

OPINION

Harper's stumbling attitude towards climate change

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BY MIR F. ALI

VICTORIA, B.C.—To avoid the most catastrophic effects of climate change, world carbon emissions will have to drop to near zero by 2050 and “go negative” after that, the Worldwatch Institute reported. If nothing is done to abate global warming, the experts warned that the 21st Century will experience conditions the planet has not seen in 40 million years. Hurricanes, melting ice caps, widespread species extinction and massive flooding are among some of the impacts caused by a warming climate.

According to former World Bank chief economist Nicholas Stern, while it would cost about one per cent of GDP annually to fight climate change, he warned that the world economy could shrink by up to 20 per cent if nothing is done.

In July 2008 at the close of the 2008 Summit in Toyko, Japan, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said that “There is a new consensus on climate change.” He declared: “The United States and Russia have joined with us this year and now all G8 countries agree on the goal of a 50 per cent reduction in global greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Moreover, G8 leaders have also accepted our longstanding argument that the post-2012 global climate change framework must include all major emitters.”

Since Harper's first minority government was elected in January 2006, there has been continued rapid turnover at the highest levels of management as well as ministers. With reference to the change of environment ministers, David Suzuki in his article, “Has Prime Minister Gone Green?” commented: “That's because whether or not Ms. Ambrose cared a whit

about the environment was irrelevant, as will be the case with Mr. Baird (Who replaced Ms. Ambrose). The reality is that government policy under the Harper administration is dictated by one person—Stephen Harper. John Baird could be a card-carrying member of Greenpeace and he still wouldn't be able to change a thing without Mr. Harper's blessings.” Perhaps this is also applicable to the current Minister of Environment Jim Prentice.

Recall, however, how former environment minister Baird pulled the most important strings in the department even before he became minister. Baird, as Treasury Board chair, directed his predecessor Rona Ambrose to have Canada refuse to pay all the money it owes in support of the Kyoto Protocol, a fact that later caused considerable embarrassment for Ambrose. Under Baird's tenure as president of the Treasury Board, his officials suspended all payments on pledges for United Nations work to protect the environment. This included payments to the United Nations Environment Programme and to international treaties such as the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNCCC). Never before has a new Canadian government refused to honour international commitments made by its predecessors;

At the October 2006 meeting of the Rotterdam Convention, the international agreement that promotes prior informed consent on international trade in hazardous substances, Canada embarrassed itself in the eyes of the world by blocking international agreement to list chrysotile asbestos as a hazardous substance. Although asbestos is effectively banned in Canada, the federal government still supports exports to other nations without providing information on asbestos' health risks.

In Uganda in 2007, alone among the 53 countries at the conclave, Canada and Australia opposed the inclusion of binding greenhouse gas reduction targets in a Commonwealth statement. The problem for Harper was that midway through the meeting, the Australian people elected the Labour Party, which planned to sign on to the Kyoto Accord. This left Harper all by himself in Kampala for the G8 summit. After long negotiations between the Harper contingent and the rest of the Commonwealth, a “compromise” statement on climate



Photograph by Jake Wright, The Hill Times

Just go for it: Canadians are hoping that Prime Minister Stephen Harper's stumbling attitude towards climate change is going to be changed soon enough to find common ground ahead of a crucial UN climate change meeting in Copenhagen in December 2009, argues Mir F. Ali.

change was agreed to, a statement which drops mandatory targets in favour of “aspirational” goals. The so called “aspirational goals” have no meaningful interpretation.

Polls have consistently shown Canadians believe the Conservatives have mishandled the environment file. Harper came to office suggesting the Kyoto Protocol, which limits greenhouse gases that cause global warming, would be essentially ignored. His government hoped that past Liberal governments' repeated failures to meet Kyoto targets would inoculate the Conservatives from any significant voter outrage on the issue. “After years of ignoring the problem Canada has perhaps the worst environmental record of any developed country,” he said in 2006. He was referring to the GHG emissions that rose by about 25 per cent under the previous Liberal government, even though it signed the Kyoto accord and always insisted its gas-reduction targets were achievable.

The reality is that Canada still doesn't have a coherent environment and sustainable development policy. No wonder they say that Harper, is not many people's ideal of an environmental hero. He once famously called the Kyoto accord “job-killing, economy-destroying, and a socialist scheme.” Understandably, many Canadians look disapprovingly on his environmental record.

The OECD in its outlook report for December 2008 reported that Canada's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are currently some 33 per cent above the target. It accounts for two per cent of world's GHG emissions, second only to the United States in per capita terms, and its emissions are growing faster than nearly any other OECD country, mainly on account of

rising oil-sands production. The government now has a plan to rein in such emissions. However, it is based on intensity targets, rather than absolute levels.

It is indeed frustrating for the Canadians. It seems like a life time but only 17 years back Canadians used to be the leaders in the environment field. Under the leadership of the former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, Canada was instrumental in organizing the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development which is also known as the Earth Summit. The conference was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 which was attended by 172 governments with 108 sending their heads of states to represent their governments.

Canada was the first industrialized country to ratify both the biodiversity convention and the climate change convention agreed to at the UN Conference on the Environment. Mulroney's government added significant new national parks (Bruce Peninsula, South Moresby and Grasslands), and passed the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act and Canadian Environmental Protection Act which put Canada on the international map as a leader. Since then so many opportunities were missed during the Liberal government to keep up with the Canadian reputation. Canadians are hoping that Harper's stumbling attitude towards climate change is going to be changed soon enough to find common ground ahead of a crucial UN climate change meeting in Copenhagen in December 2009.

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