

# TOWARD A NORTH AMERICAN CLIMATE ACCORD

Robin V. Sears

After four years in office, Stephen Harper is developing a comfort level, growing into the role as well as the job of prime minister. As Contributing Writer Robin Sears notes, he has both a strategic vision and a strong sense of tactics that comes in handy in a minority House. Whether proroguing the House (again), or lying low at Copenhagen, he seems indifferent to storms of criticism raging around him. Harper's pragmatic approach on climate change, aligning Canada's position with that of the Obama administration, could well lead to a North American agreement modelled on the acid rain accord of 1991. After the chaos of Copenhagen, this may prove to be a more realistic and achievable approach.

Après quatre années au pouvoir, Stephen Harper a acquis une aisance qui profite à ses fonctions de premier ministre. Selon notre collaborateur Robin Sears, il possède une vision stratégique doublée d'un sens tactique fort utile à la tête d'un gouvernement minoritaire. Qu'il proroge (à nouveau !) le Parlement ou se fasse des plus discrets à Copenhague, il semble indifférent aux critiques qui le visent de partout. Alignée sur celle de l'administration Obama, son approche pragmatique des changements climatiques pourrait bien mener à un accord nord-américain inspiré de celui de 1991 sur les pluies acides. Or, après le chaos de Copenhague, une telle approche pourrait se révéler plus concrète et plus réalisable.



As his time in office grows, so does Stephen Harper's comfort in the role of prime minister. He increasingly demonstrates that he is that rarest of political species, a leader with both an overarching strategic vision and the ability to play a tactical game of chess. However much he may annoy some Canadians with his strategic vision of classical *British North America Act* federalism led by a smaller federal government and offend others with tactics like his prorogation of Parliament, his mastery of the many levers of power available to a Canadian prime minister is undeniable. Especially in a minority House — an inherently unstable place.

Some argue that almost casually brutal tactics like arbitrarily shutting down Parliament twice in 13 months will eventually undermine his achievements and strategic discipline. As the Chinese like to say when they are being diplomatically skeptical about Western certitude, "To us, that is not entirely clear..."

Unlike Mackenzie King, probably our greatest strategist and tactician since Sir John A. — or most of the two generations of Liberal leaders who followed King — this prime minister is not shy about revealing his goals and convictions. His open partisanship on behalf of Israel, his exceedingly tough-on-crime agenda and his determination not to be bumped into a more proactive agenda on climate change

are all risky policy stances, surprisingly free of political fudge or hypocrisy.

Harper has learned that a tough political message delivered in a self-deprecating style with a smile is far more compelling than the tone of the snarling partisan of old. In his compelling January interview with Peter Mansbridge, he rebuffed critics of prorogation, spending cuts and the government's handling of the Afghan detainee issue with the gentle dismissal of a wise uncle schooling the young folks. It is a vast improvement on his earlier hectoring.

Nowhere is this confident cool more evident than on the climate change file. It would have been easy for Harper to dispatch Environment Minister Jim Prentice to Washington with a leaked mandate to "push the Americans" before the Copenhagen summit. He remained almost silent before, during and after the summit, apparently serene in the face of all the attacks for his apparent non-engagement. He barely responded to criticism from all sides about Canada's below-the-radar stance at the summit.

With this stance, Harper puts at risk the support of a number of Canadians who accept the reality of climate change and might otherwise become Conservative voters. His hard-edged willingness to divide the electorate into believers, persuadables and opponents is not unusual. Being equally determined not

to fudge, in an attempt to shift some of the middle group, is rare. As Calgary Conservative sage Tom Flanagan has admitted, his party likes nothing better than an issue where it is alone on the right with all its opponents lined up on the other side.

Canadian leaders are never less appealing than when they see an opportunity for sanctimony at the expense of

**Imagine the reaction of the government of Ontario if its car industry woke up tomorrow to a 20 percent cost disadvantage over American producers as a result of a unilateral federal carbon tax or even a less onerous cap-and-trade system of emission controls. How would Quebec react to a federal tax on hydroelectricity exports as an effort to share its emission-free wealth with all Canadians? About as enthusiastically as Albertans did to the National Energy Program or to the suggestion that its dirty oil deserves special penalties.**

Americans. Nationalist piety is the last refuge of every Canadian political scoundrel. A contemporary version has been to bemoan the Conservatives' besmirching of our mythically sainted reputation internationally. And nowhere has this default button been pushed to such excess — with hysterical rhetoric — as in the climate change debate. Maude Barlow and the Council of Canadians are the case study of this theatre-of-the-absurd approach to political debate, calling the oil sands Canada's "Mordor" — Tolkien's vision of hell in *The Lord of the Rings*.

One need not be a skeptic on the urgency of climate change to be embarrassed by the behaviour of a wide swath of Canadian politicians on the file. The Chrétien government's cynical decision to sign the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, with no plan to implement the stringent economic and environmental policy changes it required, was — as some of his advisers have subsequently admitted — merely a device to outshine the Americans and to divide domestic political opponents.

The Canadian government knew that the Clinton administration had no ability to get a similar commitment through Congress, that Alberta would be furious and that Ontario and

Quebec would smile. Canadian virtue would shine that much more brightly by contrast with the Americans — once again. And they gambled, correctly, that most Canadians would approve.

Rhetoric from Liberal and New Democratic politicians nationally has been difficult to square with the performance of their provincial cousins in government almost everywhere.

Gordon Campbell introduced a modest carbon tax in BC, only to be ferociously attacked by New Democrats. Dalton McGuinty continues to oppose tougher auto emission levels, now in place in Quebec, with the support of both opposition parties in Ontario.

It is less common for international conferences to be used to promote domestic political divisions. The Copenhagen debate took an unusually bizarre turn, even by the standards of traditional Canadian regional squabbles, with several provincial ministers — and even the Mayor of Toronto — travelling to Denmark to attack each other and claim virtue points for themselves versus lesser mortals in other cities and provinces. How absurd we must have looked to international observers in Copenhagen as Toronto Mayor David Miller and representatives from Ontario and Quebec flashed their green jeans and solar-powered smiles, in sunny contrast to the dirty oil-stained wardrobe of Albertans. Harper maintained a cool public silence, but senior federal officials backstage at Copenhagen privately bemoaned the spectacle of preening provincial politicians attacking each other on the world stage. Harper later said he'd never seen so much grandstanding in his entire life.

As Yvo de Boer, the senior UN official tasked with the challenge of finding a compromise at Copenhagen, acknowledged indirectly, it was clearly nonsense to think that Canada was going to implement a tough climate change policy that was not in sync with that of the Americans. "Canada has a tough period behind it in terms that Canada did rise and ratify the Kyoto Protocol but its main trading partner the United States did not, which left it in a very unbalanced situation." Our uniquely interlinked continental economy cannot be managed according to two different sets of environmental rules and cost structures. To the consternation of Canadian critics, he went on to single out Canada's role in Copenhagen behind the scenes. "Canada has been negotiating very constructively in this process," de Boer told the media.

Whether one believes that climate change is the environmental disaster of our generation or not, it is hypocritical and insulting to suggest that because Ontario merely consumes hydrocarbons by the millions of tonnes and Alberta produces them, there is greater virtue in central Canada. Quebec, whose most valuable export is power generated by water passing over hydro dams, might want to be a little cautious about its glass house when hurling rhetorical rocks at Ottawa, and Washington's inaction on climate change. God, or fate, granted one province riches in oil and the other wealth in water; there is no virtue to be claimed in either case.

Imagine the reaction of the government of Ontario if its car industry woke up tomorrow to a 20 percent cost disadvantage over American producers as a result of a unilateral federal carbon tax or even a less onerous cap-and-trade system of emission controls. How would Quebec react to a federal tax on hydro-electricity exports as an effort to share its emission-free wealth with all Canadians? About as enthusiastically

as Albertans did to the National Energy Program or to the suggestion that its dirty oil deserves special penalties.

Perhaps it's time for an end to domestic finger pointing, and even more importantly, to exporting our domestic squabbles to embarrass international neighbours. Maybe it's even time for a little more truth telling about what is really involved in costs and consequences of action or of failure to act. It will merely require our much-vaunted capacity to find the peaceful middle ground in powerfully emotional debates.

Let's start with the science. Stupid academics censoring e-mails and tampering with evidence notwithstanding, it is time for climate change deniers to sit down. Prudence dictates that if even half the rates of recorded temperature change, of the visible evidence of melting glaciers and of the increases in extreme weather patterns are true, we should act.

The reason is basic and irrefutable. It's called "climate security" — the latest international policy-wonk buzzword. It combines the energy independence issues of national security with the damage done to local economies by extreme weather and the risks to regional stability they generate. The thesis is that, for example, not only is the Netherlands at risk of inundation by increasingly powerful North Sea storms, but so is Darfur threatened by heightened conflict triggered by desertification.

The big powers who got together at Copenhagen to do their own climate change deal, to the rage of UN officials and all the world's lesser powers, did so less out of environmental conviction than out of self-interest. China knows it is poisoning its air, rivers and people with dirty coal. Expensive imported oil, almost as dirty, is no answer. Climate security adds the additional ingredient of economic upheaval and conflict triggered by climate change. None of the big economies wants the security challenge of the armies of refugees and the civil unrest that erupt in the face of famine or floods.

The United States knows that it risks being held to ransom one more



Jason Ransom, PMO

**Prime Minister Stephen Harper and President Barack Obama in conversation in the Rose Garden at the White House last September. The failure to reach a global agreement on climate change in Copenhagen presents an opportunity for a regional North American approach, writes Robin Sears.**

time by insecure oil states and their enabling multinational oil partners if it cannot reduce its dependence on imported crude. American national security is already stretched by fighting two wars in the neighbourhood of 40 percent of the world's petroleum reserves, and in the face of mounting tension with Iran. Breaking their addiction to oil from unsafe places unites Republicans and Democrats — though they differ on what to do about it.

So the race to beat the world's hydrocarbon addiction is on, assisted by concern over GHG emissions and their possible consequences, but driven by a determination to find national solutions to energy independence. Skeptics who thought that wind, solar and other alter-

natives would never fill important slices of energy needs have been silenced by the stunning pace of growth in these sectors. The massive public subsidies fuelling the race may seem bizarre until you see them in the context of national security — the subsidies pale by comparison with military investment in national security by the great powers.

But global warming hysterics need to calm down as well. Raising the rhetorical ante again and again, as Al Gore tried to do in Copenhagen and as Greenpeace has made an industry of, may accelerate fundraising, but it does little to deliver public support or policy change. Where deep division and skepticism exist, crying wolf is rarely a good idea.

Nor is it wise to refuse to discuss remedies to global warming's current impacts. If polar bears are dying as ice floes melt, it is not enough to exploit pictures of adults eating their young. If Bangladesh and small island nations are already suffering rising water levels and extreme weather, then should we not be investing in warning systems, protective mechanisms and improved emergency response measures? We will not stop the

**Like the five permanent members of the Security Council, who argue vehemently among themselves before striking a compromise that they offer to the council as a whole, countries in a G20 focused on climate change have signalled they will play a similar role.**

growth in global warming in this decade or probably the next. Why would we not be seeking proactive solutions for the victims we know await the next tsunami, crop failure or flood, as part of the climate change fight?

Nor is it useful for campaigners to deny the economic, social and political impacts of this battle, which *will* take money from the developed North and funnel it to the less developed South, with political consequences on both ends; it *will* shave points off GDP growth in resource-dependent economies until they make the adjustment to new energy sources; and it has the potential to hurt the poor and the powerless more than others if care is not taken to develop international agreements to prevent that harm. Alberta may have to spend more, in absolute and percentage terms, on environmental remediation measures as its oil sands production grows. Ontario may have to accept emission control levels on heavy industry, which will impose economic penalties on already struggling sectors.

**T**he path to the future is now becoming clear. Like the five permanent members of the Security Council, who argue vehemently among themselves before striking a compromise that they offer to the council as a whole, countries in a G20 focusing on climate change have signalled they will play a similar role. China, India and Brazil, along with the

United Kingdom and the United States, and a few allies, will fill in the blanks in their Copenhagen Accord to forge a consensus about what is acceptable to their individual and collective national interests. They will then offer those protocols and standards to the European Union and the rest of the world. Canada is already playing a role behind the scenes in Washington to attempt to shape and to share that consensus.

Sadly, the Copenhagen process revealed that, like the international land mine campaign and the endless Law of the Sea negotiations, there are some issues not susceptible to the requirements of unanimity that the UN system imposes. If one major partner — in both those cases, it was famously Washington, in Copenhagen it was allegedly China — refuses to endorse a deal agreed to by even a hundred other nations, the cause lies paralyzed by the absence of unanimity.

Copenhagen also revealed that as much fun as we all have sneering at summits where the draft communiqué is prepared months in advance, and the “frank discussions” among leaders are mostly theatre, the alternative is worse. You do not invite 120 world leaders to a discussion of a profoundly complex and divisive issue without a clear idea of where a possible compromise lies. It was absurd to have a small team of diplomats desperately working throughout the closing hours of the final night to find a form of words that would be acceptable on as infinitely complex a file as this. The only thing more absurd was expecting that compromise to have emerged organically from discussions among hundreds of nations, thousands of delegates and tens of thousands of impatient and determined activists, all under the spotlight of global media scrutiny over the course of 10 days.

President Obama has indicated

that he will propose a set of emission control targets and policy measures to meet them before the summer. We may expect the Harper government to agree with those targets, taxes and caps, even if it seeks some exemptions or exceptions to deal with uniquely Canadian challenges — not least, the oil sands. A North American climate change accord similar to the 1991 acid rain accord, struck between Brian Mulroney and the first George Bush, seems almost certain.

Provincial and federal bureaucrats have been working behind the scenes on targets and implementation scenarios for years, and in the past year with some vigour. Consultations with the business community and the most impacted sectors have been more intense than with the environmental community, to its anger and frustration. Defenders of the government's approach mildly observe that there is little point in holding discussions with publicly avowed enemies who have no investment in any agreement. Even neutral observers point out that the Harper government has made common cause on environmental issues on conservation and food and water toxins, where it had more willing partners.

So five years from now, when we look back on the first few years of international efforts to genuinely reverse climate change, what will be our verdict on the role played by the Canadian political elites, and specifically by the Harper government? My guess is that like Mackenzie King, Stephen Harper will still be vilified by experts and activists, but he will have won grudging respect from provincial governments, business and a majority of Canadians for his unflappable, cautious and mostly candid approach to an exquisitely painful political file.

*Contributing Writer Robin V. Sears is a senior partner of Navigator Ltd, the Toronto-based communications consulting and government relations firm. rsears@navltd.com*



**Priorité**  
**PATIENTS**

### **Un meilleur accès pour tous les Canadiens**

Le récent rapport de Rx&D fait ressortir les lacunes en matière d'accès aux nouveaux médicaments au Canada lorsque sont comparés les régimes publics de médicaments d'autres pays développés. **Ensemble**, nous **pouvons** améliorer le système et faciliter l'accès aux médicaments et vaccins innovateurs pour les Canadiens qui en ont le plus besoin.

Pour en savoir davantage et pour partager  
votre point de vue, visitez le

[www.prioritepatients.ca](http://www.prioritepatients.ca)

Commandité par:



Les compagnies de recherche  
pharmaceutique du Canada