

Change is in the wind

If elected, Stephen Harper's Conservatives would replace Kyoto climate targets with voluntary plan

Despite sharp differences, green policies haven't had much airing in the campaign

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A Conservative election victory would have a major impact on the battle to control climate change.

Stephen Harper said this week his government would abandon the mandatory targets and timetables set out in the Kyoto Protocol and instead adopt a less stringent, voluntary "made in Canada" plan.

"What we're going to do is obviously proceed with what we can do in developing a real plan in collaboration with our provinces," Harper said. "That's the only realistic way of proceeding."

Liberal Environment Minister Stéphane Dion was quick to call that approach "a tragedy" for Canada and the world. Instead of continuing as a "champion of climate change," this country would join the "resisters," led by the United States, he said.

Climate change and other environment issues have, so far, played an insignificant role in the campaign for the Jan. 23 vote. Beyond the rhetoric, on Kyoto in particular — and despite gaping loopholes and contradictions in the current climate-change policy — there are big differences between the two main parties.

The Conservatives now agree climate change is a real problem — not a radical move, since even the George W. Bush administration has come around to that view.

And Harper has had to amend his view from the 2004 campaign, that the protocol would never become part of international law.

It came into force at the recent United Nations conference in Montreal. Rejecting it now would mean backing out of a global agreement that polls suggest has strong and steady support among Canadians. Consistently, more than 80 per cent say we should stay committed to the protocol, says Andrew Sullivan, vice-president of EKOS Research Associates.

So the Conservatives no longer say they would scrap the treaty. But they would dump the target it imposes on Canada — cutting greenhouse gas emissions to 6 per cent below 1990 levels by 2012.

Environmentalists argue that firm, mandatory targets are essential to produce action.

Along with any domestic effects, a Conservative win would cast doubts on the international

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negotiations, approved in Montreal, on deeper cuts beyond 2012. Dion chaired the conference and is supposed to head the negotiations on future targets until the next meeting, in November.

A Conservative government would be at the Kyoto bargaining table, says Bob Mills, the party's environment critic. However, it would treat the protocol as just one of several "parallel" tracks.

Under UN rules, Harper could appoint Dion to carry on as lead negotiator, but he says he would decline: "If the leader of the country said: 'You may continue, but I'm in the other camp,' it would be completely foolish."

It would be difficult for anyone to replace him in that role, even if they cared deeply about the protocol. For a representative of a government that's not committed to the treaty, it would be virtually impossible.

As for specific measures to reduce emissions, the Conservatives would require car fuel to contain 5 per cent ethanol by 2010; the same figure as the Liberals. However, they would drop \$200 million worth of annual tax incentives. The NDP wants 10 per cent ethanol content.

The Conservatives would also shift \$2 billion from the Liberals' five-year, \$10 billion climate-change plan to a 16 per cent tax break on bus and subway passes.

Dion estimates that would save, at most, 800,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions each year by getting commuters out of cars and onto public transit. That's a tiny fraction of the 270 million tonnes Canada must cut each year to meet its Kyoto target.

While the Conservatives would scrap targets, the NDP promises a 25 per cent cut in emissions by 2020, and the Green party calls for a 50 per cent cut by 2030. The Liberals won't commit to anything beyond 2012, subject to the international negotiations.

Given those apparently stark differences, and Canadians' support for the protocol, some observers wonder why the Liberals haven't pushed harder on climate change during the campaign.

Martin raised it several times in the '04 campaign, says John Bennett of the Sierra Club of Canada. "Not this election. We've been urging him to ... we feel they could make a lot of hay if they could force the Conservatives to say what they'd do."

Some suggest the issue might still sway voters. "I think (Harper's comment) will have some impact," says Andrew Van Iterson, of the Green Budget Coalition, made up of 21 major environment and conservation groups. "It's a pretty strong statement."

Environment issues are always a hard sell — too complicated for snappy sound bites; too abstract and long-term to grab voters' attention. As well: "People expect (politicians) will just take care of the environment, so they don't pay a lot of attention to their positions," says Bennett.

Still, conditions seemed ripe for environment issues to be prominent.

The Green party, backed by more than \$1 million in federal funding — \$1.75 for each vote it received in the 2004 election — is making its biggest campaign effort yet. Hurricanes, other storms, and the record-hot summer are fresh memories. And evidence suggests when it comes to climate change, toxic pollution, deaths from bad air, and many other concerns, things are getting worse.

Even so, the environment got only fleeting mention in the leaders' debates and has so far received scant media attention and inspired less than a handful of policy announcements. Environment groups — hamstrung by what they say is a crackdown by the tax department on charitable organizations that express opinions — have remained largely on the sidelines.

Climate change did take centre stage during the early days of the campaign. In a speech to the Montreal conference, Martin attacked the United States for ignoring the "global conscience" and rejecting the protocol.

But the media defined the issue as how the Liberals were wrapping themselves in the Maple Leaf flag to win votes. Any environmental content immediately disappeared.

Many observers, and officials with the NDP and Green party, contend the big problem is that the Liberals are vulnerable if they push too hard on the environment: While they talk a good game, their record is spotty.

Canada's greenhouse gas emissions are up 24 per cent since 1990. While the Liberals say tough emissions targets are essential, their climate change plan, unveiled last April, is riddled with compromises to appease the oil industry and other large polluters.

Martin's government continues to subsidize the highly profitable oil industry to the tune of about \$1 billion a year. It also backs development of Alberta's tar sands — even though extracting oil from the earth emits far more greenhouse gases than any other form of production.

And last year, the Liberals joined the Conservatives in the House of Commons to defeat an NDP plan for much more stringent fuel efficiency standards for cars — among the biggest contributors to climate change.

Despite its flaws, environmentalists say there's a slim chance the Liberal plan will succeed. The Conservative approach, they say, offers virtually no hope.

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