitumen spills in BC lands and waters.

At each stop we would stretch out our props, 20-foot-long black cloth pipelines with banners on the side reading: “Stop the pipeline” and “Protect our Future”. We'd set up our small microphone

*Kootenay to Kitimat  
Caravan*



amplifier, hand out leaflets and explain the Proclamation we were bringing to the communities on the pipeline route.

Sometimes Jim Terral would play his saxophone to set the tone while we put up our small display. He played “Study war no more” while supporters walked up to meet us in Burns Lake and Hazelton.

At these rallies we presented local representatives

“It’s just great to know people so far away support us.”

a copy of our Kootenay to Kitimat Proclamation with over 500 signatures from the Kootenays, Kelowna and even Kamloops.

Our Proclamation wasn’t always easy to explain. “It’s NOT a petition to politicians or people in power,” I would tell people at our events.

“This is a message from our communities to you. And it’s a simple message: We support you and your right to refuse the pipeline access to your lands, waters and communities.”

But then I’d have to add: “No, you can’t sign this... this is a message to you.” That was a bit unusual, but once I made it clear this was for them, people

### **Some of the Gitksan people at the great event and lunch in Hazelton!**

everywhere from Nadleh to Kitimat would express real appreciation.

“It’s just great to know people so far away support us,” they’d say.

We weren’t on the road very long before we realized we were in for a more exciting time than we ever expected. Day one, at our second stop in Grand Forks, Mayor Brian Taylor met us, along with Margaret Steele and a couple of dozen folks. Everyone shook our hands and told us they were grateful we had taken on the project.

We found that same energy over and over and it became quite humbling. We were just four older men trying to do our small part to build up opposition to an environmental nightmare.

At each rally we also heard from activists who would explain their pipeline concerns and their organizing efforts. In Burns Lake, Carla Lewis, a Wet’suwet’en woman who had her young son holding on to her leg – told us how just the week before people in her community had done a lengthy canoe trip. They’d taken children out on the river in the big war canoes, camping out several nights. The threat from the pipeline had motivated them to to show the children life on the river. Our small rally grew very quiet as we listened to her. Carla’s voice quavered and she had to pause when she said her community’s way of life would be ended by a pipeline leak.

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Carla also first mentioned what several other people repeated: “We are grateful to Enbridge, because they have brought us together more than ever before.”

The First Nations communities are rallying to protect their lands from the pipeline, and several people told us how they are also uniting more with the non-aboriginal community than ever before.

For the four of us Caravaners, listening to the First Nations people was profoundly powerful. In Nadleh on Fraser Lake, Chief Martin Louis spent over two hours with us. He started out by explaining the huge pile of documents on his side desk, corporate proposals and government consultations he needed to respond to. He looked a little tired, but patiently explained his nation’s clarity on the pipeline.

“We are grateful to Enbridge, because they have brought us together more than ever before.”

But he told us much more. He explained how in 1910, their community had been ordered by the government to stop their traditional salmon fishery using weirs to capture salmon. Using nets and gaffs cut their share of the harvest dramatically.

The day we visited, he was most concerned about

a news of a new plan from Rio Tinto Alcan to complete the second tunnel of the Kemano diversion, the water that powers the Kitimat aluminum plant. He worried that more northern rivers would be reversed to flow not into the Fraser system, but into the Kemano power plant. He explained that kind of diversion could end the salmon fishery, drop the level of the river and the lake, and devastate his community.

We went with him to the Nadleh community store where a fundraising barbecue was helping send their young dancers to a special event in

**John Olson and his daughter snag us two salmon for dinner and the next day’s lunch event! Yum!**



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Vancouver. After munching down burgers, we presented Chief Louis with our Proclamation and again had to explain we didn't want signatures. "This is addressed to you."

Later in the Office of the Wet'suwet'en in Smithers, we met with John Ridsdale, Wet'suwet'en traditional Chief Namox. On the walls of the offices we saw photos from the Freedom Train 2012 (the cross-Canada protest that went to the Enbridge shareholders' meeting in Toronto) and other events. In the pictures were several Chiefs dressed in full regalia. We saw Chief Louis and Chief Namox standing together, looking serious and determined. When we'd met with Chief Louis we clearly saw the weight of responsibility and the authority he carried. That impression was reinforced by those photos.

Our Caravan quickly became the story of the com-

**In Prince George, Regina Thomas stepped right up to welcome us and express appreciation for the Caravan's gesture of support.**



**BC NDP Leader Adrian Dix stands strongly against Northern Gateway.**

...telling people we met. In Prince George, a young First Nations woman came out to our small and somewhat impromptu rally and introduced herself, Regina Thomas, the cousin of Chief Jackie Thomas. She explained Chief Thomas was away at the Assembly of First Nations. This young woman couldn't have been over 21, but she came straight ahead to welcome us. We encountered several women like her during the trip and they left a big impression. They were articulate, determined about stopping the pipeline, and clearly unafraid of standing up and saying so.

In Williams Lake, we were lucky enough to be joined by Adrian Dix who happened to be in the community. We were pleased to meet him and





**Kim Slater ran the full distance of the pipeline to raise awareness of alternatives.**

hear about 27,000 BC citizens signing on to the online NDP letter opposing the pipeline ([www.bandtogetherBC.com](http://www.bandtogetherBC.com)). He had encouraging words for us, with his firm commitment to stopping the pipeline.

And we met Kim Slater at that same rally. Kim is running the full distance of the BC pipeline along Highway 16. (See more at [www.bandtogetherBC.com](http://www.bandtogetherBC.com).) At events on her trip she is speaking to thousands of people about how we can move our society to less toxic energy than the tar sands bitumen. Canada is falling behind she says pointing out that Germany now gets more than half its energy from solar power.

Kim said her feet were getting a bit chewed up, with 40 kilometres a day – the equivalent of a full marathon – on highway pavement, but her smile and energy were infectious. Her clear eyes shone, as she shook hands with nearly everyone at the rally. She is obviously determined to help us move to a sustainable energy future. Inspiring to meet.

The warmth and hospitality we were shown everywhere were also humbling for us Caravaners. In Fort St. James, Louise invited us all in to her home. We sat up late and talked about politics and the pipeline, and enjoyed getting cleaned up, showers all around.

In Old Hazelton, John Olson promised to feed us with fresh salmon. “We’ll stop in at Walt’s place,” he said. There we went out back and saw big 20 and 30 pound salmon in large tubs. John hauled out two, one for that day’s dinner and the larger one he said he’d stuff for our community event the next day.

In Old Hazelton, John installed us at Jacob and Jessica’s place, great folks. Jacob showed off his talents with the barbecue, cooking up the salmon deliciously with some birch twigs for smoke. Join-



**The K’san Village in Hazelton is nestled at the confluence of two mighty rivers, the Bulkley and the Skeena. The fate of these two watersheds is crucial.**

ing us was Chief Dawamukh and his wife. We listened after dinner as he explained the Gitksan house structure, headed up by traditional chiefs like himself.

In Kitimat, Chery and Ric Willis hosted and fed us. In Kamloops, it was Tom’s sister Heather and her husband Alan Campbell, who invited us in. The kindness and generosity was wonderful everywhere we went.

The promise of economic growth and jobs at the cost of destroying so much of our environment just does not fly.

We got to camp out too and spent two nights at K’san in Hazelton. The geezers enjoyed hanging around a small fire chatting with John Olson as the mighty Skeena River rushed along just a few feet away. At one point a little aluminum skiff came by, working its way slowly up the current. “Hey, it’s Walt,” said John. “How’s fishing?” he called out and Walt’s buddy in the boat held up what must have been another 30 pounder.

The Caravan quickly fell into a routine, early each day we did a public event with great assistance

from local organizers. As we set up, Michael Gilfillan got out the cameras to record the event “just to prove we really did it.” Jim turned on his audio recorder to capture interviews with many of the people we met. Tom Nixon, who insisted he could only be happy behind the wheel, quickly became our “wagon master” – helping load us up and on to the next stop.

Getting us back on the road was never easy, because all four geezers were constantly engaged in conversations with people. As soon as one chat wrapped up, another began. Finally, we’d have to get in the van to head on.

“Where’s the Caravan?” people asked us. We’d point to our single vehicle, an old blue Dodge Caravan, and everyone would laugh. I explained that many people had wanted to come, and had supported the Caravan project. But when the reality of a ten-day road trip became clear, it was too big a commitment for most. Finally, it was the geezers who had the time available, the freedom and to some extent the jam, to head out on an unknown adventure.

Driving a Caravan, using up fossil fuel, wasn’t ideal for the trip. But the way transportation works today, we were left with no option. Commercial buses would have cost much more and taken many days longer. Running or biking were not in

**Presenting the Caravan’s Proclamation to Gitksan elders: Gyolugyet, Lorna (and helper) and Wiigyet.**



**The Caravaners get briefed by John and Mike Ridsdale in the Office of the Wet’suwet’en in Smithers.**

the cards for the geezers. But with four of us in the one vehicle and Tom driving with a (mostly) light foot we kept fuel consumption down.

Just the same, fuel was the big cost of the project. On the second last day, our \$400 fund, including a generous contribution from the Nelson chapter of Council of Canadians, was running on empty. It was time to dig deep into the donation boxes that Jade Giessen and other Caravan supporters had put out in Kootenay businesses for a couple of weeks before we left. And what we found in the last two donation boxes? Good news! Over \$100. We’d make it home!

We invited local people to come forward and speak at our rallies and the depth of knowledge and research quickly became evident. In Burns Lake, John Phair from Lakes District Clean Waters explained that the pipeline would pass just about a kilometre from where we were rallying. A leak would quickly contaminate the river and all of Burns Lake itself. What we may not know, he said, is that the evacuation zone, because of toxic gases evaporating off a leak, would be at least 1.5 kilometres from the source. As any leak would quickly be carried right round the lake, the entire community would have to be evacuated.

In Fort St. James, locals had debated spill risks with Enbridge engineers who showed contamination only running to the edge of their map. But when they were pushed, the engineers found a larger map which showed how the “dilbit” (diluted bitumen) from a leak would be carried at least a kilometre out into Stuart Lake, past a national historic site.

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The Enbridge promoters came back later to Fort St. James to explain that a pipeline leak would create local employment for months, maybe years. And they promised they would leave the trucks and heavy equipment behind for the community when it was done. People we talked to couldn't believe the arrogance of this "pitch" to the community. For one thing they pointed out, there is no clean up, really. With almost all pipeline leaks, something like 75 to 85 per cent of the leaked material is never recovered. It gets dug over and lurks in the water and soil, like a leaky old gas station storage tank.

Fort St. James Council later voted to reject the whole pipeline proposal.

In Prince George and other centres, people talked about what Enbridge calls a "National Energy Transportation Corridor". This "corridor" could start with natural gas pipelines running from northeast BC to liquid natural gas terminals in Kitimat. Several people we spoke with wondered if opening such a corridor would pave the way for a bitumen line, or even if the companies could decide at some point to convert the gas lines to carrying "dilbit".

In Kitimat, Murray Minchin showed us his sub-

mission to the JRP (the National Energy Board's Joint Review Panel which has been holding hearings on the pipeline proposal). His photos and maps detail how the line would emerge from a multi-kilometre tunnel under the mountain into avalanche and rock slide fields in the Kitimat Valley.

The people of Douglas Channel Watch in Kitimat also took us to the City Council to explain our Caravan project. At the Kitimat event the next day, local MLA Robin Austin talked about the latest BC government plan to sell the pipeline.

Other politicians also joined in at our events. In Hazelton, Skeena MLA Doug Donaldson spoke passionately about preserving the environment. NDP candidate Tom Friedman organized our event and spoke with us in front of Kamloops City Hall.

We saw that the consensus against the pipeline reaches deep into BC politics. An early boost for our Caravan project, just days before we were ready to leave, had come from our own Nelson City Council. Councillor Candace Batycki put forward a motion opposing the pipeline and endorsing our Caravan. Nelson became one of the

**A rowdy bunch in Kelowna were proud to parade their opposition to the pipeline outside the mall.**



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first half dozen BC municipalities to take a strong position.

We had expected to run into animosity, people who believe the pipeline will bring them jobs. After all, there is a high-priced campaign to convince Canadians the tar sands and the pipeline are crucial to fighting off recession and poverty. In the end, though, there was only one angry woman in a wheelchair in Kamloops. She said we shouldn't be protesting, we should "get a business plan". We need the energy, she said. Her angry attack on us got her quite a bit of media coverage too.

In our talks, I said the national debate on the pipeline is becoming an historic turning point. The people of Canada will no longer accept devastating industrial projects like this pipeline. The promise of economic growth and jobs at the cost of destroying so much of our environment just does not fly. Canadians get it: there is no economy without a healthy ecosystem.

We always outlined the basics, the frightening risks of a bitumen leak into inland watersheds, and the fears about over 200 tankers a year negotiating the Douglas Channel through the Great Bear Rainforest. I would always point out as well

**The "geezer gang" were all excited smiles at the send-off in Nelson, July 16th. Left to right: Jim Terral, Michael Gilfillan, Keith Wiley and Tom Nixon.**



**MLA Robin Austin explains the latest BC government spin on the pipeline in Kitimat.**

that the pipeline is part of a plan to triple production of some of the most carbon intensive fuel. "It really is a pipeline from the tar sands right into our planet's atmosphere."

People would applaud when I said the pipeline is \$6 billion invested in going the wrong way. We could do far more with that money channelled into new sustainable plans to harness cleaner energy that does not wreak havoc with our climate.

We've had a whirlwind tour. Driving back now we are tired, but talking a lot about what comes next. Still at the wheel, Tom pipes up: "The next time we do this..." but he is cut off right there by a roar of laughter. Our Caravan was a once-in-a-lifetime kind of adventure. But the direct connection with so many determined people is definitely motivating. Now we will go on to share our experiences, share some of what we've learned, and some of the ideas we've heard about changing our province and our country to a new path. Above all, we are more certain than ever about what the people of Canada will do first, and that is: stop the pipeline.

**Opposition to the pipeline does not stop. Keep in touch through our Facebook page: Kootenays for a pipeline-free BC or email us at [noenbridgepipeline@gmail.com](mailto:noenbridgepipeline@gmail.com).**