



FASTFACTS



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“Clean Air Act”, “Dirty Air Act”, or “Just-a-lot-of- Hot Air Act”?

Observers have almost universally condemned the federal government’s long-awaited “Clean Air Act” as being entirely inadequate to meet Canada’s grave global warming challenges. Predictably perhaps, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce stood out from the crowd with its thumbs-up analysis of the planned new round of industry consultations on greenhouse gas emissions.

But, there is an overwhelming agreement in the country (with the possible exception of industry) that the time for talk is long over. What’s needed now is definite and swift action to get Canada’s emissions down and back on-track with our Kyoto commitment.

Is the Harper government even serious about Kyoto? It would appear not. The fact that Kyoto targets appear nowhere in the new legislation doesn’t really surprise anyone. Mr. Harper was ever reluctant to endorse this legally-binding agreement while in opposition, or during the election campaign. Conservative politicians like Environment Minister Rona Ambrose, keep reminding us of their view that we cannot meet our obligations under the Protocol, and in fact, have even acted on the global stage to undermine it. The “Clean Air Act” only serves to reinforce their assertions.

Why a “Clean Air Act”?

Any new government wants to distinguish itself from its predecessor. It’s unfortunate that Mr. Harper’s minority Conservatives have chosen this crucial issue as a hallmark of their dissimilarity to the Liberals. They recognize that taking strong action to address climate change would not only reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it would also reduce smog in Canada’s urban centres.

Smog days have critical implications for the health of Canadians including respiratory illnesses, asthma, and death. The Harper government chose to meld these two issues, but unfortunately, their plan has backfired.

The clean air aspects are a confusing mixture of measures requiring amendments to no less than 5 pieces of existing federal legislation. And the climate change aspects will actually permit increases in Canada’s emissions in the foreseeable future. The vehicle emissions regulations are still voluntary until 2010, and fall far behind the examples set by leading jurisdictions, such as the State of California. New restrictions on emissions from numerous consumer products, outboard engines, off-road vehicles, motorcycles and other items will be welcome, but pale in comparison to the massive increases that will now be permitted from the oil and gas sector. Bea Olivastris of Friends of the Earth Canada called the Conservative plan a “Dirty Air Act”, and sadly, she is right.

How does this Act compare with Kyoto?

The Kyoto Protocol, ratified by Canada in 2002, requires signatories to reduce GHG emissions by a modest 6% below 1990 levels, sometime between 2008 and 2012. (By way of a reality check, Canada’s actually increased by 24% between 1990 and 2003 (mostly under a Liberal government watch), meaning that our necessary reduction to meet the first Kyoto period obligation is now at least 30%. (And remember this needs to happen between 2008 and 2012). However, the first Kyoto period is considered to be only the first step in what is required of the international community to avoid global average temperature increases above 2 degrees Celsius. This is widely agreed to be the point beyond which irreversible damage



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to ecosystems will occur. The required next step will be for industrialized countries such as Canada to reduce emissions by at least 80% below 1990 levels, by the year 2050.

Clearly, any hope of reaching these goals rests on the ability of nations to make steady progress in improving technologies, increasing energy efficiency and changing (read “regulating”) consumer and industry practices. In Canada’s case, it means mandatory measures to begin serious reductions, starting immediately. Instead, the new Act demands *no* short-term actions to reduce emissions. It calls instead for an absolute reduction between 45 and 65% from 2003 levels by 2050, a woefully insufficient objective. In the meantime, industry will need to adhere to “intensity” based targets. This means that overall emissions can increase as long as the emissions *per unit* of energy produced go down. As David Suzuki has pointed out – intensity reductions may be achieved by standard efficiency upgrades, something that industry would probably be doing anyway, in order to save money.

Taking a risk

Why is this government so determined to avoid its responsibilities, and so evidently prepared to let global warming get even worse? There are probably several answers. One must be that the Conservatives remain unconvinced, even in the face of irrefutable evidence, that global warming-induced climate change is actually occurring. That, or they choose to believe the consequences will not be serious. Either of these positions leads them to be willing to take a risk on the tar sands of northern Alberta. With its projected 5-fold increases in GHG emissions by 2020, the tar sands will become the largest contributor to the growth of Canada’s emissions, according to the Pembina Institute. Any immediate action to reduce Canada’s greenhouse gases could put a quick halt to this cash cow situated right in the Tory heartland.

Can Canada make a difference?

Some may ask why Canada’s actions are so important to this issue. After all, Canada produces only about 2% of the world’s GHG emissions and even with the tar sands in full swing, our overall contribution will remain far lower than that of many other countries. Can Canada really make a difference in the global scheme of things?

The answer takes us back to the Kyoto Protocol. As former World Bank economist, Sir Nicholas Stern states: “Because climate change is a global problem, the response to it must be international. It must be based on a shared vision of long-term goals and agreement on frameworks that will accelerate action over the next decade, and it must build on mutually reinforcing approaches at national, regional and international level”.

International agreements are not easy to get. Kyoto is the first, and only, binding international agreement that sets targets to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change. It’s far from perfect, but it’s the only game in town. Without Kyoto, which took years to develop, as a point of reference, the world will be back at the starting gate – and we just don’t have the luxury of time to start negotiations all over again.

Canada, as one of the original signatories and with per capita emissions amongst the highest in the industrialized world, must play a leadership role on this issue. We have much to lose if global warming continues: As the Rocky Mountain glaciers recede and the Prairies face drought levels never seen in recorded history, as the northern permafrost melts, as the mountain pine beetle takes its toll on the forests of BC, and the people of northern Manitoba see the disappearance of the ice roads that sustain their communities, poll after poll shows that the population of Canada wants action on climate change.

If the government really is “listening to the people of Canada” as Minister Ambrose asserts, they will immediately withdraw the Clean Air Act and replace it with legislation that will place Canada amongst the climate leaders in the world (on November 13, Canada earned the dubious distinction of placing 51st out of 56 countries based on our performance and policies on climate change, in a rating by a German NGO at the Kyoto talks in Nairobi). Only in this way, can we regain the credibility and leverage that we so desperately need to ensure that the global community acts swiftly to cool the planet.

- Anne Lindsey

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