

The Chrétien record on environment and sustainability

CANADA AS ENVIRONMENTAL LEADER: 1993

Jean Chrétien was elected prime minister in 1993, one year after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the “Earth Summit”) was held in Rio de Janeiro. Many observers regard that event as the zenith of global concern about the environment. It was certainly the culmination of growing popular awareness and extensive engagement of decision makers in the public sector around the world. It also catalyzed the global involvement in sustainable development of businesses, NGOs, and aboriginal peoples.

Canada’s reputation as an international environmental leader was also at its zenith. The driving figure behind Rio, and the secretary general of the Earth Summit, was Canadian Maurice Strong. But Canada’s leadership had been evident for a number of years leading up to Rio. Canada had hosted the 1987 Toronto Air Conference, which first identified climate change as a major global issue. That same year, the Montreal Protocol brought international action on ozone depletion, an issue Canadian scientists had helped bring to light. The secretary general of the Brundtland Commission, and principal author of its 1987 report *Our Common Future*, which led the UN to organize the Earth Summit, was also a Canadian, Jim MacNeill.

Canada had hosted six public meetings of the Brundtland Commission, and as a result, set up the National Task Force on the Environment and Economy. Among its recommendations that Canada implemented was the establishment of the National Round Table on Environment and Economy (NRTEE). Canada introduced the Green Plan in 1990, which entailed a multibillion dollar commitment to better resource management and environmental protection. The environment portfolio was a prize

BY DAVID V.J. BELL

David V.J. Bell is founding director of the York Centre for Applied Sustainability (now the Institute for Research and Innovation on Sustainability).

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given to rising stars in the Mulroney cabinet, including Lucien Bouchard and later Jean Charest. In 1992 Canadian Elizabeth Dowdeswell was appointed executive director of the United Nations Environment Program.

No one in 1992 could have anticipated the utter collapse of the Progressive Conservative Party in the election the following year. Few expected that the environment would soon fall off the public agenda in Canada and internationally. The shift from zenith to nadir was abrupt and surprising.

The environment was certainly a key element of Liberal Party strategy going into the 1993 election, and featured prominently in the Red Book whose principal architect, Paul Martin, was environment critic in Chrétien’s shadow cabinet. Martin was well familiar with the portfolio, and was fortunate to have Maurice Strong as his friend and mentor. But the Chrétien government soon became pre-occupied with the deficit and national unity. As finance minister,

Martin presided over the program review exercise in 1994, which resulted in huge cuts to many departments, especially Environment Canada. Speaking in 1997, Jim MacNeill described the Liberal environment record as “perhaps the worst in recent memory.” But how bad was it? What happened to the Red Book promises?

Several of the key commitments contained in the Red Book focused on changes to the structures and processes of environmental decision making. In 1994, NRTEE was given a firmer institutional basis by an Act of Parliament establishing it as an agent Crown corporation. In 1995, a federal Guide to Green Government was signed by every member of the Cabinet. As promised, the Chrétien government established both the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development and the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development (CESD).

The 1995 amendment of the *Auditor General Act*, which introduced the CESD requires each federal department and key agency to produce a sustainable development strategy (SDS), renewed every three years and reported on annually to Parliament by the commissioner. A 1999 Cabinet directive requires all major federal proposals to undergo an environmental assessment. These governance changes may ultimately prove to be the most significant environmental legacy of the Chrétien government, but more on that later. What about the substance of Canada’s environmental policy?


THE SUBSTANCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Here the record is mixed. Canada took years to pass the *Species at Risk Act*, which was finally proclaimed in June 2003. A revised version of the *Canadian*

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potentially very good news for creating a more unified Canadian security policy. However, it is quite probable that the results will be less than satisfactory from a human security perspective with Canada becoming more inward looking, drawing into a closer security relationship with the United States, stressing defence of Canadian territory over humanitarian intervention, and continuing to neglect ODA as a crucial aspect of Canadian security policy.

The touchstone for a Martin foreign policy is likely to be the need both to better manage Canada's complex relationship with the United States and to be better able to protect those Canadian interests at home and abroad that may be compromised in the wake of American policies and actions. Challenges to international peace and security, whether from state or non-state actors or structural inequalities, will continue to require responsible Canadian action.

How Canada responds will determine not only our place multilaterally but especially our signature relationship with the United States. Martin will have to juggle both the growing intrusiveness of an American administration fixated on Homeland Security and peripheral defence and a global community crying out for effective multilateral institutions capable of addressing the most basic problems of human development and human security. 

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Environmental Protection Act, 1999 was watered down after the committee stage following a coordinated assault from the business community. Meanwhile, the cuts to Environment Canada had greatly weakened its capacity for scientific research and policy development. Not surprisingly, the overall impact has been negative. As David Runnalls and Françoise Bregha concluded in "The Canadian Record Since Rio":

Biodiversity is still declining; the number of threatened species is growing, wetlands continue to be drained, and the freshwater habitats of the Fraser River, St Lawrence River and the Great Lakes are still negatively affected by commercial fishing, toxic wastes, agricultural run-off and municipal sewage.

On the positive side of the ledger, many new national parks were created and large tracts of land were set aside as protected areas. Though some observers have condemned Canada's environmental performance, others have been much more positive. For example, a 2001 Columbia and Yale universities study of 122 countries ranked Canada third overall behind Finland and Norway. The rankings were based on the Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI), which identifies 22 major factors that contribute to environmental sustainability, including air quality, overall public health, and environmental regulation. In contrast,

David Boyd's study "Canada vs the OECD: An Environmental Comparison" puts Canada near the bottom of the list, 28th out of 29. Only the United States scored lower on the series of environmental indicators (which include waste, pollution, air quality, transportation, climate change, agriculture, etc.).

CLIMATE CHANGE

Responding to climate change is arguably the most significant environmental governance challenge of this century. Canada signed the Kyoto Accord in 1997 (against the strong objections of several provincial premiers, particularly Ralph Klein), but then gave ambivalent signals about whether it would ultimately ratify the agreement. The next five years involved a series of discussions and negotiations but little action to reduce emissions, which on the contrary continued to increase. To his great credit, Prime Minister Chrétien pledged Canada to the Kyoto convention at the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in August 2002. Formal ratification by the Canadian Parliament followed a few months later.

In November 2002, the federal government unveiled Canada's "Climate Change Plan," which proposed a "national goal—for Canadians to become the most sophisticated and efficient consumers and producers of energy in the world and leaders in the development of new, cleaner technologies." Five key instruments are proposed to achieve the goal:

1. Emissions reduction targets for large industrial emitters established through covenants with a regulatory or financial backstop that would create an incentive for shifting to lower-emissions technologies and energy sources, while providing flexibility for these emitters through emissions trading and access to domestic offsets and international permits;
2. A partnership fund that will cost-share emissions reductions in collaboration with provincial and territorial governments, as well as municipalities, aboriginal communities, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector to increase energy efficiency and reduce emissions in the most effective way;
3. Strategic infrastructure investments in innovative climate change proposals such as urban transit projects, intermodal transportation facilities, and a CO₂ pipeline;
4. A coordinated innovation strategy that allows Canada to benefit fully from the innovation possibilities of our climate change agenda and builds on programs such as Technology Partnerships Canada, the Industrial Research Assistance Program (IRAP), Sustainable Development Technology Canada, and the Technology Early Action Measures (TEAM); and

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5. Targeted measures including information, incentives, regulations, and tax measures that will help achieve our climate change objectives in specific sectors and program areas.

Clearly, this plan embraces a wide range of policy instruments, but it leaves in doubt how the total Kyoto commitment of 2.3mt of GHG (green house gas) reduction will be achieved. In this as in several other key areas, the Canadian government has promised much without developing mechanisms and processes to deliver on the promise. The resulting “implementation gap” has been duly noted in nearly every report of the CESD. In his December 1999 opening statement to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development, Commissioner Brian Emmett lamented that “there continues to be a substantial gap between talk and action on the federal government’s environmental and sustainable development agenda. As a result, we are paying the price in terms of our health, environment, standard of living and legacy to our children and grandchildren.”

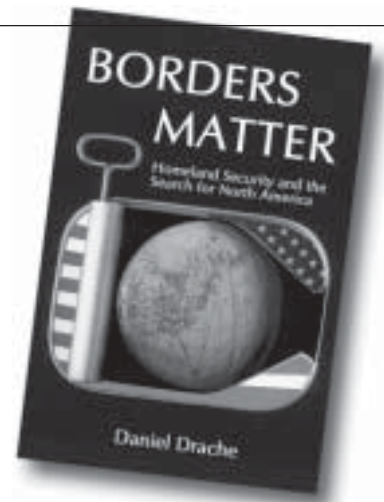
GOVERNANCE FOR SUSTAINABILITY?

This brings us back to the effectiveness of the SDSs. Governance for sustainability, which of course requires integrated decision making that connects environmental, social, and economic components, involves two challenges: making better decisions and making decisions better. Ultimately, the changes in governance will prove the most important elements of Chrétien’s legacy. His substantive accomplishments are modest. The boldest decision—ratifying Kyoto—was preceded by such temporizing and ambivalence that we are still without a plan that will bring together the coalition of commitments needed to achieve the targets.

The numerous efforts at transforming how decisions are made in Ottawa are, however, an important step in the right direction. Many of the building blocks of sustainability-based governance are now in place. But, to date, they have not been assembled into a coherent edifice. We will not move very far from the status quo until strong leadership is exercised from the centre of decision making, by central agencies (Privy Council Office, Finance, Treasury Board) led by the prime minister and supported by key ministers and deputy ministers. This in turn will require the articulation of an overall government of Canada SDS (something that until now has been lacking), absent which “the challenge faced by each department is like helping to assemble a large jigsaw puzzle without the picture box.”

The torch has been passed to a new leader. Paul Martin has all the skills required to push further a transformation toward sustainability governance. He understands the issues; he has an excellent mentor and adviser in Maurice Strong; and he enjoys taking on big policy challenges. He has already announced the creation of a new Cabinet Committee on Domestic Affairs, which he has charged to take a sustainability approach to domestic policy, highlighting the interconnection of environmental, economic, and social dimensions.

Whether Martin possesses the courage and political will to push the needed changes through a largely reluctant bureaucracy will soon be evident. Only then can we take the true measure of the Chrétien legacy, for it is now incomplete and dependent on what happens next. 🍁



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BORDERS MATTER

HOMELAND SECURITY AND THE SEARCH FOR NORTH AMERICA

BY DANIEL DRACHE

Daniel Drache is an Editor-in-Chief of *Canada Watch*, the Associate Director of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, a Professor of Political Economy at York University, and Senior Resident at Massey College, University of Toronto, 2003-04.

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The great North American border has always been a blend of the porous and the “impermeable.” If the border, in all its aspects, is working well, Canadian sovereignty will be effective and focused; when the fundamentals are neglected, sovereignty becomes threatened, and economic integration becomes the focus of debate.

Borders Matter examines the importance of the US–Canada border against the background of the new pressures of increased security practices and the continuing need to have a sufficiently porous border for the purpose of trade. Canadians have never been very good at defining or defending their strategic self-interest. Instead, Canadians carefully negotiate between competing nationalisms, regionalisms, and localisms and the reality of being a small economy dependent on and vulnerable to US pressures.

In *Borders Matter*, Drache points to a need for a policy model and social theory that would grasp the complex, multi-dimensional, and dramatic changes to the border and ultimately help to shape the political economy and future of this country.