



THE HARPER RECORD

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The Harper Government and Climate Change

Lost at sea?

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OF ALL THE issues confronting the Harper government, climate change has caused it the most trouble. In fact, for the communications tsars in the Harper government, the issue of climate change must represent a continuing storm that they are struggling to sail through, with a leaky platform, little public credibility in their direction, and a crew that often loses its footing.

The climate change storm hasn't sunk Harper's ship of state yet, but it may remain one of his greatest impediments to majority rule. At the same time, his reaction to this issue provides a good illustration of Harper's overall approach to the role of the federal government.

The Harper view

Before he was elected prime minister, Stephen Harper's view on climate change and the Kyoto protocol was perhaps best articulated in a fund-raising letter for the Canadian Alliance party in 2002:

We're gearing up for the biggest struggle our party has faced since you entrusted me with the leadership. I'm talking about the "battle of Kyoto" — our campaign to block the job-killing, economy-destroying Kyoto Accord.

It would take more than one letter to explain what's wrong with Kyoto, but here are a few facts about this so-called "Accord":

— It's based on tentative and contradictory scientific evidence about climate trends.

— It focuses on carbon dioxide, which is essential to life, rather than upon pollutants.

— Implementing Kyoto will cripple the oil and gas industry, which is essential to the economies of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia.

— As the effects trickle through other industries, workers and consumers everywhere in Canada will lose. THERE ARE NO CANADIAN WINNERS UNDER THE KYOTO ACCORD.

— The only winners will be countries such as Russia, India, and China, from which Canada will have to buy "emissions credits." Kyoto is essentially a socialist scheme to suck money out of wealth-producing nations.²

Harper's hostile perspective was in quite stark contrast to the approach of former Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. Mulroney emphasized the environment so much that he was proclaimed the "greenest prime minister in Canadian history" by *Corporate Knights* magazine in early 2006 by a group that included the leader of the Green party, Elizabeth May.

Mulroney made the environment a high priority within his cabinet with the appointment of Lucien Bouchard as a high-profile minister. His government developed a first-ever *Green Plan*, and Canada was the first industrialized country to ratify the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)*, under which the Kyoto Protocol was developed. His government also ratified the Montreal protocol on ozone, the *Rio Convention on Biodiversity*, created the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act*, and established a number of new national parks.

In the 2004 election, the Conservative party, newly merged with the former Canadian Alliance party, made a commitment that it would

withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol. Going into the 2006 election, the Conservative party platform had little about climate change, but what was there suggested Harper's views hadn't changed much by that time:

For all the Liberal talk about the environment, they have done nothing to clean up the environment here in Canada. They sign ambitious international treaties and send money to foreign governments for hot air credits, but can't seem to get anything done to help people here at home.

A Conservative government will implement a "made-in-Canada" plan focused on ensuring future generations enjoy clean air, clean water, clean land, and clean energy here in Canada.³

According to the platform, the Conservatives' made-in-Canada plan was to include a *Clean Air Act*, a requirement for 5% ethanol or biodiesel fuel content in gasoline fuels, and addressing greenhouse gas emissions with a plan emphasizing new technologies developed in concert with the provinces and with other major industrial countries.

Then federal Environment Minister Stéphane Dion hosted a United Nations climate change conference in Montreal during the federal election campaign, but none of the political parties focused on it as a major election issue.

When the Harper government came into office in January 2006, they had their own made-in-Canada plan to address climate change, whatever that was going to entail. What they didn't plan on was the forceful rise in the public's concern about climate change and about the future of our environment in global terms.

A gathering storm

Hurricane Katrina, which killed over 1,800, displaced millions, and caused over \$80 billion in damages when it struck New Orleans in August 2005, convinced many that the impacts of climate change were real and could be extremely devastating, especially for the poor. Europe

had already suffered from a record heat wave two years before that caused an estimated 35,000 deaths.⁴

Concerns about climate change continued to rise in early 2006 as Canadians lived through the country's warmest winter on record, followed by a searing heat wave throughout North America and Europe in the summer.

Al Gore's documentary film about global warming, *An Inconvenient Truth*, premiered in May 2006 and quickly became a sensation, breaking box office records and helping to spawn a popular movement to take action on climate change. The following year, the film propelled Gore to win both an Academy Award and the Nobel Peace Prize for his work.

As if this wasn't enough, the UK government published the *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* in October 2006. This comprehensive review by one of the world's top economists concluded that nations should invest 1% of their economic output per year now to prevent an estimated 5–20% loss that would result from climate change if nothing was done.⁵

Stern's Review was followed by the publication of the *Fourth Assessment Report* by the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) throughout 2007.⁶ The IPCC report, prepared in cooperation by thousands of scientists and experts around the world, outlined the consensus scientific view on the physical science evidence of climate change, its likely impacts, and actions that could be taken to mitigate it.

In Canada, it was revealed that the nation's greenhouse gas emissions had increased by 27% from 1990 to 2004. This was one of the largest increases of all the countries bound by the Kyoto Protocol, and far beyond the 6% reduction that Canada had committed itself to for the 2008 to 2012 period.⁷

The *National Roundtable on the Economy and the Environment* and an increasing number of economists began to argue more forcefully that Canada needed to put a price on greenhouse gas pollution to achieve reductions.⁸ This was something that the former Liberal government's climate change plans had all failed to do with their emphasis on subsidies and voluntary actions, resulting in a growing gap between their rhetoric and action.⁹

In September 2006, the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, a position under the Auditor General, issued a damning report on the federal government's progress in reducing Canada's emissions. She outlined a number of the failures and emphasized that a "massive scale-up of efforts is needed."¹⁰

The evidence accumulated among scientists, policy-makers, and the public that climate change was a growing and devastating threat to the planet and that strong action urgently needed to be taken. Polling showed the environment rapidly rising to an almost unprecedented top concern for the public.

Year one: The battle of Kyoto

Most governments would probably have responded by taking positive action to address this concern. Instead, the Harper government stood its ground and tried to fight the growing storm of scientific evidence, public concern, and policy pressure.

In April 2006, newly appointed Minister of the Environment Rona Ambrose stated that it was "impossible, impossible for Canada to reach its Kyoto target."¹¹ Other Conservative government ministers and spokespeople talked about the flaws and problems with the Kyoto protocol. Ambrose said they wouldn't meet their commitments, but wouldn't pull out of the Accord either.

The assault continued in Harper's first budget, even though climate change and the environment were barely mentioned. Despite having just registered an \$8 billion surplus, the federal government slashed funding for its climate change programs by 40%. This funding was "re-allocated" to cover the cost of a new tax credit for public transit passes at a projected cost of \$220 million a year.¹² Environmental groups and others had proposed the idea of making transit passes a non-taxable benefit for employers, not realizing that a redesigned plan would mean the slaughter of many effective federal climate change programs.

A memo prepared by department officials had told the environment minister that the Conservative transit pass tax credit would have little effect and would be a very expensive and inefficient way of reducing emissions, but the Harper government forged ahead with its ideologic-

al belief in tax cuts at any price and a hostile aversion to effective government programs. This pattern of cutting government spending and replacing targeted public programs with expensive and inefficient “boutique” tax measures that complicated the tax system would soon be repeated in many other areas of policy.

This first budget contained virtually nothing else for the environment and climate change. Behind the scenes, almost all the climate change programs from the Liberal government’s *Project Green* plan were eliminated, including the *Large Final Emitter System*, renewable energy programs, a provincial partnership fund, the one-tonne challenge, the *Climate Fund*, the *EnerGuide* program for houses, low-income retrofits, information offices, and scientific and research programs.¹³

By virtue of Canada hosting the latest meeting of the *United Nations Framework on Climate Change*, Ambrose was appointed the titular head of an organization that her government was fundamentally opposed to. Canadian negotiators at a conference in Germany were ordered to delay negotiations, block discussion of tougher targets, and push for an abandonment of Kyoto after 2012.¹⁴ Calls soon came for Ambrose to resign.

The opposition in the minority Parliament united around a Liberal private member’s bill, the *Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act (C-288)*, designed to force the federal government to meet its own emission reduction commitments.

The introduction of the *Clean Air Act* in Bill C-30 in October 2006 was designed as the Harper government’s first positive advance on this issue, but it was met with immediate and near-universal derision. The bill was a botched and confused attempt at appearing to do something — shifting around responsibility for greenhouse gases and pollutants — but was attacked as counterproductive and possibly unconstitutional.¹⁵

In what was one of the most interesting parliamentary manoeuvres in years, instead of killing the bill, the NDP led a cooperative move with the opposition to take control of the bill. Over the next seven months, opposition MPs rewrote the bill into forceful legislation that established reduction targets consistent with Kyoto, deep long-term reductions, a

cap-and-trade system for industry, leading fuel efficiency standards, and funding for building retrofits.

Harper's government continued to flounder further. Ambrose's performance at a UN climate change conference in Nairobi in November was considered to be particularly embarrassing. She made partisan attacks on the former Liberal government and betrayed a repeated lack of knowledge on the file. International environmental groups rated Canada second-last in a comparison of national government policies to reduce greenhouse gas pollution, and yet Canada continued to demand emission reductions from large developing countries.

The environment took centre stage again at the end of the year when the Liberal party cast aside its traditional red colours and selected Stéphane Dion as leader in a surprise election on a green platform.

Year two: A new aggressive approach

In early January 2007, a poll was released showing that three-quarters of Canadians felt that the federal government's effort on the environment was lacking: its worst showing. Later that month, another poll showed the environment had ascended to the top of Canadians' list of priorities.

Over the winter break, the Harper government retreated. Early in the New Year, it attempted to launch a new approach with a new brand and a new face at the helm of the climate change file.

Ambrose was summarily sacked as environment minister in early January 2007 and replaced with the more experienced and aggressive John Baird.

Baird's appointment was followed with a flurry of announcements of new programs, most announced by Harper and Natural Resources Minister Gary Lunn: the *ecoENERGY Technology Initiative*, the *ecoENERGY Renewable Initiative*, the *ecoENERGY Efficiency Initiative*, and the *ecoTrust* program.

Many of these were simply rebranded versions of programs that had been cancelled the previous year and criticized by Lunn as inefficient. In a number of cases (such as for the EcoTrust program that was modelled on the provincial partnership program), the funding was cut

in half. In other cases (such as the EnerGuide program that provided funding for energy retrofits to 130,000 low income households), funding was never restored.

In Ottawa, the climate change file is largely shared between Environment Canada (EC) and Natural Resources Canada (NRCAN). The environment minister almost always takes the higher public profile and their department has primary responsibility for regulating pollutants. Natural Resources is responsible for most of the federal government's energy efficiency and technology programs, but, because it also has close relationships with oil and gas and mining industries, politicians like to keep its profile low on climate change and environmental issues. NRCAN Minister Gary Lunn, while exercising great influence over major polluting industries, energy efficiency and technology programs, has been the master of low profile on the climate change file.

Baird organized meetings with prominent environmentalists and made a point of welcoming, rather than attacking, each new report from the IPCC. The makeover was well under way, but did it really represent a substantial change in direction?

Harper's second budget, tabled in March 2007, also appeared to signal a new-found concern for climate change. Programs that had been eliminated a year before and then revived and rebranded by "Canada's New Government" were highlighted as evidence of the Conservatives' concern for climate change.

This budget also included a number of new announcements responding to pressure from environmental organizations. Hundreds of millions of dollars in federal tax subsidies to new developments in the tar sands would be phased out, but very gradually. A new vehicle efficiency incentive for low-fuel-consumption vehicles was also announced. This proposal came under attack when it was revealed that it would preferentially benefit certain vehicles manufactured close to Finance Minister Flaherty's riding, but exclude other much more efficient vehicles.

The most significant environmental measure in the March 2007 budget was a measure that was met with general support from the public and all political parties at the time, but is likely to be highly damaging for the environment and very costly for the poor: regulations requiring a minimum percentage of ethanol, bio-diesel, or other "renew-

able fuels” content in gasoline, and direct federal subsidies to producers of these fuels.

Regulations and subsidies that promote turning food, and especially corn, into fuel have shown to be especially ineffective in reducing greenhouse gases: both are very costly and potentially more environmentally damaging than the alternatives.¹⁶ Use of food for fuel has also forced up the price of food around the world, hurting the poorest around the world the most. While promoted as an environmental measure, until alternatives to food-based ethanol and bio-diesel are economically feasible, these measures really involve the transfer of billions to the agricultural industry, paid for through taxpayer subsidies and higher prices on food by the public.

What’s more, the 2007 budget included a little-noticed change from an exemption to the fuel excise tax for ethanol to an equivalent producer subsidy. This change could be worth hundreds of millions to Canadian ethanol exporters, and betrayed the increasingly cozy relationship between the Harper government and its most enthusiastic industry supporters: the Renewable Fuels Association.

Despite all these new manoeuvres, the battle of Kyoto continued in Ottawa.

In April 2007, Baird released a report with the crest of the Canadian government on its cover in an unprecedented direct attack on a private members bill. The opposition-supported *Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act* had been approved by the House of Commons and was proceeding through the Senate.¹⁷ Baird’s report, *The Cost of Bill C-288 to Canadian Families and Business*, was a peculiar attempt to highlight the devastating economic consequences that would result from Canada complying with its Kyoto commitments.¹⁸ The study included “validation” from a number of well-known economists, but was widely criticized for its scaremongering and contrived and misleading analysis that was based on faulty assumptions.

Later in April, Baird announced the *Turning the Corner* regulatory framework to reduce greenhouse gases and air pollution.¹⁹ This is by far the most significant climate change measure announced to date by the Harper government. It was notable for a few things.

First of all, the plan connected regulation and reduction of greenhouse gases with the reduction of smog-producing air pollutants, such as nitrogen oxides, sulphur oxides, volatile organic compounds, and particulate matter (or NO_x, SO_x, VOCs and PMs). Others don't often link greenhouse gases, which have impacts over the long-term on a global scale, with these pollutants which have mostly immediate and local impacts, but for Harper, who has asthma, these local air pollutants have always been a policy priority. There may be co-benefits to this form of co-regulation, but it may lead to co-implications as well.

Secondly, the proposed regulations are based on intensity-targets instead of absolute caps on emissions. Kyoto and virtually all other cap and trade systems around the world are based on reductions of actual levels of emissions. Harper, in his often vociferous opposition to Kyoto, has always insisted on intensity targets, which specify greenhouse gas emissions as a share of production. Intensity targets benefit fast-expanding industries, such as the tar sands, but are usually worse for slower growing or shrinking industries.

Even more troubling, intensity targets cannot guarantee actual emission reductions and are not compatible with any other international greenhouse gas regimes. This was a serious problem for international businesses, who prefer greater certainty as well as clear, simple, and internationally compatible regulations.

Thirdly, the plan included a multitude of ways for polluters to avoid actually reducing their emissions or to suffer any penalties for doing so. These include credits for early action, exemptions for small or new facilities, a "flexible approach" for some facilities, leniency for the oil and gas industry, payments to a technology fund, credits for certified investments, credit for emissions trading with non-Kyoto countries, and a domestic offsets system.²⁰ With the intensity targets and complicated array of loopholes, it was impossible to tell, and very hard to believe, that the proposed regulations would actually result in the emission reductions suggested, or perhaps any at all. Independent assessments by four different organizations, including international banks, business groups and environmental groups, reported that this plan wouldn't provide the reductions required.

For all these problems, the framework actually did represent a symbolic advance. After years of emphasis on failed voluntary targets and subsidies for industry, the framework represented the first time that the Harper government actually proposed specific mandatory regulations for industry. The plan very likely wouldn't achieve any reductions and was roundly condemned; Al Gore proclaimed the plan "a fraud," and Baird shot back. Still, the plan represented a tiny step ahead for Ottawa, even if it was out of step with the rest of the world.

Harper made a larger symbolic step when he acknowledged to a business audience in Germany that climate change was "perhaps the biggest threat to confront the future of humanity today."²¹

Following this less than enthusiastic reception to the Harper government's principal piece of climate change legislation, Baird appeared to uncharacteristically lower his profile for some time, reappearing occasionally to make a feel-good announcement or to try and assure the public that his department wouldn't be cut again.

Two months after the *Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act* was passed through Parliament by the opposition, it compelled the federal government to prepare a climate change plan to describe the measures it was taking to meet its obligations under Kyoto. As required by law, the federal government produced a document, but it was filled with all the reasons why it couldn't meet the Kyoto targets.

Instead of facing another embarrassment with the rewritten bill C-30, the *Clean Air and Climate Change Act*, Harper made the decision to prorogue Parliament and start a new session in September. This effectively killed bill C-30 and gave Harper the opportunity to start again with a clean slate and a new Throne speech. The Throne speech, delivered on October 16, stated explicitly that Canada could not meet the reductions required under Kyoto. This was a clear attempt to embarrass the Liberals, who had decided not to vote against it and provoke an election on a matter of confidence.

From now on, Harper proclaimed, he would consider a much wider range of votes matters of confidence, effectively requiring the Liberals to vote with the government if they didn't want to trigger an election. Harper was clearly angry at not being able to get his way and being outmanoeuvred by the opposition, particularly on climate change issues.

This destroyed the opposition unity that had been so effective working together on the *Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act*.

In September, Harper and Baird further tried to undermine the UNFCCC and Kyoto process by desperately trying to establish public credibility with alternative organizations of nations. Harper announced that Canada would formally join the *Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development*, a U.S.-led group with voluntary emissions targets. The organization was also dubbed the “coalition of the emitting” and the “coal pact,” as it was aimed at undermining Kyoto and making it easier to sell coal to China.²² Baird also joined another U.S.-led group in Washington to strategize about post-2012 global agreements.

At a Commonwealth meeting in November, Harper yet again refused to accept binding commitments on emission reductions by developed countries unless developing countries — with a fraction of the per capita emissions of Canada — did the same.

These meetings were all a prelude to the major UN Climate Change conference in Bali, which was designed to start negotiations for the post-2012 global climate agreement or “Kyoto Phase 2.” EU heads of state had already agreed to a binding target of 20% reductions from 1990 levels by 2020, and were considering a green import tax on countries that don’t sign up to emission treaties. Harper often claimed that he was trying to have Canada act as a bridge to bring the United States closer to the EU countries. But a summary of Canada’s actual positions leading into the Bali negotiations shows that Harper’s position was firmly with that of George Bush on most of the key issues.²³

The Bali negotiations almost ended in failure, thanks to Canada working closely with the U.S. to oppose key parts of the “Bali roadmap.”²⁴ Canadian negotiators were under explicit instructions to demand that poorer countries accept the same binding reduction targets as rich countries. Baird excluded environmental groups, but included industry as part of the official Canadian delegation.²⁵ With support from Canada and Japan, the U.S. pushed for post-2012 targets to be voluntary, which would have made them meaningless. The meeting was extended and, under intense pressure, Canada agreed to not oppose a consensus position calling for 25%-to-40% emission reductions below 1990 levels by 2020 for developed countries.

Year three: Harper becoming isolated at home

In 2008, the focus of the climate change debate shifted to another level. The federal advisory *National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy* released a report stating that Canada needed to put a broad-based price on carbon pollution through a carbon tax and/or a cap-and-trade system to meet its targets for emission reductions. The NRTEE stated that Canada could achieve a 65% cut in reductions by 2050 without too much economic damage, but only if a strong carbon price signal was put in place across the entire Canadian economy as soon as possible.²⁶

A number of environmental advocates had been reluctant to explicitly propose carbon taxes before, fearing a negative public reaction, but with this support from an eminent organization, it became a priority.

The climate change debate in Canada shifted to a different level in another way as well. In early February, the British Columbia government presented a budget intensely focused on climate change, including the first carbon tax to be put in place in North America. It also announced that B.C. would put a cap-and-trade system in place by joining the Western Climate Initiative.²⁷ Federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty responded, saying that a national approach was preferable to a patchwork of provincial carbon taxes and greenhouse gas regimes — but then didn't say when the national approach would be revealed.²⁸

Flaherty's federal budget later that month provided virtually no additional support for climate change measures. The only two main measures were funding for a carbon capture demonstration project and for nuclear energy, together with accelerated depreciation tax measures for a wider range of investments. This reflected the Harper view that the emissions problem could be easily solved by technology on its own.

Instead of demonstrating a commitment to seriously deal with the growing problem, Harper's government continued to delay and obstruct. Conservative MPs filibustered environment committee hearings to delay any progress on Bill C-377, the *Climate Change Accountability Act* tabled by NDP leader Jack Layton. This first-ever filibuster by a governing party at the committee level continued for over a month.

New measures announced for the government's *Turning the Corner* climate change plan provided new operations in the tar sands with minimal obligations for another decade and a number of other loopholes.²⁹

Other provinces also showed leadership on climate change in the New Year. Manitoba turned its back on the federal government's *Turning the Corner* plan when it passed legislation to commit to Kyoto targets and achieve longer-term reduction goals for 2025. Its climate plan included a focus on public investments and energy efficiency regulations and joining the *Western Climate Initiative* cap-and-trade system. Québec and Ontario also signalled rejection of the federal government's intensity approach when they announced that they would also join the *Western Climate Initiative*.

Harper's government continued to announce new *ecoACTION* initiatives: funding for the freight industry, amendments to the *Energy Efficiency Act*, more funding for ethanol producers, and numerous other announcements to provide positive grist for the news services.

But on the main bill — requiring broad-based emission reductions — they were becoming increasingly isolated at home and abroad.

Harper lost a key ally when his mentor, Australian Prime Minister John Howard, lost an election to Labour with climate change as a prominent issue. With George W. Bush set to leave the White House by the end of the year, Harper would soon be almost completely isolated on the world stage. Both contenders for the U.S. presidency, Barack Obama and John McCain, have said they would implement a cap-and-trade program to enforce absolute emission reductions on industry.

Harper's government did maintain some close friends at home, especially among members of the Renewable Fuels Association, the ethanol industry's lobby group. There has been a revolving door of staff between this organization and Conservative politicians' offices.³⁰ The most notable recent appointment is of its former executive director, Kory Teneycke, as chief spokesman for the Prime Minister.

The Canadian government under Harper continued to obstruct and delay progress on climate change negotiations in Bonn in June. Harper then pushed G-8 leaders to adopt weakened commitments at their July meeting in Japan.

In-depth polling showed that Canadians continued to express a strong concern for environmental issues, with almost 90% agreeing that Canada should do what it can to reduce emissions, even if countries such as China and India do not take similar action.³¹

When Liberal leader Stéphane Dion released his “Green Shift” carbon tax proposals, the reaction of the Harper government was so over the top, it seemed to hit a raw nerve. Baird’s initial reaction was so incoherent that he was replaced on the top of their reaction roster by Jason Kenney, Harper’s parliamentary secretary.³² Harper attacked the carbon tax proposal by saying, “This is crazy economics. It’s crazy environmental policy” that will “screw everybody.”³³ The attack ads they prepared were even rejected as inappropriate by the advertising company.

Harper’s next act on climate change

It is difficult to predict what the Harper government’s next act on climate change will be. Despite Harper’s apparent conversion from a full-force sceptic to acknowledging the severity of the threat, his government’s actions have not made a similar progression. All the Harper government’s major policies on climate change remain entirely consistent with their election platform. It is hard to imagine any 11th hour conversion.

Harper’s government is likely to continue to obstruct and delay progress at the international level, even though Canada may be increasingly isolated in doing so. We can also expect very significant promotion of their made-in-Canada *Turning the Corner* emission reduction plan — even though provinces with a majority of the Canadian population have abandoned this proposal for something more forceful.

The Harper government might be tempted to see the price of fuels and a declining economy as its No. 1 ally in an election focused on climate change. Unfortunately, Canada’s lack of progress in reducing our fuel dependency has made us more vulnerable to rising prices for oil and other fuels. Higher fuel prices are now leading to lower fuel use and emissions through the market system, but instead of this resulting in more revenues for governments through carbon taxes, it has meant more profits for oil and gas companies. Polling has shown that a two-to-one majority of Canadians feel that the rising price of fuels is a rea-

son to move more aggressively, rather than more slowly, on climate change issues.³⁴

The Harper record on climate change is interesting for what it reveals about Harper as a person. It appears to show a person utterly convinced about the superiority of his own positions and unwilling to compromise or reach consensus, even when virtually everyone in the rest of the world agrees with a different approach. This steadfastness could be a positive quality if the positions were based on solid principles, as they often were for Harper's mentor, Preston Manning, no matter how much one may have disagreed with his principles.

Unfortunately, Harper's positions do not appear to be based on any broad or solid principles. While Harper is sometimes described as an economist, many of his climate change policies are actually damaging to the economy. Virtually all economists support carbon pricing — an effective cap-and-trade system, and/or carbon taxes — as a means to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Industry wants certainty and straightforward national level regulations that are internationally comparable, but, under Harper, Canada's approach has degenerated into a complicated and byzantine array of regulations at many different levels. Tax credits and loopholes are expensive and inefficient and complicate the tax system, yet these have proliferated under Harper.

Canada's economy will suffer tremendously by being a laggard on climate change, with uncertainty preventing greater investment in the economy, and no national leadership. Large industrializing countries will need to be brought into an international climate change regime, but this is already happening in different mechanisms under the UNFCCC. Insisting on immediate hard targets from them becomes just a stalling tactic.

Ultimately, Harper's fundamental climate change policies haven't shifted much at all during his time in office, even though the script and actors may change. In many ways, they appear to be based more on parochial interests: defence of the interests of the domestic oil industry, Western agricultural producers, and concern for ground-level air pollutants.

These climate change policies also provide a good reflection of the Harper government's approach to the role of the federal government for

many social and environmental issues. They illustrate an overwhelming preference for tax cuts and tax incentives over public programs, even where tax cuts are shown to be highly inefficient. Climate change policies have generally been developed without much consultation, except with industry, and also include considerable opportunities for privatization and steering benefits to corporations. Communications have been aggressive both in promoting their policies and in containing other information and reports from the public.

At a more fundamental level, they also represent a lack of interest in using the potential of the federal government to achieve positive progress on most social and environmental issues, leaving these largely to the provinces. Harper's government hasn't actually said that the provinces should have primary responsibility for the climate change issue, but this is effectively what has happened.

Provinces have moved far into the lead on climate change policies in Canada. A number have adopted significant emission reduction targets, have developed provincial climate change plans, and have implemented or are considering carbon taxes. Perhaps most significantly, by the summer of 2008, provinces representing over three-quarters of Canada's population had joined the Western Climate Initiative (wci). The wci's cap-and-trade program, with its absolute limits for emissions, would effectively make the Harper government's weaker proposals for intensity-based emission regulations irrelevant.

The wci is likely itself to become subsumed by the introduction of a federal cap-and-trade program in the United States, which both presidential candidates have explicitly supported. At that time, the Harper government's current set of climate change policies could become truly lost at sea.