ENVIRONMENTAL RISK AND POPULATIONS AT RISK:

The Constitution of British Columbia's Offshore Oil and Gas Controversy

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OF ALL OF THE RESOURCE DEBATES currently under way in British Columbia, the seemingly inevitable lifting of the moratorium on offshore exploration for oil and gas reserves is potentially one of the most explosive. The stakes in this debate are extraordinarily high. On the one hand is the prospect of an enormous economic boon to coastal communities that have suffered real declines in their prosperity and population (Statistics Canada 2001); on the other is the risk of environmental catastrophe through spillage – a hazard that is complicated by the fact that the majority of British Columbia's offshore oil and gas lies beneath Hectate Strait (the stretch of ocean that separates the Queen Charlotte Islands from the Mainland), an area that is one of the most geologically active regions in the world. The result is a seemingly classic dilemma of industrial society: how much environmental risk is deemed acceptable in the face of how much economic benefit?

At this time, however, offshore oil and gas development in British Columbia remains a spectre that exists only in the ideas held by individuals, groups, environmental organizations, governments, and public and private institutions. What this article argues is that the institutions that dominate the public "life" of this issue – media and the provincial government – are structuring their rhetorical and political actions regarding offshore oil and gas in order to negotiate and regulate politically explosive ideas about risk and risk management.

The prospect of offshore development invites the collision of different types of risk perception and management: (1) the environmental risk of a major spill or other catastrophe and (2) the very real risk of the economic annihilation of certain regions of northern coastal British Columbia. Yet because offshore development is still a prospect rather than a reality, its

current "form" is made up of different kinds of knowledge, particularly the expert knowledge of scientists, policy makers, and economists, as well as the "lay" knowledge of both the general public and residents of potentially affected communities. The public life of the offshore oil and gas issue is rooted in the dynamics of these different types of knowledge and how they are handled by media and government institutions.

Therefore, the second major argument in this article is that the media and government are consumers and "translators" of both expert and local knowledge. It is, however, very important to recognize that this "use" of knowledge is more political than it is substantive. For advocates who speak through the media, and for policy makers in the provincial government, engagement with the voices of stakeholders is less about listening than it is about advancing positions or policies that are intended to neutralize the explosive intersection of environmental and economic risk.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OFFSHORE OIL AND GAS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA[1]

The history of offshore oil and gas exploration and drilling in British Columbia is intertwined with the complex question of federal-provincial jurisdiction over coastal waters. Indeed, the federal government initiated the first attempt at offshore oil exploration in 1966 in clear contradiction to a 1959 claim by the province to legislative control over coastal "submerged lands." The federal government decision authorized Shell Canada to develop a total of fourteen offshore wells in Hectate Strait as well as off Vancouver Island. However, early exploration and drilling proved inconclusive and Shell abandoned the wells two years later. In 1972 the federal government imposed a moratorium on oil tanker traffic in Hectate Strait in a move directed primarily towards the Alaskan oil industry's use of BC waters. Current Minister of the Environment David Anderson, at that time a back-bencher in the Trudeau government, has publicly taken credit for subsequently insisting that the federal government strengthen the tanker legislation with a moratorium on offshore oil and gas exploration and drilling. By 1981, however, with the Hibernia project on the political horizon, the federal government's attitude towards ocean drilling began to change, prompting the government of British Columbia to impose its own moratorium.

[1] The primary sources for this section are the *North Island Gazette* (2001) and Thompson (1999). Other sources include Williams (2001); McNulty (2000); Willcocks (2000); and Palmer (2001).

In 1983 the federal and provincial governments agreed to establish an environmental assessment panel to explore the potential environmental and socioeconomic effects of exploration. The panel concluded in 1986 that exploration could proceed if it satisfied ninety-two recommendations that addressed many technical concerns as well as issues such as proper siting and the establishment of coastal buffer zones. In the following two years, negotiations between the province and the federal government began on the "Pacific Accord," which was to spell out the manner in which oil and gas exploration was to be managed and regulated. However, the massive 1989 *Exxon Valdez* spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska, galvanized public opinion in British Columbia against the prospect of offshore oil. In response, the provincial government then extended its moratorium for a further five years, effectively ending the Pacific Accord negotiations.

Interest in offshore oil and gas exploration increased again in the 1990s, in spite of the fact that the provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) government extended the moratorium in 1994 for another five-year term. Much of this interest was sparked by a report issued in 1998 by the Geological Survey of Canada, which estimated that the sea floor beneath Hectate Strait potentially contained oil deposits equalling 9.8 billion barrels and gas deposits equalling 25 trillion cubic feet. By very rough (and controversial) approximations, these deposits are touted as being two to three times the size of the Hibernia oilfield off Newfoundland. Largely as a response to this report, the provincial government appointed the Northern Development Commission (NDC) under Commissioner John Backhouse and immediately directed it to consult with residents of the North Coast regarding the *prospect* of a review of the moratorium. Active in this process was Dan Miller – deputy premier, minister of energy and mines, and MLA for the riding of North Coast. However, the NDP government was by no means unified on this issue, with high-profile Minister of Environment Moe Sihota and Premier Ujjal Dosanjh making public statements against lifting the moratorium. Nevertheless, in 1998 the NDP government contracted a Newfoundland-based environmental consulting firm to produce a report reviewing potential risks from offshore development and the technologies available to manage those risks.[2] In 1999 the NDC concluded its consultations and reported that it had found significant support among North Coast residents for a *review* of the moratorium.

The oil and gas debate was not a significant election issue in the 2001 landslide victory of the neoliberal BC Liberal Party over the incumbent

[2] This report was never released.

NDP. However, the new provincial government has been very public in its commitment to review the moratorium. Since the election, the unreleased 1998 technology report has been recommissioned and subsequently made public; the NDC recommendations for extensive long-term consultation have been shelved in favour of an accelerated process; and a scientific panel has been appointed to assess further the environmental viability of offshore oil and gas development. The panel's report, made public in May 2002, found that "there is no inherent or fundamental inadequacy of science or technology, properly applied in an appropriate regulatory framework, to justify a blanket moratorium on activities" (British Columbia 2002).

RISK

Over the past decade, the concept of risk has become increasingly central to many branches of sociological theory and analysis. It is, however, a term with multiple definitions and connotations. Lupton (1999) identifies three broad sets of "perspectives" on how risk exists as a social phenomenon. For the sake of clarity, I will rename them as traditional, moderate, and radical perspectives on the social nature of risk. The traditional perspective on risk is the one that is most familiar to the public and to the natural sciences, risk being defined as "the product of the probability and consequences (magnitude and severity) of an adverse event" (Bradbury, qtd. in Lupton 1999, 17-8). The traditional perspective looks at the social impact of risk by examining how the "lay" public receives and (mis)interprets factual information from experts and institutions about risks and risk management. By contrast, the moderate perspective on risk looks at how ideas or "notions of risk" actually affect the behaviour of individuals, groups, and institutions. This perspective argues that the avoidance and management of risk are becoming increasingly central to how we see and organize the world (Lupton 1999, 24-7). Finally, the radical perspective on risk is grounded in the argument that "a risk is never fully objective or knowable outside of belief systems and moral positions: what we measure, identify and manage as risks are always constituted via pre-existing knowledges and discourses" (29).

Therefore, risk in a sociological sense can be many things: it is often considered as a variable that affects individual and institutional behaviour, is often used as a specific analytical tool for making sense of particular social phenomena, and/or is often engaged as a theoretical "metaphor" for grasping broad trajectories of social change. The contemporary sociological approach to environmental risk, however, is dominated by

the "risk society" thesis developed by Ulrich Beck. The risk society thesis is best characterized as a "moderate" perspective on the social nature of risk. It insists that behaviour in the contemporary world is affected both by "the immateriality of mediated and contested definitions of risk *and* the materiality of risk as manufactured by experts and industries worldwide" (Beck 1999, 4, emphasis in original). By this logic, environmental risks are certainly "real" and are putting various forms of direct and tangible pressure on individuals and social institutions. Yet at the same time, the theory acknowledges that environmental risks are perhaps most significant in their impact on "risk consciousness" – on how we think and structure our day-to-day lives in relation to perceptions of, and *ideas* about, risk. Risk consciousness is both an individual and institutional phenomenon, meaning that our behaviour and the behaviour of administrative organizations becomes increasingly dominated by an ever-present awareness of risk to environmental and human health.

In institutional terms, what Beck (1999, 81) is arguing is that industrial society, through the reckless pursuit of its own self-identified goals (progress, growth, and consumption), is now being forced to reckon with its own destructive legacy. The single-minded drive for endless production-consumption has produced not only wealth and goods but also environmental "bads," whose effects are becoming increasingly visible both to experts and to the public. As these problems multiply, science begins to turn its interest towards attempts to manage and counter these bads. Yet, at the same time, science is increasingly "disenchanted" in the eyes of the public due to its obvious failures to ensure against environmental catastrophes and to manage environmental degradation. In response, citizens' groups and environmental organizations, frustrated by official denials, mobilize their own versions of science and expertise in order to make counter-claims. The result is a multiplication of expert discourses on risk, each of which collides with, and mutually reinforces, the heightened consciousness of risk among institutions and the public (Beck 1992, 30, 54). The irony of this process is that, according to Beck, "risk modernity" – the widespread obsession with countering and/or managing environmental and human health risks – has arisen through the pursuit of the logic of industrialism (10-1). We are driven ever further into risk modernity because "solutions" to environmental risks can only be found in more capitalism, more rational management, more science. Our attempts to manage the risks that have arisen *from* industrial society are therefore founded upon the principles *of* industrial society, a fact that strains the public credibility of political and scientific "action plans" aimed at managing risk (59-61).

From Environmental Risk to Populations "at Risk"

Beck's risk society thesis is useful but, by itself, inadequate for exploring the offshore oil and gas controversy in British Columbia. While the theory does grant considerable insight into the broader context of the means by which expert environmental (risk) knowledge is produced and contested, it does not provide a comprehensive analytical framework that can explain the political dynamics present in this case. This is due in large part to Beck's neglect of the effects of different "types" of risk that may be embedded within a single issue. In the case of offshore oil and gas, notions of environmental risk are complicated by the existence of an easily defined (at least conceptually) population whose health and existence is readily identified as being "at risk" due to economic factors.

Ultimately, the *idea* of environmental risk from offshore drilling resides in the oil spill. As demonstrated by the massive 1989 *Exxon Valdez* spill in Prince William Sound, the impact of such an event on marine and shore-dwelling animals is both highly visible and devastating. However, one of the unique features of the ocean spill as an environmental catastrophe is the lack of significant impact on human health. The oil spill is a risk that plays out almost exclusively "in nature," entering human affairs through economy, aesthetics, and possibly culture – but not directly through health. Populations are therefore "at risk" from an oil spill only through mediated phenomena that affect individuals, families, and groups differently according to occupation and (conceivably) aesthetic and cultural sensibilities. By contrast, the condition of "being at risk" from overall economic hardship or collapse is easily conceptualized as being an issue of collective survival. The most evident barometer for the health of the whole community is the local economy – and yes, all economic actions and inactions by government and the private sector directly affect the standard of living within these communities. It is therefore possible to conceive of offshore oil and gas development not as an introduction of risk into a social environment but, rather, as an exercise in risk management.

This points to another key divergence of British Columbia's oil and gas controversy from the risk society thesis. According to Beck (1999, 19), the management of environmental risks is complicated by the "unbinding" of large-scale environmental risks from the constraints of space and time, meaning that the consequences of disasters extend into an unknown future and are not bound to their geographical point of origin. This means that responsibility for environmental risk is often

difficult to assign and that, consequently, "we [all] live in a context of organized irresponsibility" (6). The state of organized irresponsibility both handcuffs regulatory agencies and somewhat liberates them from direct responsibility over risks that originate "elsewhere" (Beck 1992, 185, 187-203). However, the clear existence of a population "at risk" means that the issue of offshore oil and gas does indeed have a distinct primary locale. Environmentally, oil and gas drilling certainly has the capacity to wreak known and unknown havoc across space and time. Yet the proximity of exploration and drilling to a spatially "bounded" population-at-risk grounds the issue in a series of *sites* that include specific flesh-and-blood individuals and families, specific jurisdictions, and specific institutions. The identification of a category of "potentially impacted peoples" localizes this issue in two distinct but linked ways: it introduces and (somewhat) legitimates a set of voices, yet also presents a specific category of people to be institutionally and discursively acted *upon* and *on behalf of*. Therefore, notions of responsibility and of active governance are in fact central to the oil and gas controversy, both in terms of the management of environmental risk and of the management of populations "at risk."

DISCOURSE ON RISK: A MEDIA STUDY

At this point in time, the primary voices affecting the public "life" of the offshore oil and gas controversy in British Columbia are the media and various political and bureaucratic branches of the provincial government. These institutions are the key players in the formulation of a "discourse on risk" regarding offshore development. As Ericson and Haggerty (1997, 83) note:

> Discourse is the institutional construction of knowledge ... What are constructed are representational frameworks: classifications and categories that stand for objects, events, processes, and states of affairs in the world. These frameworks provide the basis for shared understanding, including an understanding of what knowledge is required to enhance, modify, or deny representation.

In the case of oil and gas exploration in British Columbia, discourse on risk is a contested terrain, where individuals, groups, and organizations lay out competing positions on offshore development. Yet the discursive terrain, as suggested by the above quotation, is ultimately grounded in knowledge claims that are institutionally recognized as legitimate.

Therefore, while real people make real arguments for real reasons (be they bureaucrats, businesspeople, community members, or environmentalists), institutions are themselves active players that significantly influence and mediate public debate through the authority and reach of their voices and actions.

The media are the most visible of these players, particularly in their position as intermediary between individuals (constituting "the public"), government, and private-sector decision makers. In studying the discourse on risk in the major British Columbian daily newspapers, two sets of questions emerge: who is speaking about offshore oil and gas exploration through this medium, and which discursive "tools" are being engaged?

The Study

I conducted a content analysis of seventy-six newspaper items that ran in any of the three major British Columbian daily newspapers (the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Province*, and the *Victoria Times-Colonist*) from January 1998 to December 2001.[3] The items were first sorted according to type: news article, editorial, letter to the editor, and information series. The items were then coded according to three discrete and exclusive categories: support for the moratorium, opposition to the moratorium, and "neutral" or no discernible dominant position expressed.[4] In addition, the items were coded by twenty-two discrete but non-exclusive criteria according to presence-absence (meaning that, for example, a news article could be coded both for mentions of environmental risk and for mentions of economic risk).

Table 1 presents the frequencies achieved by each criterion according to type of item. Of the seventy-six items, the vast majority are either news articles (38) or editorials (26), the remainder being letters to the editor (6) and articles written as part of an information or thematic series (6).[5] Immediately striking is the discrepancy in frequency distributions between items that express support for the moratorium (12) and items that either express opposition to the moratorium (31) or

[3] The articles were selected using the British Columbia Newspaper Index (keyword: "offshore oil industry – British Columbia"). Each was then screened to ensure relevance (i.e., that oil and gas exploration and drilling was not merely mentioned but was substantively present in text and theme). However, only four items were subsequently excluded.

[4] The categories "support for moratorium" and "opposition to moratorium" proved to be much more consistent and conceptually clear than did categories such as "opposition to offshore oil and gas exploration" and "support for offshore oil and gas exploration."

[5] On two occasions one newspaper printed a collection of very brief letters to the editor regarding the oil and gas controversy. Given the thematic consistency across the letters and extreme brevity of each individual piece, the collections were each considered as a single item.

TABLE 1
Frequencies by Type of Item

	News Article	Editorial	Letter to the Editor	Information Series	Total
Support for moratorium	7	4	1	0	12
Opposition to moratorium	14	13	3	1	31
Neutral/Indiscernible/No dominant position regarding moratorium	17	9	6	5	33
Total:	38	26	5	6	(76)
Mention of Expert Knowledge	23	21	0	4	53
Mention of local or "lay" knowledge	10	4	2	0	14
Mention of environmental risk	27	15	5	5	49
Mention of economic risk	26	22	0	4	57
Mention of risk to culture	1	0	1	0	1
Environmental risk as central theme	7	5	2	1	14
Economic risk as central theme	13	14	0	2	31
Risk to culture as central theme	0	0	0	0	0
Mention of a desire for better overall environmental policy	5	2	0	0	8
Mention of a desire for better overall economic policy	3	4	0	0	9
Call for mobilization (for a cause or issue)	0	0	0	0	0
Call for consultation	9	8	0	2	19
Environmental group (or member of) cited	15	4	1	3	22
Industry or pro-industry lobby group cited	16	2	0	2	21
Government expert or non-elected official cited (federal or provincial)	9	1	0	1	11
Federal or provincial elected official cited	13	5	0	1	19
Local non-elected official cited	0	0	0	0	0
Local elected official cited	3	1	0	0	4
Community member cited (non-First Nation, non-lobby group affiliated)	3	0	0	1	4
First Nation member cited	2	0	0	2	4
Mention of First Nation property rights (in favour of exploration and/or development)	2	2	0	0	4
Mention of First Nation property rights (in opposition to exploration and/or development)	3	3	1	2	9

contain no discernible dominant position on the issue (33).[6] Editorials appear particularly unbalanced, although this category also contains a substantive number of items classified as "neutral."

Table 1 also demonstrates the saliency of certain kinds of knowledge in the construction of ideas about offshore development. The fact that fifty-three of seventy-six articles make some mention of expert knowledge strongly suggests that technical issues such as exploration and drilling technology, scientific risk assessment, and expert opinions on the economy and industry are central to the definition of issues *in the media*. By contrast, only fourteen items mention local, or "lay," knowledge of any kind. This discrepancy is also reflected in the near-total absence of local voices from these items. Only four pieces cite a local elected official, four cite a resident of a potentially affected community (who is not explicitly identified as a member of an environmental or pro-industry lobby group), and four cite a First Nation member.

The cross-tabulations presented in Table 2 shed further light on the dominance of expert knowledge as a discursive tool in this controversy. Here we see that mentions of expert knowledge are made liberally across the three "positions" (support for the moratorium, opposition to the moratorium, and neutrality). In addition, items that express support for the moratorium rely almost exclusively on appeals to expert knowledge (nine of twelve items) to the exclusion of local, or lay, knowledge (mentioned only in one article). Last, it is significant to note that, overall, mentions of expert and local knowledge rarely occur in the same item (coinciding on only five occasions). The study suggests that there is a significant conceptual distance between the arguments that are made using these two "types" of knowledge. In the media, at least, it appears that a higher premium is placed on expert knowledge than on the knowledge and experiences of those most affected by the prospect of offshore development.

An interesting contrast, however, is the seeming convergence of mentions of environmental and economic risk.[7] Table 2 demonstrates that thirty-seven items mention both risk "statuses." Furthermore, many

[6] News articles and information series articles were coded for "support for moratorium/opposition to moratorium" if such positions were clearly the subject of the article. Hence, an article about an environmental group's support for the moratorium was coded as "support for the moratorium," while an article about opponents of the moratorium was coded as "opposition to the moratorium."

[7] "Mention of economic risk" was coded when any of the following elements were present: the health of a local (i.e., rural community) economy presented as endangered or failing, mention of economic hardship or its effects on a rural community and/or its members, portrayal of a local industry or sector as threatened.

TABLE 2
Crosstabulations (Select Variables)

	Support	Opposition	Neutral	Expert knowledge	Local knowledge	Mention env. risk	Mention econ. risk	Environmental risk as theme	Economic risk as theme	Environmental policy	Economic policy	Call for consultation	Environmental group cited	Industry or lobby group cited	Government expert cited	Fed. or prov. elected official cited	Local elected official cited	Community member cited
Support for moratorium																		
Opposition to moratorium																		
Neutral																		
Expert knowledge	9	21	23															
Local or "lay" knowledge	1	7	6	5**														
Mention environmental risk	10	16	23	37	9													
Mention economic risk	7	30**	20*	39	11	37												
Environmental risk as central theme	10**	1**	3	11	1	13*	9											
Economic risk as central theme	1*	26**	4**	18	8	17	31**	0**										
Better environmental policy	5**	0*	3	6	0	7	7	5**	0*									
Better economic policy	2	5	2	9*	0	6	9	3	3	4**								
Call for consultation	0*	8	11	14	5	13	14	2	9	0	0							
Environmental group cited	7*	4**	11	16	3	21**	17	7	4**	7**	4	4						
Industry or pro-industry lobby group cited	2	8	11	15	5	17	17	3	9	4	3	6	12**					
Government expert or non-elected official cited (federal or provincial)	0	2	9**	5	3	6	5*	0	2	0	0	2	4	2				
Federal or provincial elected official cited	3	9	7	15	3	13	12	4	7	2	2	6	8	4	2			
Local elected official cited	0	1	3	3	1	2	3	1	2	0	0	3	1	2	0	2		
Community member cited	0	2	2	1*	1	2	4	0	3	0	0	0	2	3	1	0	0	
First Nation member cited	1	0	3	2	2	4	4	1	1	0	0	2	3	2*	0	0	0	1

Measure of association: phi
* Significant at or below .05 level
** Significant at or below .01 level

of the items that take either environmental or economic risk as a "central theme" also make mention of the other (9 of 14 for the former, 17 of 31 for the latter). This suggests that both the environmental and economic risk-benefit schemata have achieved a "deep legitimacy" in the media, making it difficult to argue one position without basic acknowledgment of the other. The finding also reflects the fact that economic (and, to a lesser degree, environmental) arguments are used by both supporters and opponents of the moratorium. For instance, half of all calls for improvements in general environmental policy are accompanied by calls for improvements in general economic policy.

Finally, but most important, Table 1 demonstrates clear discrepancies between who is speaking through this medium. Most citations are attributed to federal or provincial elected officials, environmental groups and their members (both "local" and urban-based), and pro-industry lobby groups (also both local and urban-based). Other local voices are largely absent, with First Nations members, non-Aboriginal community members, and local elected officials cited only four times, respectively.

Discussion

All findings derived from this study must be tempered by an awareness of the fact that the data are limited to corporate-owned print media sources situated in British Columbia's two major urban areas. Nevertheless, the public discourse on risk regarding offshore oil and gas is communicated, constituted, and drawn upon by these media. Several things stand out immediately. First is the dominance of expert knowledge in the arguments made both by proponents and opponents of development. Consistent with Beck's (1992, 1999) risk society thesis, the substance of the media debate revolves around competing expert evaluations of the impacts of development on environment and economy. If, as Ericson and Haggerty (1997, 83) stress, "discourse is the institutional construction of knowledge," then the knowledge gathered and presented to the public by British Columbia's print media is firmly grounded in the language of science, prediction, professional advocacy, and technology rather than in lay community voices.

The second trend that stands out – one that goes well beyond Beck's thesis – is the attempts within the articles and editorials to "resolve" or align conflicting environmental and economic issues. Generally, strong positions in the debate are framed in one of two ways: (1) that choices based on values and priorities must be made or (2) that the position being advocated in fact represents or contains a means to resolve or prevent conflict between environmental and economic priorities. It is essential

to note, however, that the "choices" approach is only typical of earlier items that express support for the moratorium (published prior to the year 2001). These pieces argue, for instance, that environmental integrity must be protected even at short-term economic cost to coastal British Columbia. However, tone and logic change in many of the later items that support the moratorium, with these pieces insisting that its retention is necessary in order to, among other things, protect local industries such as fisheries and tourism. By this logic, extending the moratorium is a means of preventing a specific conflict between environmental and economic values. The surety of this potential conflict, in turn, rests on an accumulation of "expert" technical knowledge regarding the (estimated) effects of an oil spill of some (hypothetical) magnitude. It is very important to note that items expressing opposition to the moratorium also advocate the harmonization of economic and environmental priorities, although they typically do so by promoting the idea that the resolution of conflict is possible through the application of expert knowledge to specific environmental concerns. These articles express a deep faith in the ability of expert knowledge to predict and resolve potential problems, specifically by means of environmental monitoring *and* the development of new, "safe" technologies.

Much of the media discourse, therefore, revolves around different arguments regarding the harmonization of economic and environmental risk issues in the "best interests" of those most affected – members of coastal communities – but using *expert* knowledge. The absence of community voices in the discourse is striking. Issues are engaged by all sides "on behalf of" individuals, workers, households, and communities, but their actual voices are excluded. While the content of the media arguments are very different, expert knowledge itself is presented to the public as the ultimate means to the resolution of the different types of conflict over risk. The lay, experiential, or tacit knowledge of the "ordinary coastal citizen" is not necessarily denied; it is simply never voiced.

GOVERNING OFFSHORE OIL AND GAS

The other major institutional player in the public life of British Columbia's offshore oil and gas issue is the provincial government and its bureaucratic apparatus. This particular issue, as has been argued, represents a site of the collision of environmental and economic notions of risk within a bounded geographic (and political) area. Therefore, like advocates in the media, a succession of provincial governments have been concerned with the harmonization of environmental and economic risk

issues. Yet government has very different mandates, tools, and internal structures than does the media, meaning that the discussion must now move beyond discourse alone and into the means by which the prospect or *idea* of offshore oil and gas development is being governed.

"Governance" is a term that seeks to capture all methods and processes of governing. Dean (1999, 11) offers a provocative definition of government, which attempts to address the breadth of governance as a social phenomenon as well as its interactions with people and things that are governed:

> Government is any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through our desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs, for definite but shifting ends and with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes.

Governance therefore refers to much more than policy, or at least to more than what is commonly thought of as policy. While the question of offshore development may ultimately be reduced to a series of "yes or no" policy decisions, these decisions are only the end point of processes that have been under way for years. To understand how offshore oil and gas is being governed *today*, it is necessary to ask how the government is currently "structuring the field of possible action [by] acting on our own or others' capacities for action" (Dean 1999, 14).

The NDP government of the 1990s was internally divided on the issue, and the struggles between proponents of development (such as Dan Miller) and opponents (such as Minister of Environment Moe Sihota and Premier Ujjal Dosanjh) were evident enough outside of Cabinet to be reported in the media (see Palmer 2000; Willcocks 2000). Nevertheless, the government initiated several key processes that are central to understanding the governance of offshore development. These processes include the commissioning of technological and scientific reviews and the initiation of consultations with selected stakeholding groups. It is very significant that the government of the BC Liberal Party, elected in 2001, has not significantly wavered from the policies put into practice by the NDP, although it has accelerated them.[8] This consistency is due in

[8] The July 2001 decision of Minister of Energy and Mines Richard Neufeld not to pursue the recommendations of Northern Development Commissioner John Backhouse ought to be seen as an acceleration, not a termination, of the consultative process. In October 2001 Neufeld announced that the "northern caucus of Liberal MLAs" would now be responsible for community consultations.

large part to the fact that the idea of offshore oil and gas development continues to be dominated by the notion of environmental risk. Both governments have strategically mobilized processes of consultation and extended scientific assessment in order to "enclose," head off, and overcome the spectre of environmental risk.

Specifically, consultation and scientific expertise are tools in the achievement of two goals: (1) legitimizing any eventual decision and (2) neutralizing the potentially explosive prospect of environmental catastrophe. On the one hand, expert knowledge allows for the ecological question to be confronted directly but abstractly. By amassing data, by constantly monitoring environmental health, and by pursuing and applying state-of-the-art technology, it is hoped that the notion of environmental risk will be "captured" through knowledge and, thus, be politically defused. On the other hand, the act of consultation allows government to mobilize the *legitimate* desire of stakeholders for economic well-being. In the consultation process, open engagement and discussion is sought, for a time at least, with members of populations who would "live" the effects of offshore oil and gas development (and who currently live the effects of its absence). The notion of legitimate desire therefore derives directly from the conceptualization of certain populations as "being at risk." The desires of these people are conceived as inherently, and even tragically, pure – for it is survival itself that is at stake. Yet, at the same time, the notion of legitimate desire forms the last line of defence against "residual risk" – the final inability of expert knowledge to guarantee against catastrophe – because those who would be most affected by disaster have been allowed to direct their own fate through both scientifically and locally informed choices. Consultation is not about absorbing local knowledge: it is a counter to the crisis of legitimacy confronting expert knowledge in regard to risk. It is a partial recognition of the ubiquitous uncertainties that surround offshore development, and it is at the same time a downloading of political responsibility for the allocation of environmental risk through the solicitation of implicit consent.

Strategies such as these are consistent with the development of what Rose (2000) sees as "the facilitating [and] enabling state." Here, the retrenchment of heavy-handed state involvement in certain areas is coupled with new forms of governing by means of the structured provision of choice and freedom.

> To be governed through our freedom: the very idea seems paradoxical. Freedom appears, almost by definition, to be the antithesis of government: freedom is understood in terms of the act of liberation from bondage or slavery, the condition of existence in liberty, the right of the individual to act in any desired way without restraint, the power to do as one likes. (Rose 1999, 62)

Freedom is a concept that is almost universally defined as a "good," so it ought to come as no surprise that it can be a tool through which people and issues are governed. Dean (1999, 205) furthers this point by arguing that "advanced liberal rule makes freedom into a technical means of government and contrives the conditions under which such freedom can be exercised as a form of 'responsible autonomy' or rational choice." The consultation process, for instance, is a complex structuration of freedom that is both internally structured (stakeholders are required to abide by certain rules, such as procedure and time allotments, when participating) and externally structured (only certain groups and categories of people are invited "to stakehold" in the first place). Nevertheless, the political presence of a consultation process places an onus on those who have been explicitly and implicitly named as stakeholders. Regardless of whether or not an individual is a direct participant in consultation, all stakeholding voices are evoked to some degree in the conclusions drawn by the overseers of this process.

These are the means by which offshore oil and gas has been governed in British Columbia since the issue began to find public life again in the late 1990s. The provincial government has strategically employed expert knowledge and consultation processes in an attempt to strictly define environmental risk and simultaneously to subsume it under the notion of managing and empowering populations at risk. This is not to say that the entire process has been planned and executed with clear step-by-step goals in mind; rather, I argue that each action taken by the provincial government to this point regarding offshore oil and gas is an employment of *both* expert knowledge and the legitimacy of local desires against the dominating spectre of environmental risk.

To sum thus far, we have seen that the key players in the regulation and mediation of the offshore oil and gas controversy – the media and the provincial government – act in different ways but have a similar effect on the public life of the issue. Both media discourse and government policy are preoccupied with various "resolutions" of environmental and economic considerations, and both are highly selective users of knowledge to the exclusion of actual voices. The differences reside in

the purpose and goals of each institution. While the media offer a forum for competing arguments (which, as I have indicated, are remarkably similar in form if not in content), government policy is currently oriented towards capturing the legitimacy found in "due process." Politically, expert assessment is about *having done* expert assessment, and, even more so, consultation is about *having done* consultation. Actual content is secondary. As a consumer of stakeholder voices, government translates, uses, and subsumes local knowledge and voices under an institutional framework (the consultation process) that then "speaks for" them with the aim of reconciling environmental and economic risk.

LOCALIZING OFFSHORE OIL AND GAS

Behind the policy, politics, and media discourse are actual local voices that deserve to be heard. Unfortunately, the absence of extended site research makes it very difficult to assess what local people are actually thinking about the prospect of offshore oil and gas development. Nevertheless, it is important to conclude with consideration of how offshore oil and gas might be experienced as a local risk issue, even in the absence of firm empirical data.

I took a small step in this direction when I explored the difference between the environmental risk posed by offshore development and the status of populations considered to be economically "at risk." This distinction is reinforced at the local level by the differences in how each type of risk is experienced. Contrary to Beck's risk society thesis, it is necessary to consider the *actual* experience of economic hardship or turbulence as qualitatively different from the experience of a *potential* environmental catastrophe. Economic turbulence is currently being lived by many members of coastal communities. So, too, is environmental degradation, particularly if one's personal situation (such as occupation) relies on or is in close proximity to ecological health. But it is necessary to remember that the *idea* of environmental risk from offshore oil and gas development resides more in the prospect of catastrophe than in systematic environmental degradation. Large oil spills are not being "lived" on the coast. They are maybes: they are ideas that are influenced by other (expert and non-expert) ideas.

Expert and non-expert knowledge(s) are connected by bridges and by overlap. The primary bridge between the two is that of trust (cf. Giddens, 1990). Yet, according to Beck's (1992, 156-7, 184-8) risk society thesis, experts (scientists and state institutions) are no longer

blindly trusted by the public and have suffered a "de-monopolization" of their claims to authoritative knowledge. So while expert knowledge has become the primary language for talking about all kinds of risk, expert knowledge is also being both directly contested and demystified: "Science becomes more and more necessary, but at the same time, less and less sufficient for the socially binding definition of truth" (156). Risk consciousness (the ubiquitous awareness of risk) poses a serious challenge to trust in expert knowledge, particularly in terms of personal experience. According to Beck, it is precisely the collision of science's preoccupation with probabilities and deductive methods and the public's increasing "contact" with the effects of environmental risks in their day-to-day lives that contributes to further friction between the two types of knowledge. On issues of risk, scientific discourses are becoming less and less satisfying. In Beck's own words, written in reference to a conflict over sulphur dioxide emissions in Germany in the 1980s, we are given a colourful and memorable example of how trust in science can be undermined by personal experiences:

> Parents whose children suffer attacks of ... [the] croup bang their heads against the walls of scientific denials of the existence of modernization [i.e., industrial] risks ... What scientists call "latent side effects" and "unproven connections" are for them their "coughing children" who turn blue in foggy weather and gasp for air. On their side of the fence, "side effects" have voices, faces, eyes and tears ... [From their perspective], the farmers' cows can turn yellow next to the newly built factory, but until that is "scientifically proven," it is not [officially] questioned. (61)

As we have seen, however, offshore oil and gas development does not produce effects that are comparable to this in terms of inevitability and degenerativity. The absence of human health issues and of steady, visible environmental degradation removes two key "challenging points" to the expert discourse that advocates risk management (rather than avoidance). With respect to environmental risk, experiential knowledge, grounded in witnessing and "being," *does not in this case overlap significantly with expert knowledge.*

This suggests that environmental risk issues may have less salience at the local level than they do in policy and institutional discourse. It would, however, be a mistake to consider the environmental risk of offshore development to be more abstract than the prospect of economic gain. As Macnaghten and Urry (1998) remind us, ideas about nature and local environments have a close affinity with ideas about "the home" and,

more generally, about quality-of-life. In short, both environmental and economic risk exist for coastal residents "where the home is." What this means for the politics of offshore development is that, despite all institutional and expert efforts at enclosing environmental risk by means of expert knowledge and the process of consultation, offshore development remains politically unpredictable. Environmental and economic risk collide in the most intimate spaces of coastal residents – meaning that local desires for the actual resolution of environmental and economic risk issues undoubtedly differs from the political resolution currently pursued by institutional authorities through the downloading of responsibility for risk.

IN CLOSING

This article has attempted to use and expand on the principles of Beck's risk society thesis in order to understand how "public" institutions mediate and regulate the intersection of environmental and economic risk issues through the use and translation of different kinds of knowledge. The most distressing conclusion to draw from this research is that neither the media nor "the facilitating state" is obliged to actually engage with the knowledge and voices of stakeholders, despite the fact that they are both "consumers" of that knowledge. Journalists and advocates/activists who speak through the media demonstrate a near-exclusive dependence on expert knowledge. Community members, if present at all, tend to serve as backdrop and anecdote. The public life of this issue as facilitated by the media includes what are considered to be "local concerns" but tends to exclude actual voices. The coast, the community, the household, and the citizen are abstractions: they are represented as constants in the contested "expert" rhetorical struggles between opponents and supporters of the moratorium, each of which is desperately seeking to resolve the environmental and economic risk dilemma in a politically expedient manner.

Government, by contrast, consumes local knowledge without necessarily internalizing it. Consultation is a process that mobilizes the legitimacy of "stakeholders" to legitimate future political action (or inaction). Its specific consequence is the downloading of moral responsibility for risk to stakeholders by means of implied consent. Science can never guarantee against catastrophe, so consultation serves as the final justification in the allocation of environmental risk. It may be argued, therefore, that processes of consultation are less about participatory democracy than about political risk management.

It may be assumed, therefore, that the actual "local experience" of these risk issues is not being adequately addressed. According to theories of risk, which have been employed as well as critiqued in this article, the environmental risk presented by offshore development is somewhat abstract, particularly given the overwhelming immediacy of economic decline. Nevertheless, the provincial government's attempts to play environmental and economic risk issues off one another demonstrates that they are in fact intertwined and must be addressed together. Unfortunately, the public life of the issue is dominated by an obsession with negating what is perceived to be an environmental/economic impasse by means of expert knowledge and the downloading of responsibility for risk. As I have argued throughout this article, this process is about political expediency (and the political positioning of groups for and against development) that consumes the voices of the citizens of the BC coast without internalizing or addressing the concerns and knowledges of those who will live the effects of offshore development.

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