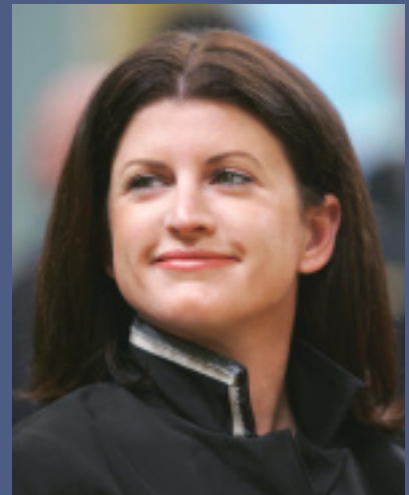


THE POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE: FROM ONE GOVERNMENT TO THE NEXT

Robin V. Sears

Most Canadians support the Kyoto Protocol, even if they don't know what's in it. They support clean air and Kyoto's target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 6 percent below 1990 levels by 2008-12. But they expect government and industry to achieve the necessary efficiencies and are generally unprepared to sacrifice their SUVs or home heating habits to help achieve the Kyoto targets. Contributing writer Robin Sears looks inside the politics of climate change, including the "Kyoto implementation fiasco," and looks ahead to the Harper government's *Clean Air Act* and Green Plan II as a made-in-Canada alternative to unachievable Kyoto targets.

La majorité des Canadiens soutiennent l'accord de Kyoto même s'ils en ignorent le contenu. Ils veulent un air pur et appuient la cible de réduction des gaz à effet de serre, qui prévoit pour 2008-2012 d'en ramener le niveau à 6 p. cent de moins qu'en 1990. Mais ils s'en remettent au gouvernement et au secteur industriel pour agir, et sont peu enclins à sacrifier leurs VUS et leurs habitudes de chauffage. Notre collaborateur Robin Sears analyse la dimension politique des changements climatiques, y compris le « fiasco de l'implantation de Kyoto », et se demande si la Loi sur l'assainissement de l'air et le plan vert II du gouvernement Harper ne deviendront pas une solution de rechange proprement canadienne aux cibles inatteignables de Kyoto.



No subject generates more hot air from politicians around the world than environmental policy. It's not hard to see why. The gap between what we say we believe about leading a green lifestyle and how we actually behave leaves a hole in the ozone large enough for a fleet of SUVs to thunder through.

Environmentalists and the liberal left, sensitive to this uncomfortable political reality, typically focus on the need for better green behaviour by corporations and governments. As a result, we remain free to overheat our houses, overcool our offices and light up midnight city skylines while feeling virtuous about the fines our governments occasionally levy on wicked chemical companies or slimy businesses caught dumping toxic wastes illegally.

The closest that most Canadian governments come to attempting to nudge us toward less energy-intensive or even less environmentally damaging personal choices is embarrassing exhortations like the Rick Mercer comedy "The One Tonne Challenge." The tax regime, real prosecutions and serious negotiations with industry are tools every party has dropped as it moved from opposition to government.

There are several problems with this approach over time, from both policy and political perspectives. First, little

is achieved in the way of environmental remediation or reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions or other pollutants. It also sets up the hostage to fortune that an incoming government may denounce the fraud, and declare its predecessors' environmental clothes non-existent.

It is this "truth-telling" mission that the Harper government has adopted for itself on the environment. It will attack the inflated and largely incompetent record of the Government of Canada in the past decade and try to change the channel to a different green agenda.

The reasons for Ottawa's long-term failure to perform on its list of green promises are many and difficult to fix. The federal government has few effective policy levers in this largely provincial domain. Its green agenda is hopelessly divided across at least six departments, often more committed to savaging their ministerial rivals than to delivering change. It has a limited ability, using either international pressure or treaty agreements, to force the provinces or industry to make change, as the sad Kyoto implementation fiasco revealed.

These intrinsic federal weaknesses may yet come to bite the Harper government on the derriere. The Tories will,

however, attempt to promote a more modest and workmanlike approach to environmental policy development and enforcement. Stephen Harper's convictions about the proper role for government — less is more, and be sure to deliver — combined with Tory scars and anger at being constantly wrong-footed by the Liberals on green virtue in opposition are the drivers of this less sweeping vision. Some very savvy public opinion research convinced the Tories to adopt a policy stance which is, at least, refreshingly candid about what is possible and what ain't.

Veterans of the period differ about which Chrétien insiders knew their Kyoto commitments were a fraud from day one. Some say they believed, and that the inevitable failure was a sobering reality that crept up on them only when they tried to deliver. Others acknowledge that the whole initiative was a political game driven from the Prime Minister's Office and Foreign Affairs in defiance of alarm bells from the economic ministries, from day one. Politically, today, it doesn't matter: they failed on all fronts, miserably.

Liberal leadership candidate Stéphane Dion's triumphalist stump rhetoric about his protection of a sacred "Kyoto trust" notwithstanding, the legacy of those years is naked defeat. Canadians now pump nearly a third more GHGs into the ether than we did when the Liberals signed the Kyoto deal. Six years from now we are not likely to be much below that mark, and nowhere near the 6 percent cut we had pledged ourselves to by 2012.

Despite two separate Chrétien "Kyoto Action Plans" and a Martin promise of massive spending to cut emissions, it was foolishness like the "One Tonne Challenge" that was as close as the previous government came to actually implementing a policy.

Successive Liberal Kyoto champions failed to persuade either the provinces or industry to commit to real change. Curiously, both the Tories and the NDP failed to nail the government on this nearly decade-long humiliation.

Even on the Rick Mercer crusade, helpful in pumping his personal profile but never likely to have any real impact on our emission levels, the opposition got little traction.

This puzzled expert observers, who pointed out that few Canadians had the ability to pick up the challenge. Few of us, in our Ontario-built

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gas-guzzlers, drive long distances to and from work out of environmental recklessness. We live far from work and have few bearable transit options, especially on a Friday night in a Canadian February. Of the fewer than half of us who own our homes, many are skeptical about the payback on the five to ten thousand dollars required to effectively insulate even a heat-sink home. Apart from those big-chunk lifestyle changes, few of us ever had the interest or ability to meet anything like a "one-tonne challenge," especially in the absence of any financial carrot or stick to do so.

Any Liberal leader, or local Liberal candidate, tempted to slam "Harper's

pro-polluter environmental policy" risks having this embarrassing failure hurled right back at him. The Tories' confidence in their ability to attack the Liberal record bequeathed them helps explain what appeared to be the Harper government's hesitant and even maladrofit approach to environmental policy in its early months. Rona Ambrose gets few points from government insiders for her early stumbles in attempting to define a Harper environmental agenda. She is being "supported" by the PMO in the management of the file this fall, as a result. Her acting chief of staff,

Bruce Carson, is a senior adviser to the prime minister in the PMO. Some clever analysis of Canadians' real environmental views has made the Harper PMO confident of the appeal of its vision to its target voters.

According to most pollsters, environmental policy has been highly ranked as a top political concern for most Canadians, across most demographic, geographic and partisan divides, for years. As a top-of-mind issue it ranks consistently with health care and crime, for urban voters. While Afghanistan has pushed it down the charts, most Canadians know that they should have a greener Canada high on their wish lists when pollsters call.

Even in qualitative research, the focus-group-based tool usually more revealing of underlying attitudes and values than phone call interviews, a majority of Canadians claim they would like to do more to ensure environmental sustainability. The Tories recognized that one-on-one private interviews might reveal a different picture. They'd used this technique on earlier myth-busting projects such as research on attitudes to crime. Given that until recently, SUV sales soared, despite years of attack for their dreadful GHG impact, it did not take a political genius to speculate that what Canadians demanded of corporations,

governments and “others” might be a much stiffer agenda than what they were really willing to commit their own families to.

Their research vindicated this hypothesis in spades, as a helpful leak about the project by the bureaucrats at

Another surprising learning from the Harper government’s research into what Canadians “really, really” care about on the environment is toxins: in food, in the air and being absorbed by our children. Climate change advocates have done a good job in persuading voters that hotter summers and rougher hurricane seasons are directly attributable to our collective bad behaviour, but there exists a sense of hopelessness about the speed or feasibility of the solutions among many of us.

Environment Canada revealed. The leak hinted at what the full report spelled out clearly for Tory strategists: that Canadians believed their “pop cans in the Blue Box” represented a big contribution to environmental sanity, and that little more should reasonably be demanded of them. What was not revealed was that Canadians were also quite deluded about the severity of the current environmental regime facing even willful polluters.

Collectively, most of us have been taken in by the years of federal and provincial government propaganda about how hard they are on “environmentally irresponsible corporations,” and how vigorous government efforts at getting green have been. Millions of taxpayers’ dollars have been invested in TV campaigns promoting various governments’ green success stories. In fact, Canada’s record on many indices of environmental performance is quite shabby, placing us well below our usual middle ranking in developed-country statistics.

Harper was, no doubt, mildly surprised to be told by his policy team that the federal government has far more wildlife officers than it does environmental cops, that the fines levied on those rare miscreants actually prosecuted were usually trivial and

that the list of at-risk and/or potentially troublesome environmental sites exceeded a hundred thousand, meaning that most could count on examination once a century or two.

Given his twin determination that governments should do more of what

they have promised they will, and that crimes should be seen to be effectively punished, one can see a “Harper the green enforcer” message being hoisted up the next Tory campaign flagpole.

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Experts’ reports of “50-year time frames” for any real improvement in climate change, combined with a recognition that China, India et al. are committed to pumping ever higher amounts of pollutants as they follow our path to prosperity, have left many citizens more than a little jaded about the prospects for real change. But “pesticides in your Pepsi” one can demand something be done about, now. An asthmatic child’s torture by smog in the schoolyard is a ballot question. Hence the Tories, focus on the aspects of environmental degradation that we can see and feel, and be enraged by inaction on.

Harper needs to be careful not to diminish climate change as a widely popular concern, however. Attacking the Kyoto record may work; attacking the dream won’t. “Climate change is important, and we are committed to the long-term fight. But you have a right to clean food, air and water now!” will therefore likely be the Tory message track. To counter Liberal, Bloc and New Democrat critics’ taunts that Harper is weak on Kyoto, out of loyalty to Alberta or the oil and gas sector, expect some high-profile investigations of the most egregious polluters, combined with efforts at high-profile industry environmental accords.

This latter path was well sketched by the report of the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy, launched under the previous regime, and delivered to Environment Minister Rona Ambrose this spring. The Liberal appointees seem to have done a good job in recalibrating their prose to this government’s vocabulary and priorities, demonstrating in their latest release how a Conservative “post-Kyoto” strategy could fight smog and GHGs simultaneously.

The Tories, planned *Clean Air Act* will form the legislative centrepiece of their strategy this fall, but given a heavy House agenda, in a minority parliament, their larger political efforts will take place on the road, with private sector and provincial allies. It’s a significant political gamble, as the Tories have few green credits in their political war chest and an influential group of internal grumblers about any green agenda.

They also face the same risks that hobbled their predecessors: the provinces will want to be bought off to be helpful, risking environmental policy being dragged into the fed-prov fiscal swamp. Industry players — especially the resource and auto



Jason Ransom, PMO

Prime Minister Harper after introducing Brian Mulroney at April's gala honouring the former prime minister as Canada's greenest PM. Harper may reap "some recognition from the Mulroney environmental message and record," which was presented, writes Robin Sears, "in a powerful speech" at this event.

sectors — may believe that they'll get a pass from a Tory government. Given that they successfully stonewalled a Liberal government, they will need a touch of the lash from Harper in private to persuade them that this time it's real.

There are at least three mines buried in the political terrain ahead that the Tories will have to avoid in creating some new environmental space for themselves.

First they must not be seen as too cozy with Canadian business, especially their friends in Alberta oil and gas. What the Liberals failed to deliver, the Tories need to. Much of corporate Canada is already adapting to a new world of tougher environmental expectation. Given that profits are on the line in any serious environmental campaign, it is not surprising that

many corporations are far ahead of governments in planning their transition to a new era. The oil and gas sector has decades of success in bending proposed environmental policy to its interests, and then adapting to the new regime. Harper needs to be seen to have pushed it successfully to defend his green credentials.

Curiously, it is the American vehicle assemblers who seem once again to be among the last to get it about the need for real change. Gazumped by Honda and Toyota on innovative engine technologies once more, they are reduced to fighting California-style emission controls and buying licences to use their rivals' technology to try to keep up. Industry insiders are speculating that the Canadian auto sector will fail to come up with a believable strategy for the implementation of its voluntary emissions guidelines by its promised

deadline next month, gambling on a quiescent Conservative government.

Harper could turn this to Tory advantage. It would be a clever piece of partisan jiu-jitsu to call the Ontario Liberal government on its rather mixed environmental record by demanding the same level of vehicle emission standards as Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger recently negotiated with the US assemblers.

The second potential explosion is a partisan dilemma: many conservative activists are allergic to any green agenda. Harper will need to pay private deference to those among his hard-core supporters who see the whole climate change crusade as baloney. Those who trash climate change cling to their conviction in the face of overwhelming and increasingly irrefutable evidence. Just as South African President

Thabo Mbeki believes that ginger and fresh fruit are HIV fighters, or Ronald Reagan feared fluoridated water as a Communist plot, this conviction resists rational debate.

The anti-climate-change zealots will, under duress, tweak their position to appear slightly less loopy. “The world may be warming, but it happens all the time,” the anti-climate-change clan claim. “There is nothing we have done to accelerate it, or can do to slow it down.” “Party on!” is the cheerful subtext for this embarrassingly large number of Canadian conservative activists.

Typical of the neanderthal commentary favoured by these strange libertarian hedonists was this drollery by the Greek playboy aristocrat who writes under the pseudonym Taki in the London *Sunday Times*: “The latest apocalypse, global warming, is just that. Lots of hot air. In the 1960s and 1970s the doom-sayers had been warning of an impending ice age. Their anti-capitalist agenda back then was that human activity was putting so much dust in the atmosphere that it was cooling the planet.”

Harper will welcome a mild baracking in the Canadian neo-con blogosphere when he begins his environmental crusade, as it will offer proof to skeptics that his vision is not theirs. The famously disciplined PMO communications boffins will be careful to avoid patronizing this strange cult. But the Harper team cannot afford a counterattack from the right. They need to avoid a “Sellout!” slap from even a retired Ralph Klein.

The final hurdle is how well Canadians ultimately accept the Harper government’s breach of Kyoto, and the broader issue of who owns climate change politically. Both the Liberals and the New Democrats tried to make the Tory Kyoto apostasy damaging in the

spring, with mixed success. While being in deliberate breach of a treaty commitment might not seem to be an asset, the

The final hurdle is how well Canadians ultimately accept the Harper government’s breach of Kyoto, and the broader issue of who owns climate change politically. Both the Liberals and the New Democrats tried to make the Tory Kyoto apostasy damaging in the spring, with mixed success. While being in deliberate breach of a treaty commitment might not seem to be an asset, the Tories are unlikely to give much quarter here. Not only will they highlight the poisoned chalice they were handed by the Liberals, they will buttress their defence with the sorry record of delivery by Ottawa on a range of green promises.

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The holy grail will be to deprive the Liberals of ownership of the Kyoto brand itself. It is a mystery to most opinion researchers who have studied Canadian attitudes on climate change over the years how the simple word “Kyoto” acquired such powerful if meaningless “brand equity.” Few Canadians have a clue about what the Kyoto agreement required, how it would impact their lives, what its environmental impact would — and would not — be. Yet among young and women voters, and especially in Quebec, it had achieved iconic status even by the 2000 election.

The often spurious linkage of climate change, by CNN and other populist media, to Katrina, lower water levels at the cottage and the price of orange juice has clearly sunk in. To the fury of conservative skeptics and their often abused academic supporters, “global warming” became a green policy garbage pail into which one could safely throw almost every environmental unpleasantness, without fear of contradiction. So heavy rains on the Canadian prairies and the near drought that followed were both blamed on our Kyoto sins.

“Saint” Stéphane has escaped successful counterattack, so far, on the

Liberals’ failure to deliver a sliver of their Kyoto pledge. One can expect his improbable claim that yet another

unenforceable GHG pledge — made in Montreal under his gavel in December — was somehow more bankable than the previous ones to come under Tory allies, fire later this year. Persuading young urban Canadian voters, even those otherwise in the centre of the Tory target voter profile, that their vision of a greener future is safe in Conservative hands will require a partisan *volte-face* equivalent to that achieved by Brian Mulroney a generation ago — and even he failed to get his environmental due. Despite his government’s surprising success in getting the Reagan administration to endorse Canada’s solution to “acid rain,” following a decade of Liberal failure, Mulroney got little credit for it, until years later.

As the Harper government launches its pre-election effort to change the channel on environmental policy from Kyoto to smog, from long-term emission level campaigns to quick-hit enforcement announcements, the hot air on all sides will reach scalding levels.

For the Tories, much of their majority government prospects will hang on whom Canadians believe by the time of the next campaign.

In order to secure a majority made up of seats gained mostly in urban Ontario and Quebec, Harper’s challenge will be to move a large slice of skeptical, pale green voters to a vision of

“conservative environmental stewardship.” The newly revived Green Party under the leadership of its media-savvy leader Elizabeth May, along with ranks of Liberal and New Democrats, is already sniggering at the prospect.

Given the heavy baggage of the environmental record of George Bush, to whom Harper will be endlessly compared; given Mulroney’s thin reward for his environmental wins; and given the curious connection of environmental leadership with the liberal left, Harper’s prospects might seem dim.

Australian, British and American conservative theorists have begun to articulate a right-of-centre approach to managing the planet. The young Harper strategists are keen students of this work. They point out that the left’s green commitments are often held hostage to environmentally ambiguous job creation measures and consumption pump-priming. A conservative vision of “limits to growth” and a Tory government devoted

to real environmental protection — not production at any cost — may not be an impossible political vision.

It may be that Harper will reap belatedly some recognition for the Mulroney environmental message and record, repackaged in a powerful speech he gave in April of this year. Harper can remind Canadians, as part of this Conservative rebranding, that it was the Tories who first adopted “sustainable development” as a strategy, who helped negotiate the first climate change accord in Rio and who won the battle on ozone depletion and acid rain.

Stephen Harper has prided himself on being an unbendable Canadian political leader, made of sterner stuff than his competitors. He faces a low bar of Liberal achievement in environmental leadership. As the only Tory to have successfully challenged that record put it, it doesn’t really matter where you begin or how you choose to manage the

green policy file so long as you show leadership and will. Mulroney added, “Where political will prevails, solutions will follow.” An absence of will has rarely been a Harper deficit.

If a Harper embraced by organic food fans and angry mothers of asthmatic children is an improbable vision, reflect on Canadian politics less than 12 months ago. Who, at this time last year, could honestly claim to have predicted that Stephen Harper would have blown a hole in the Bloquiste bastion of Quebec City, or broken the Liberal Party’s grip on the Canadian Jewish community, or made a credible play for Chinese-Canadian votes — let alone have won power?

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