Charlie Angus and the story of Cobalt's ESG failure

written by Peter Clausi | August 10, 2022
Charlie Angus is pissed off.

Charlie is the Canadian Member of Parliament for Timmins – James Bay in northern Ontario, a federal position he's held since 2004 through 7 elections. He sits on the Canadian Government's Standing Committee on Natural Resources. He's also an author, activist, journalist, guitar player, and frontman for the alt-folk Grievous Angels (who I saw play in the late 80s at the Empire Hotel in Timmins). He's also deeply passionate about First Nations rights. Not entitlements, *rights*.

And he's pissed off. If you're in any way connected to the mining industry, anywhere in the world, pay attention.

House of Anansi Press recently published Charlie's well-researched book "*Cobalt: Cradle of the Demon Metals, Birth of a Mining Superpower*". It's a riveting telling of how the town of Cobalt was founded at the turn of the 20th century, how its minerals were exploited, its wealth exported and its environment destroyed, while turning Canada into a mining superpower. Despite the grim material, it's a fun informative read. Charlie today lives in Cobalt.

Toronto at the turn of the 20th century wasn't much of anything. "Toronto? Ah yes, that's where you switch trains to get to Cobalt." But it was through the extraction of wealth from the ground around Cobalt that Toronto learned how to be a center of finance, how to re-invest in new projects, and how such projects should be regulated. Toronto owes much of its current financial hi-life to minerals taken from Cobalt over a century ago.

Charlie’s book is also a painful narration of how First Nations got screwed, again and again and again. From murder to claim jumping to starvation and rape, First Nations didn’t stand a chance.

The history books we read seem to think God (whatever that is) created northern Ontario in about 1900, just for Europeans to ‘discover’ and exploit. Actual data contradicts that historical claptrap. As Charlie points out (with extensive footnotes), silver from this region has been found in jewelry, pottery and religious ornamentation across eastern North America, proving up an extensive trading network predating Europeans. First Nations were doing just fine without Europeans thank you very much within their own local context.

But as written about in the Pulitzer Prize winning book *Guns, Germs and Steel*, that local context changed when faced with European disease and firearms. Suddenly First Nations were on their back foot, and heading backwards. Forced into corners, ignored by the legal system, the only alternative was to settle with the Crown and reach reasonable accommodation, also known as ‘treaties’.

In mining in Canada, we keep hearing about ‘the honor of the Crown’. It’s a dubious honor. The Crown has broken every treaty it signed in Canada – it’s hard to call that honorable. First Nations’ rights have been trampled, spat upon, ignored.

Did you have fresh water this morning? A lot of First Nations didn’t. As of November 1, 2021 there were 99 drinking advisories in place for First Nations communities across Canada. These are Canadians, with drinking advisories? Imagine Forest Hill in Toronto with a drinking advisory. Westmount in Montreal? North Vancouver? It’s pretty much a guarantee water advisories in those communities wouldn’t last very long. But since it’s *only*

First Nations, most of Canada seems to think it’s OK.

Charlies’ riding includes many reserves and First Nations members living off-reserve, on an everyday basis trying to deal with the Crown’s dishonor. No wonder he’s pissed off.

At 260 pages, the book is a solid read without becoming pedantic or redundant. It would be great if the Canadian Securities Administrators could somehow make it a precondition to being on the board of a Canadian-listed mining company to have to read *Cobalt*.As a book, it stands on its own just fine. But there’s a much larger point, larger to the point of being global. Charlie uses the horrific indigenous experience in northern Ontario as a metaphor for communities around the globe displaced by invasive miners. Whether in Brazil or the DRC or Papua New Guinea, every mining exploration play is on someone’s native lands. Every producing mine is in someone’s backyard.

Being in someone’s backyard is a challenge. You have responsibilities to your neighbors, to the government, to the industry as a whole. Not everyone is up to that challenge.

For example, I stopped by a booth at PDAC 2022 in Toronto to chat with a PGeo friend. The CEO came over to try to make an impression, with talk about the asset and the company’s commitment to ESG. I asked him if he knew what ESG stood for. He didn’t. Rhetorically I asked, how can you be committed to something if you don’t know what it is? The CEO just laughed weakly and walked away.

An obligation to each of Environment, Social Justice and Good Governance (ESG) is a key part of any successful company, not just a miner. While ESG is largely about the company’s relations with the communities around it, DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) relates to matters internal to the company. The scorched earth policies historically enacted at Cobalt and

elsewhere around the world have no place for ESG or DEI. That has to change. And you and I have to be those agents of change.

I’m pissed off, too. Get the book.