

# The “Goracle” factor: Politics and the environment

## BUSH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

George Bush, according to Robert F. Kennedy Jr., is “the worst environmental president we’ve had in American history.” It’s hard to dispute this claim. Bush has been on the anti-environment side of nearly every issue that has come up during his presidency. He came into office as a climate change skeptic and a determined opponent of the *Kyoto Protocol*, which, he declared, “would have cost our economy up to \$400 billion and we would have lost 4.9 million jobs.” He pandered to the interests of the worst environmental laggards in the oil industry and consistently relaxed restrictions on large polluters like coal-fired electricity-generating companies. Much of this he accomplished under the Orwellian banner of his “Clear Skies” initiative. Bush’s stance came as no surprise to those familiar with his environmental record as governor of Texas. In fact, it was Bush’s legendary anti-environmentalism that made his presidential candidacy attractive to many hard-core Republicans.

## CANADA AND THE ENVIRONMENT

During the Bush years, Canada has had three different governments representing two different parties. The Jean Chrétien Liberals ratified Kyoto in December 2002; and the fall 2005 budget introduced at the end of Paul Martin’s term had significant green measures, including an arrangement to provide a portion of the federal gas tax to cities and communities that came forward with an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan. Despite the ambitious “Action Plan 2000,” and the even broader “Climate Change for Canada” announced in 2002, neither of the two Liberal governments took effective action around climate change.

Instead of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions dropping to 6 percent below 1990 levels (Canada’s Kyoto commit-

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ment), seven years after first signing the Kyoto treaty, Canadian emissions were on an upward trajectory that took them more than 25 percent above 1990 levels. In fact, at the UN climate change meetings in Ottawa in 2005 (chaired by then Environment Minister Stéphane Dion) the Americans repeatedly pointed out that despite their having refused to ratify Kyoto, US GHG emissions had risen less steeply since Kyoto than Canada’s.

Like George Bush, Stephen Harper was a climate change skeptic and a bitter critic of Kyoto. When it was negotiated in 1997, Harper denounced Kyoto as “a money-sucking socialist scheme.” Nine years later, judging that the environment was a non-issue for the Canadian public, the Harper Conservatives had almost nothing to say about it in their platform for the 2006 election in which they defeated the minority Martin government to win their own minority.

If it is true that political parties think when they are in opposition and act when they are in power (having neither the time nor the inclination to think and act simultaneously), the Harper Conservatives assumed the mantle of govern-

ment absent any serious thoughts about the environment. This made it difficult for them to know how to respond when the wave of growing environmental concern showed up in poll after poll during their first year in office.

## PUBLIC PRESSURE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION

The public demanded that the Harper Conservatives articulate a climate change policy. Their repeated response that the Liberals had allowed emissions to increase soon wore thin. In danger of losing control of the agenda in this troublesome file, Harper made several moves. He replaced Environment Minister Rona Ambrose with John Baird. He also attempted to shift the focus away from Canada’s Kyoto commitments, which called for significant GHG reductions by 2012. First (taking his cue from the Bush administration), Harper tried to replace absolute reduction targets with talk about “intensity” reduction targets. Then, somewhat more successfully, he began to refer to a longer-term strategy of achieving substantial reductions by mid-century. To some extent, concern over the Afghanistan mission and the woes of the American economy overtook the environment in public debate. But the environment remains a top-of-mind issue enjoying strong public support.

It’s impossible to predict how the environment will play as a federal election issue, especially with the Green Party now polling almost as much support as the NDP. One thing is very clear, however. The environment is no longer a solitary or isolated issue. Whether we are talking about climate change, deforestation, water quantity and quality, waste and conservation, the decline of the fisheries, biodiversity, invasive species, the threat to coral reefs, the problem of pesticides and the safety of the food supply, the spread of new diseases, or air

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quality and smog—in all instances these issues are strongly interlinked and have profound, significant implications for the economy and social well being. Appropriate policy responses require a horizontal, integrated, systems-based long-range perspective. This is the essence of what sustainability has to offer as a lens and a guide to policy formulation.

Efforts to graft the gene for sustainable development (SD) into the culture of the federal government have failed despite 1996 legislation establishing a federal Commissioner for the Environment and Sustainable Development and requiring all federal departments and key agencies to prepare a Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS) every three years with annual reports to Parliament (through the Commissioner) on progress toward meeting SDS goals.

Politicians largely don't seem to “get” SD, and the bureaucracy has marginalized the SDS exercise in most departments. Central agencies—particularly Treasury Board and Privy Council Office—have shown little leadership and have not yet risen to the challenge of establishing an overall government of Canada SDS. Canada's failures in this respect contrast sharply with the progress made by Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany, and the United Kingdom, all of which have strong national SD strategies, with the president or prime minister playing a leading role as the SD champion.

## REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

Fear and hopelessness are very poor motivators, and the best climate change communicators are going beyond cataloguing the frightening consequences of climate change to identifying positive signs of change, and there are plenty. Some of them are outlined in *The Geography of Hope*, journalist and author Chris Turner's personal odyssey to find indications that his new daughter's future was not as bleak as many experts forecast.

Significant steps to address climate change and to embed sustainability com-


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mitments in their decision-making fabric have already been taken by hundreds of US cities, dozens of states (most notably California), most large municipalities in Canada, and some spectacularly impressive smaller ones like Whistler, BC. Leading businesses are getting serious (including Wal-Mart, which has 60,000 companies in its supply chain) in response to what author Bob Willard calls the “breaking wave” of concern for the environment and SD. The financial services industry and other key decision makers in both the private and public sectors have begun to pay attention to the Stern report, *The Economics of Climate Change*, which identified huge costs to inaction on climate change that far exceed the (not insignificant) costs of taking action now.

Some provinces are showing leadership. Quebec passed a far-reaching *Sustainable Development Act*, which promises to transform decision making across the board in the provincial government and to steer other public institutions (including all educational institutions from elementary to postsecondary) toward sustainability commitments. The Quebec Act (modelled to some extent on a similar Act passed nearly a decade ago in Manitoba) broke new ground by including a modest carbon tax provision.

With the British Columbia premier now a strong SD advocate, BC took this

several steps further in the recent budget, which introduced a carbon tax on consumers that will rise gradually each year. The new tax will be “revenue neutral” by channelling proceeds back to consumers in the form of other tax reductions or incentives for greater energy efficiency. The initial public response has been positive with a majority (55 percent) of British Columbians registering support for the new measure. Dr. Keith Neuman of Environics commented that this poll shows that the BC public “recognizes that tackling climate change requires concrete measures that go beyond setting targets and promoting voluntary efforts.”

According to a Leger poll conducted in February 2008, “[n]early two-thirds of Albertans say the government should limit greenhouse gas emissions produced by oils sands development, even if it means some projects would be delayed or cancelled.” We are beginning to see the emergence of a “culture of sustainability” (including Tupperware-like “Eco-Moms” parties) coinciding with the current UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development, which began in 2005 and received an unplanned boost from the “Goracle factor” thanks to the popularity of Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). Although there is still a gap between public attitudes and behaviour, this third wave of public support for the environment and sustainability may change the landscape of politics and public policy for the foreseeable future. 

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