



The Road to Paris and COP21 runs through Campaign 2015 in Canada. Will the environment and climate change be an election issue? Will Canada be a leader of a laggard on climate change and global warming? Shutterstock photo

Will the Environment be Election Road Kill on the Road to Paris?

David McLaughlin

This year sees two seminal political events for Canada: a general federal election and a major global climate change conference in Paris designed to agree a new binding treaty on limiting carbon emissions after 2020. The environment generates a lot of political heat but typically has not driven voting preferences in Canada. Canadians are primarily concerned with jobs and the economy. All the parties are wary of the political complexities of climate change policy and how the average voter sees it. The Liberal “Green Shift” carbon tax platform of 2008 still resonates. But oil sands development and pipeline projects are current hot-button issues linked to climate change and the Harper government’s own climate policy target for 2020 will not be reached. So, will this year be different?

As the three major Canadian political parties prepare to roll out their policy priorities ahead of this year’s election, there are two major externalities to factor into their thinking on the environment: The UN Climate Change Conference in Paris—beginning just a month after the October vote—and the U.S.-China agreement on carbon emissions.

But to what extent those external factors will influence platform formulating here will hinge on where the environment fits in the election-year public psyche. For all the policy linkage between a strong economy and a healthy environment, in Canadian politics it is the inverse that is true. A weak economy means less public attention on the environment. As jobs and the economy rise as a personal concern, environmental concerns drop.

This has been the Canadian pattern for some time. The figure below from Environics Research Group illustrates the priority trade-off Canadians have made on the economy and the environment over the years. Asking Canadians what was the most important problem facing them between 2007 and 2011, it shows environmental issues trumping economic issues in 2007 but falling off completely after that when the global financial crisis hit in 2008 and Canada entered economic recession. While economic concerns moderated subsequently, environmental concerns did not rise in response. Nothing suggests this dynamic has reversed itself.

This makes campaigning on the environment a less assured strategy for political parties. All major party platforms in 2015 will note the environment. How central this will be to each party's election strategy remains the question.

The closest example of an environment/economy election in Canada occurred in 2008. The "Green Shift" election promise by Liberal leader Stéphane Dion returned Stephen Harper's government to office with a strengthened minority. Dion's Green Shift platform of implementing a carbon tax while cutting income taxes and increasing social spending

certainly argued the environmental benefits of doing so. It echoed British Columbia's successful introduction of a carbon tax that same year. But Dion's campaign fell short illustrating in part the risks of this approach. Three reasons account for this.



In the 2008 campaign Liberal leader Stéphane Dion proposed his Green Shift to implement a carbon tax while cutting income taxes and increasing social spending. That didn't go very well. The Liberals lost.

First, it was characterized as a 'tax on everything' by opponents, making its economic impact much more concerning to voters than any environmental benefits it would bring. Second, Dion's own leadership skills were never readily accepted by voters who failed to see him as a potential prime minister, making him an ineffective agent of this type of complex policy change. Third, the environmental need for such a strong dose

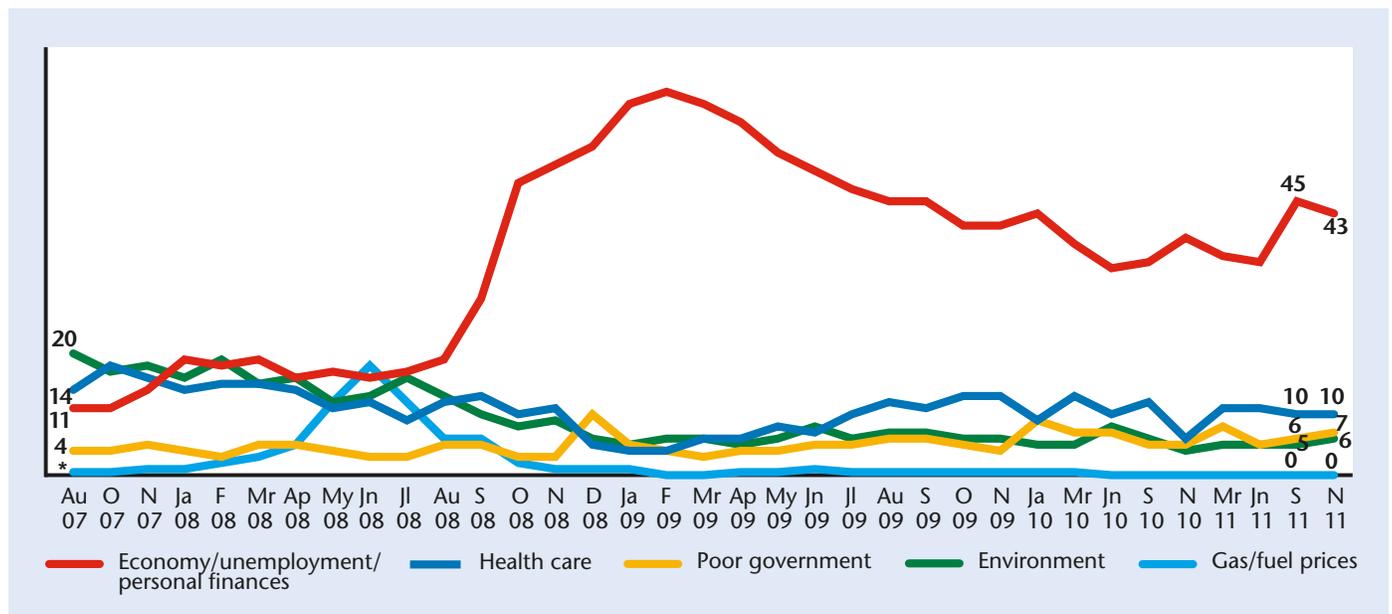
of tax reform was never effectively communicated and understood or accepted by the electorate, leaving the economic calculus as the most salient one.

It is this last point that remains a *condition precedent* for significant political action by governments on the environment.

Even though concern about the environment was close to concern about the economy generally for Canadians at the time of that election (as seen in Figure 1) as a voting issue motivating people, the economy still trumped it. By the time of the 2011 election, the Conservatives won their first majority government on the basis of two core appeals, one positive and one negative: strong economic management under Harper and manufactured fear about a coalition opposition government. The environment was simply ignored.

The 21st United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP 21), scheduled for November 30-December 11, guarantees a year of rising attention on climate change issues and Canada's carbon reduction ambitions. Its goal is to achieve a legally binding, successor treaty to both the Kyoto Protocol and the Copenhagen Accord for limiting and

Figure 1: Most Important Problem Facing Canadians Today



Source: Environics Research Group, 2011.

reducing GHG emissions after 2020. This is a tall order but one that places obvious political pressure on Canadian performance and commitments.

To date, Canada's carbon reduction performance has been fitful and inadequate to meet our target of reducing emissions 17 per cent below 2005 levels by 2020. The governing Conservatives' plan is to take a sector-by-sector regulatory approach, as has been done for fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks but not for oil and gas, while letting provinces contribute on their own accord.

In early December, Harper retreated from his pledge to regulate carbon emissions in the oil industry, saying it would be "crazy" to do so at a time of plunging crude prices. "Under the current circumstances of the oil and gas sector, it would be crazy, it would be crazy economic policy to do unilateral penalties on that sector," he said. "We are clearly not going to do it."

Figure 2 shows progress to date in achieving the 2020 target. This latest chart released by Environment Canada shows that without additional measures, Canada will miss its target by 116 megatons or almost 50 percent.

Compared to both meeting its own GHG target and by any international

comparison, Canada remains a serious climate policy laggard. In a 2013 performance index of the biggest global emitters, Canada ranked last among all industrialized nations as well as within the G8 countries. (see Figure 3)

Compared to both meeting its own GHG target and by any international comparison, Canada remains a serious climate policy laggard. In a 2013 performance index of the biggest global emitters, Canada ranked last among all industrialized nations as well as within the G8 countries.

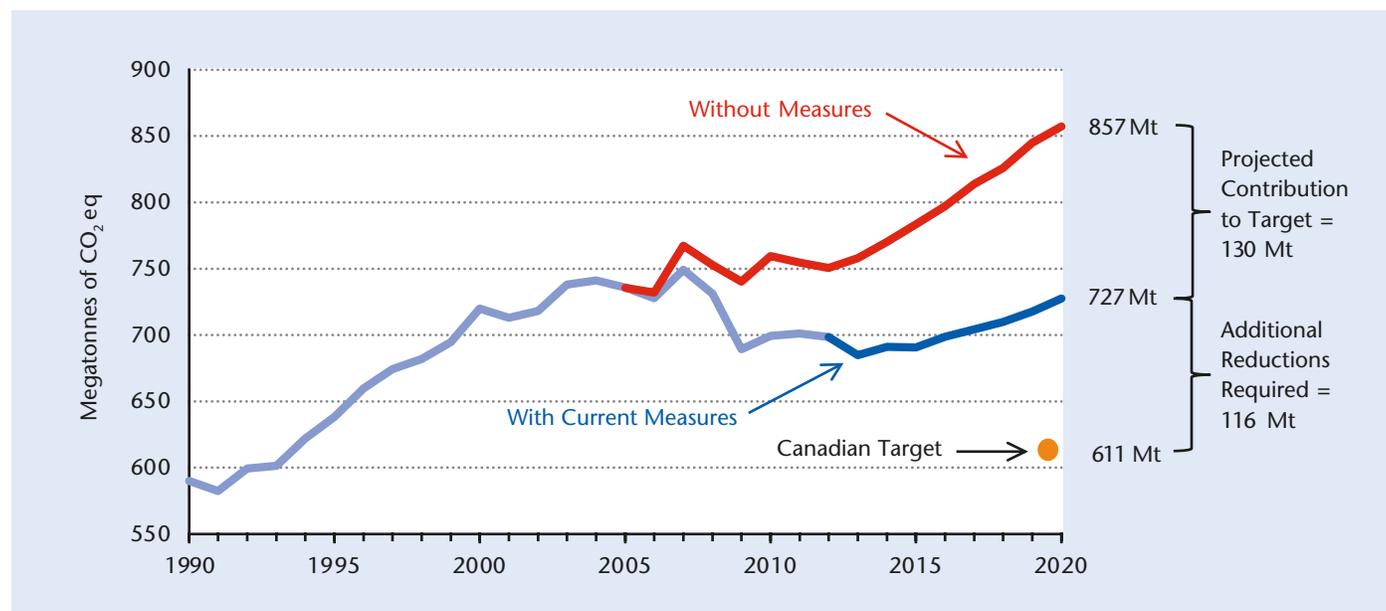
COP 21 promises to ramp up the pressure on parties to detail their goals for Canada's next climate policy commitments. Even though the actual negotiating meeting takes place after the election, all countries are requested to submit their proposed post-2020 commitments in advance, by March, 2015. This guarantees public focus not just on the politics of the positioning of the Conservatives,

Liberals, and New Democrats, but on their substantive plans.

The federal government's approach to Paris was formalized in a June, 2014, submission to the UN. It calls for "nationally-determined contributions" from countries of GHG mitigation targets as part of an "internationally legally binding" agreement. Canada called for all countries to make contributions with this proviso:

"...Parties' contributions under a new agreement will be differentiated to reflect unique national circumstances and capabilities. We recognize that Parties need to continue to grow their economies in order to achieve sustainable development while reducing emissions well into the future. Various domestic factors will shape Parties' efforts to reduce emissions, including for example the structure of their economy, population growth, the cost of abatement, geography and climate." There is little here to suggest a shift in the government's current approach is forthcoming. First, it trumpets economic growth over environmental mitigation. Second, it takes issue with conventional scientific assessment on the need to act now to reduce emissions only "well into the future". This explains why the Prime Minister characterized global efforts

Figure 2: Progress Toward Canada's 2020 GHG Emissions Reduction Target



Source Environment Canada Emissions Trends, 2014.

on climate change this way:

“No matter what they say, no country is going to take actions that are going to deliberately destroy jobs and growth in their country. We are just a little more frank about that...” (June, 2014)

The only consistent feature of the government’s climate policy approach has been on the means to reduce emissions. It will not bring in any form of economy-wide or sector-specific carbon pricing scheme, calling it “job-killing”. No matter the effectiveness of such a measure in reducing emissions as seen in British Columbia, for example, it will not countenance it.

Adding to this pressure is a significant new commitment in November, 2014, by the world’s two largest emitters—China and the United States—to limit and reduce their own emissions. China will peak its emissions by 2030 and reduce subsequently; the US is now setting a new reduction target for 2030, for the first time committing

to reducing emissions 26 to 28 percent below 2005 levels by 2025, with “best efforts” to hit the higher end of that range.

With the US now going further, then Canada must decide to either concur with the US despite not being on track to meet the original 2020 target or consciously show that it is not willing to match the US, thereby undermining a key component of Canadian climate policy.

This is meaningful for two reasons: First, it is the first time China is committing internationally to domestic reductions. This highlights the prospect of a global deal involving all major emitters (a Canadian policy goal) in Paris. Should this hold, it places major pressure on Canada to go beyond its current 2020 commitments

and offer to reduce emissions further.

Second, it illustrates the dilemma for Canada in adopting climate policy targets aligned with the United States. With the US now going further, then Canada must decide to either concur with the US despite not being on track to meet the original 2020 target or consciously show that it is not willing to match the US, thereby undermining a key component of Canadian climate policy.

None of the other parties’ final environmental platforms have been announced as election year begins. But elements of each are already in play based on leaders’ statements.

In a speech to the Economic Club of Canada in December, 2013, Opposition Leader Tom Mulcair stated:

“We will rise to meet our international climate change obligations by creating a cap-and-trade system that puts a clear market price on carbon. We’ll use the revenue generated by that cap-and-trade system to reinvest in the future of our energy sector.”

Figure 3: Climate Change Performance Index for OECD Member Countries

Rank	Country	Score	Rank	Country	Score	Rank	Country	Score
4	Denmark	75.23	17	Slovak Republic	63.17	40	Czech Republic	53.93
5	United Kingdom	69.66	18	Italy	62.90	42	New Zealand	53.49
6	Portugal	68.38	19	Germany	61.90	43	United States	52.93
7	Sweden	68.10	20	Mexico	61.50	45	Poland	52.69
8	Switzerland	66.17	22	Spain	60.37	47	Greece	51.50
10	France	65.90	23	Luxembourg	60.27	50	Japan	47.21
11	Hungary	65.17	24	Norway	59.32	53	Korea	46.66
12	Ireland	65.01	29	Austria	57.19	54	Turkey	46.47
13	Iceland	64.89	31	Netherlands	56.99	57	Australia	41.53
14	Belgium	64.65	32	Finland	56.57	58	Canada	40.39

© Germanwatch 2013

Figure 4: Climate Change Performance Index for G8 Countries

Rank	Country	Score	Rank	Country	Score	Rank	Country	Score
5	United Kingdom	69.66	19	Germany	61.90	56	Russian Federation	43.64
10	France	65.90	43	United States	52.93	58	Canada	40.39
18	Italy	62.90	50	Japan	47.21			

© Germanwatch 2013

PERFORMANCE ■ Very good ■ Good ■ Moderate ■ Poor ■ Very poor

Source: GermanWatch, CPPI, 2014.

Many important details are lacking, including: the actual carbon price, timing of implementation, link to 2020 or other targets, economy-wide vs. individual sector coverage, trading allowances, and so forth. Each of these is material to determining both the effectiveness and the impact of such a policy. But it is also materially different than the Conservatives' approach.

Justin Trudeau's Liberals have been less explicit on their climate change policy. But he has been consistent on the need to price carbon as part of it, as he stated in a speech to the Calgary Petroleum Club in October, 2013: "I would have joined and contributed to the provincial government, industry, and civil society efforts to build a national

Think of climate change as a "sword" or "shield" issue for the parties; the former being offensive, the latter defensive. The NDP and Liberals cite climate change in order to contrast offensively with the Conservatives, letting them say the Conservatives have done little to tackle this issue.

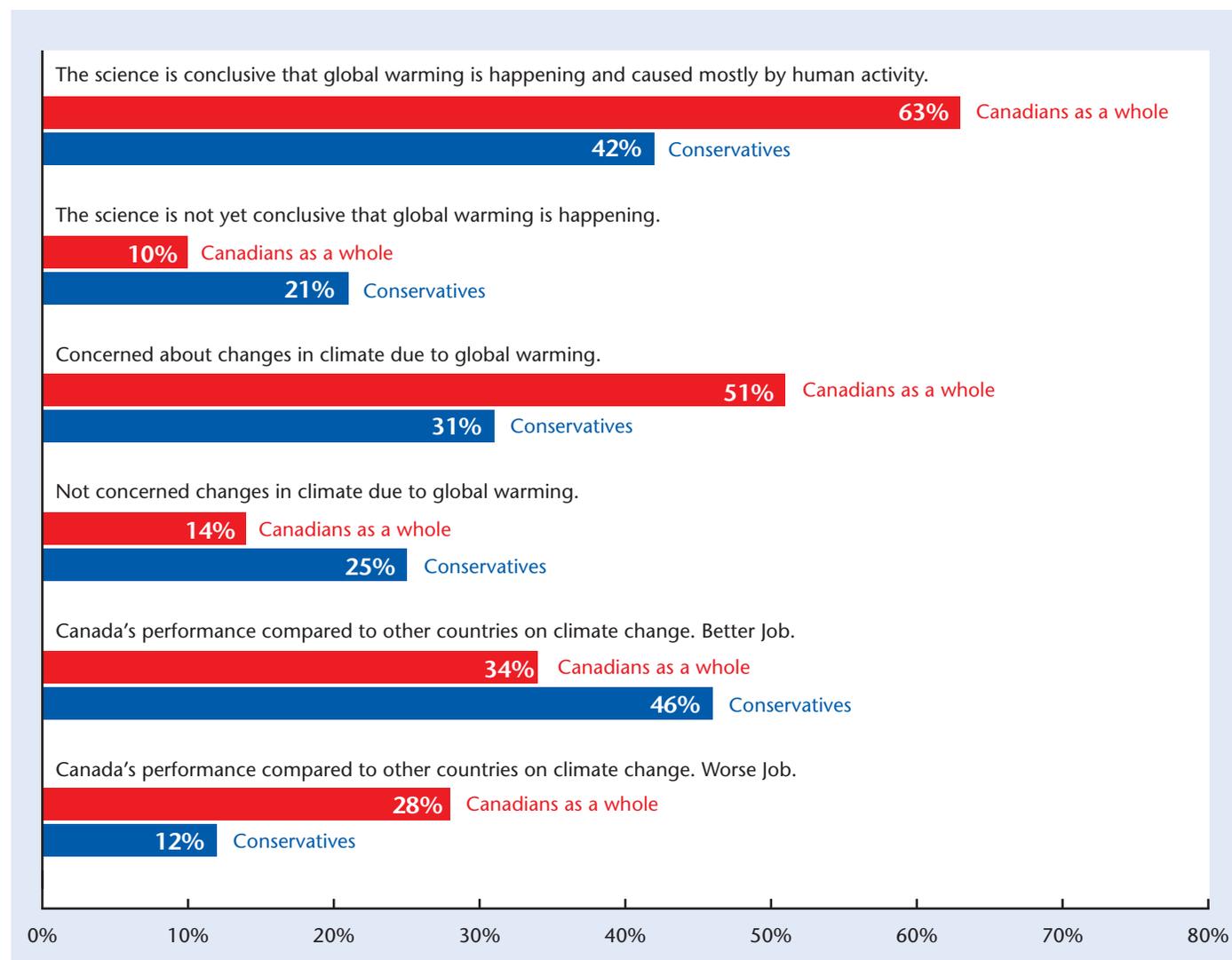
energy strategy. Part and parcel of that strategy ought to be a national approach to pipelines and development, within an overall framework that includes a policy that puts a price on carbon pollution."

So, both opposition parties agree on the need for some form of carbon pricing in Canada. The NDP favour a cap-and-trade system while the Liberals have not pronounced. It is this ambiguity on details but clarity on carbon pricing that

continues to allow the Conservatives to label the NDP and Liberals as both being in favour of a "carbon tax", even though neither has stated such.

Politically, think of climate change as a "sword" or "shield" issue for the parties; the former being offensive, the latter defensive. The NDP and Liberals cite climate change in order to contrast offensively with the Conservatives, letting them say the Conservatives have done little to

Figure 4: Canadians on Global Warming—By the Numbers



Source: Environics Research Survey Institute, Detailed Tables 2014.

tackle this issue. The Conservatives, knowing they are weak on climate action, cite carbon tax as their sword issue against the opposition, knowing they need to shield themselves from neither caring nor acting on climate change. It buttresses their positioning as the 'low tax' party and deflects the argument to the economy rather than the environment.

These poll results show Canadians are more ambiguous about acting on climate change and makes the likelihood of climate change becoming a top 2015 election issue less guaranteed.

This simple framing—useful for political messaging, as we saw in 2008—will carry through to election day. Who stands to profit?

Public opinion tells a less forthright story. New research released by the Environics Institute for Survey Research and the David Suzuki Foundation in November, 2014, shows Canadians believe 63 per cent to 33 per cent that there is scientific evidence that global warming is occurring and is caused by human activity. They are also concerned about the effects of climate change and would like to see Canada take “significant new actions” by almost 90 per cent.

The issue is not as clear-cut in two other areas: perception of Canada's overall climate performance (where 34 per cent of Canadians believe we are doing a better job than other countries, compared to 28 per cent who say the opposite) and overall concern about climate change (with 50 per cent saying they are very or definitely concerned compared to 48 per cent who say they are somewhat or not at all concerned). Taken together, these poll results show Canadians are more ambiguous about acting on climate change and makes

the likelihood of climate change becoming a top 2015 election issue less guaranteed.

The most compelling public opinion results about possible Conservative action on climate change can be found in the party breakdowns. For every question, in every category, self-identified Conservative party supporters are less inclined to believe the science of climate change is real, the issue is of significant concern, or more actions need to be taken. Not surprisingly, Conservative supporters are also more likely to believe Canada's climate performance is better than other countries. (See Figure 4)

Conservatives are plainly more satisfied with the government's climate change approach. The Conservative Party's 'shield' is working—enough for its own supporters.

Elections are unpredictable. There is no guarantee a party's intended campaign strategy will hold as outside events, opponents' stumbles, and media coverage influence voters. What is clear is this:

- Conservatives are vulnerable on the issue of climate change but it has not risen to a salient voting issue for Canadians. The economy continues to trump the environment.
- There is a clear policy distinction between the Liberals and NDP on the one hand and the Conservatives on the other in their climate policy positioning. The other parties will be splitting this vote, which leaves a strong minority pool for the Conservatives.
- Conservatives will campaign against carbon taxes rather than for more climate change action. They will paint the Liberals and NDP as ready to bring one in.
- A core of Conservative support remains in their camp and basically satisfied with the government's actions to date or suspicious of climate change reality.

The road to a global climate deal in Paris in 2015 remains an uncertain

one for the world, let alone Canadian political parties. The initial political skirmish will come in March, when the government must submit publicly its negotiating position on post-2020 emission reductions to the United Nations. The Conservatives will be vulnerable at this point based on their failure to meet their own 2020 target and their likely prevarication on committing to anything substantive beyond. It will be up to the opposition parties to use this to get the attention of voters if they are to have a real chance of making 2015 a climate change election.

If the outcome is a minority government, as polls suggest, then climate politics will become much more relevant to Canadians with a subsequent election looming.

Much of the action will, in political terms, occur after the federal election, in December rather than in October. If the outcome is a minority government, as polls suggest, then climate politics will become much more relevant to Canadians with a subsequent election looming. The year 2015 may then prove quite decisive for climate change politics in Canada, but its real impact could be in an election to come. **P**

David McLaughlin is Strategic Adviser on Sustainability at the Faculty of Environment, University of Waterloo. He was the last president and CEO of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy. dmcl1602@gmail.com