

## OPINION: CLIMATE CHANGE

# Canada's lost decade on climate change

Three consecutive environment ministers under Prime Minister Stephen Harper have failed to implement a single major policy to cut our growing emissions.

By **MARLO RAYNOLDS  
AND RICK SMITH**

When George W. Bush left the White House a year ago, many people in America and around the world collectively breathed a sigh of relief. His eight years in office made up what many call “the lost decade” for American leadership, particularly in the race against time to transition to a clean energy economy before our atmosphere turns toxic because of greenhouse gas pollution.

Likewise, will Canada's embarrassment at the recent climate summit in Copenhagen be considered the low point in Canada's “lost decade”? Only time will tell. But without a significant course correction, Canada's losing streak could drag on into the G8 and G20 meetings in Ontario this June.

Before then, on Feb. 6, Stephen Harper will celebrate his four-year anniversary as Prime Minister. He rightly critiqued the Liberal government before him for its four years of inaction after ratifying the Kyoto Protocol, but with nothing to show from his own government,

this refrain has lost its punch.

Three consecutive environment ministers under Harper have failed to implement a single major policy to cut our growing emissions. The government's most recent attempt to cut industrial emissions, called “Turning the Corner,” skidded off the road at the first bend. The only major federal incentive program for renewable energy has run out of funding, and Canada's government won the “Fossil of the Year” award in Copenhagen as the country doing the most to stand in the way of meaningful international action on global warming.

Luckily, some provinces have tried to fill the leadership vacuum left behind by Ottawa. British Columbia has put in place an economy-wide carbon price. Ontario is implementing its Green Energy Act that is igniting a massive scale up of technologies like wind and solar. Quebec is committed to reducing its emissions by 20 per cent below the 1990 level by 2020, the strongest target in North America.

But action from provinces alone is not enough. The lack of

federal leadership on climate change creates a patchwork of policy across the country that is inefficient for business, and lets the fastest growing polluters in Alberta and Saskatchewan off the hook—feeding a growing sense of inequality as some Canadians do more than others to reduce emissions. We are losing time to build a national consensus on a pathway to address climate change because Ottawa is failing to do its job to unite the country in all of our common interest.

Where do the G8 and G20 come in? With countries now coming to terms with what is—and isn't—in the Copenhagen Accord, there are critical questions still to be resolved internationally. The G8/G20 meetings can't solve everything, but they can contribute momentum towards the fair, ambitious and binding agreement we need, particularly by agreeing on financial support for poorer countries as they take action on climate change.

Unfortunately, as summit host, the federal government has not yet stepped up with any bold ideas for climate leadership. Instead, it seems to want to change the channel away from climate to the economy, but this is ultimately futile, since the two issues are integrated, a fact recognized by many of Canada's competitors. The next job creating



Photograph by Jake Wright, *The Hill Times*

**Environment files:** Jim Prentice.

industrial revolution will centre on de-carbonizing the world economy, a revolution that other countries are leading instead of us.

We can still find our way. Done properly, putting a meaningful price on greenhouse gas pollution right across the Canadian economy could help reduce the deficit. For instance, Ireland just introduced a carbon tax to generate much-needed funds during the downturn; a tax on gasoline and diesel of \$22.40/tonne is expected to raise more than

\$520-million annually, with an overall direct impact on households of less than \$5 per week.

Along with putting a price on carbon, we need strong federal leadership to ensure our clean energy companies can compete in the global market of low-impact renewable energy and energy efficiency engineering and manufacturing. Canada needs to be part of this emerging market—currently worth \$250-billion, and growing rapidly. Our economic future depends on it.

With a stony silence emanating from a prorogued Ottawa, people can be forgiven for thinking we're not coming out of our lost decade anytime soon. But polls show that Canadians are tired of watching other countries lead the clean energy economy, and want those clean energy jobs to be created right here. Sooner or later, one of our federal politicians will tap into this mood, and propose policies to pull Canada out of its funk and throw ourselves into leading the next industrial revolution.

Whoever does that well could ride the sense of relief right into a majority government.

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