

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE BIOPHYSICAL NATURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

BY DOUG MACDONALD

In 1985 the federal and provincial governments culminated a successful process of national policy development which allowed Canada to meet its goal of a fifty per cent cut in acid rain causing sulphur-dioxide emissions. Two years later, Canada was one of the lead nations in the successful negotiation of the 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer.

Not only had Canada joined the United States and Japan among the group of nations least interested in action on climate change, but federal-provincial and inter-departmental wrangling prevented this country from taking any position at all prior to commencement of the Kyoto negotiations.

A decade after that high point, however, in the Fall of 1997, Canada's international reputation for environmental protection lay in the ashes. Not only had Canada joined the United States and Japan among the group of nations least interested in action on climate change, but federal-provincial and inter-departmental wrangling prevented

this country from taking any position at all prior to commencement of the Kyoto negotiations. The federal-provincial agreement on a target of stabilization by 2010, reached at a meeting of energy and environment ministers in Regina on November 12, 1997, was subsequently ignored by Ottawa: the press conference scheduled by the Chrétien government for Friday, November 28 to announce the Canadian position on the eve of the Kyoto talks had to be cancelled to allow negotiations to continue over the weekend. And when the Canadian position was finally announced on the following Monday, after talks had begun in Japan, a member of the Alberta cabinet immediately announced he was going to Kyoto to continue the Edmonton-Ottawa feud on a larger stage.

The Chrétien government already has an environmental record far worse than that of either Prime Ministers Mulroney or Trudeau. The fiasco of Canadian climate change policy has now demonstrated not only that this government has scant concern for the issue, but that it is unable to muster basic competence, either in reaching agreement with the provinces or around the cabinet table.

In another article in this issue [see page 1], David Bell has documented the factors which have produced the current Canadian unwillingness to incur the costs of environmen-

tal protection. I would like to briefly supplement that analysis by considering whether the physical nature of the climate change issue of most significance—the emission of carbon dioxide during fossil fuel combustion—must also be considered for explanatory purposes.

Doern and Conway have suggested that environmental policymaking be seen as a "double dynamic", the first part being the conflicts and alliances amongst state and non-state actors found in every policy process, and the second being the "ever-changing ecological and biophysical realm, which is characterized increasingly by unpredictability, scientific uncertainty, and stark spatial realities".

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They suggest that, to understand environmental politics and policy, we must consider not only the relevant ideas, institutions, and interests, but also the physical nature of cod in the North Atlantic, green garbage bags sitting at the curb, or infinitesimal quantities of dioxin in the St. Clair River. By comparing the nature of sulphur and carbon dioxide emitted to air, can we better understand why acid

rain was a Canadian success and climate change nothing but folly and farce?

Acid rain was constructed, first by scientists and then by environmentalists, as a social issue requiring a policy response in the late 1970s. The substances of concern were both sulphur-dioxide emissions and nitrogen oxides, but attention was focused upon the former, seen as the primary problem. Canadian policy development from 1980 to 1985 was a process of negotiation amongst the key actors of Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec, and their relevant hydro utilities and smelters, coordinated by Environment Canada and carried out against the backdrop of unsuccessful attempts to negotiate a Canada-U.S. agreement. Greenhouse gas negotiations, on the other hand, encompass a much larger number of business actors, all of the provinces, and the backdrop is one of global, rather than bilateral, diplomacy.

Canada made a unilateral commitment to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions in 1990 and thus had no difficulty in ratifying the 1992 Rio Framework Convention on Climate Change, since it imposed no additional obligations. Development of the Canadian program over the next three years, the National Action Strategy on Climate Change announced on February 20, 1995, however, posed political problems not encountered in the case of acid rain. In that instance Ontario, the major polluter, was required to absorb costs which were never seen to pose any fundamental threat to the provincial economy. The two major Ontario sources, Ontario Hydro and Inco, did their best to minimize requirements for cost internalization, but were unable to mount arguments

which successfully identified their own self-interest with that of the province as a whole.

Aquatic acidification was symbolized by the metaphor of dying lakes, thus touching the heart of Canadian identity, particularly in Ontario and Quebec. The central symbol of the greenhouse issue—unnatural weather, which conveys images of sunny climes as much as danger and death—carries no such weight. Nor is the degree of scientific certainty comparable.

The climate change process of the 1990s, however, was very different. Alberta was motivated to resist federal attempts to develop a national program in a way that Ontario never had been. Still smarting from the regional alienation symbolized by the 1980 National Energy Program, Alberta saw any threat to the financial well-being of the petroleum industry not only as a major fiscal problem, but as a direct challenge to Western identity. In consequence, the regional champion, then Minister of Natural Resources Anne McClellan, led the fight in cabinet to ensure that voluntarism, rather than law, would be the policy instrument of choice. A month before announcement of the Canadian program, on January 20, 1995,

Natural Resources Canada and the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers signed a Memorandum of Understanding, codifying the industry commitment to take voluntary action to reduce emissions. Although the federal Environment Minister, Sheila Copps, had publicly stated her preference for law-based regulation, the flagship of the 1995 Canadian program when it was announced in February turned out to be the Voluntary Challenge and Registry Program. Throughout the 1997 negotiations, the oil industry and Alberta continued to claim, despite the admitted failure to achieve the policy objective, that voluntarism was preferable to law.

In 1985, the only Ontario government debate over instrument choice was whether to bring in new, stand-alone acid rain legislation or, as was eventually decided, to rely on regulations under the provincial *Environmental Protection Act*. Unlike the federal debate a decade later, voluntarism was never considered nor advocated by the provincial energy or industry ministers.

At least in part, this difference is explained by the fact that the two substances primarily associated with acid rain and climate change have been seen very differently. Aquatic acidification was symbolized by the metaphor of dying lakes, thus touching the heart of Canadian identity, particularly in Ontario and Quebec. The central symbol of the greenhouse issue—unnatural weather, which conveys images of sunny climes as much as danger and death—carries no such weight. Nor is the degree of scientific certainty comparable.

Although the Reagan administration used uncertainty

as its major rationale for delaying U.S. action throughout the 1980s, the issue was seen very differently in Canada, where by the early 1980s there was scientific and lay agreement on causes and effects. On November 22, 1997, the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, on the other hand, carried a prominent article which led off with the statement that "A funny thing happened on the way to the international global-warming conference: the Earth failed to heat up". Climate change is still seen as an issue characterized by scientific uncertainty.

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More important than the relative science or symbols, however, are the fundamental economic interests associated with the two substances. As noted, significant reductions in fossil fuel combustion would impose a proportionate cost upon Alberta and other producing provinces, such as British Columbia and Saskatchewan, many times greater than those borne by Ontario and Quebec to limit acid rain, thus concentrating the Western mind. Nor do the Western provinces face any concerted provincial opposition.

In its fight against the National Energy Program, Alberta faced not only a federal government intent upon gar-

nering tax revenue associated with global price increases, but also the major consuming province, Ontario. That was not the case in 1997, when there was no major division among the provinces. Ontario, for instance, implementing an agenda of environmental deregulation under the Harris government and, in any case, having a consistent interest in low energy prices, made no public statements in favour of tough Canadian action. The inherent nature of the issues is such that the polluters must pay a much higher price to achieve the stabilization objective than was required to meet our goal of cutting acid rain in half.

There is no doubt that the shift in ideas between 1985 and 1997 concerning the relative value of state and market goes a long way to explain these two very different policy decisions and outcomes. At the same time, the nature of the substances in question clearly must also be considered. In this case at least, Doern and Conway's double dynamic is an aid to understanding policy.



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