

## ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS LOSING INTEREST IN LOBBYING PRENTICE

Frustration is mounting that the government has locked itself into an environmental policy bunker on climate change.

By Jeff Davis and Cynthia Münster

Canada's leading environmentalists say they're losing interest in lobbying federal Environment Minister Jim Prentice because the government has locked itself into an environmental policy "bunker" and is not giving their ideas serious consideration.

Meanwhile, according to the Registry of Lobbyists, representatives for big oil companies frequently lobby the minister, and appear to be a major source of policy advice on energy and climate issues.

Following a decade of consultations that have resulted in virtually no action on climate change, environmentalists are now questioning whether it is even worth their time to lobby the minister.

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"As an environmental movement, we have resources and people and time and we have to prioritize," said Marlo Reynolds, the executive director at the Pembina Institute. "It is questionable how valuable those meetings are when you have no tangible action."

"If they were interested, they would actually listen sometimes," said John Bennett, executive director of the Sierra Club. "They've basically put themselves in their own bunker and are telling us what the solutions are."

Mr. Reynolds said he and fellow environmentalists think the endless consultations are simply pro forma meetings, and do not indicate the government is actually interested in crafting a climate change policy.

"This really is a case where we've had four years, three ministers, and literally absolutely nothing on climate policy," he said. "It just seems more like ragging the puck instead of deciding to go for a goal of any kind at all."

Mr. Reynolds said the government's inaction could be driven by effective lobbying by an energy sector that wishes to operate in a regulation-free environment.

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“No action is taken, so if industry’s message is do nothing, then maybe they’ve been effective,” Mr. Raynolds said.

These environmentalists pointed out that the government’s message track has shifted a few times. For years the government said a ‘Made in Canada’ climate change action plan was needed, but now Mr. Prentice (Calgary Centre- North, Alta) says any Canadian action must be “harmonized” with American plans.

“This is misinformation to cover the real truth: that they don’t want to do anything and they just want to be able to have something to say that sounds like they’re working on something for the future,” said Mr. Bennett.

A search of Canada’s Lobbyists Registry revealed that Environment Minister Jim Prentice met with some nine times as often with lobbyists from the oil, energy and other industry sectors than with environmental interest groups.

According to the communications log in the Registry of Lobbyists, since Mr. Prentice was appointed to the ministry on Oct. 30, 2008, environmental NGOs have met 10 times with him and industry has had 90 meetings with Mr. Prentice. The purpose for six of the industry meetings was stated to be for either the Alaska or the MacKenzie Valley gas pipelines.

Bill Rodgers, Mr. Prentice’s director of communications, said the minister has been diligent in meeting with both environmentalists and the energy industry. He said the minister is meeting with so many energy sector lobbyists in part because he is the minister responsible for the MacKenzie Valley gas pipeline project, requiring many meetings on the issue. He added that communications logs with different industry officials are filed separately even if the minister met with a number of stakeholders in one meeting, which can sometimes inflate the numbers.

Mr. Rodgers insisted the government has done its due diligence in meeting with all stakeholders, including environmentalists and climate activists.

“There are a lot of stakeholders in this and so the minister met with them all,” he said. “We requested to meet with them.”

Mr. Rodgers said the minister discussed climate issues last year with environmental groups, industry, the electrical sector, and “all of the groups that would be affected by whatever our domestic policies would be on climate change.”

Mr. Raynolds said that the relatively small number of meetings between environmentalists and the minister is not due primarily to a lack of access, but rather a lack of time and optimism. Both the Sierra Club and the Suzuki have met with Mr. Prentice twice since he was appointed to the environment file, at the minister’s request.

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“I don’t feel we are constrained in any shape or form, or that we don’t have the opportunity” to meet the minister, Mr. Reynolds said. “To be quite honest, the environmental movement doesn’t request those meetings often enough.”

While environmentalists’ ideas were entertained, Mr. Bennett said, he knows the oil executives truly have the ear of the minister.

“We would meet the PR guys in the consultations,” he said. “But the big guys in the corporations would be able to pick up the phone and talk to the minister.”

One longtime Ottawa insider said it is quite clear that the government, with its Western political base, is motivated to listen to the oil industry, which is located largely in its backyard.

“As a general proposition, this government knows more about and cares more about the oil and gas sectors than it does about most, and that has to do with its roots,” he said.

More importantly, he said, the government is not receptive to the policy options provided by the bureaucracy, and ends up going instead to industry for advice.

“The dirty little secret about this government is that its relations with the bureaucracy are very, very poor, and particularly with the policy side of the bureaucracy. It doesn’t trust it, and it doesn’t trust the options and the policy prescriptions its being given,” he said. “There really is an imperative for them to reach out to players in the private sector for expertise, for policy help, for analysis because of the fundamental distrust it has with the bureaucracy.”

He said the government feels an obligation to hear our environmentalists’ points of view, it knows these groups will likely not provide policy prescriptions they are likely to implement.

“[Environmentalists’] proposals are probably more draconian and dramatic than the government is willing to entertain, so it looks for expertise it has more comfort with and will provide it with options that are in its sweet spot,” he said.

Some say energy interests have an inordinate influence on Canada’s national policy, something which is symptomatic of a deeper “corruption” in Canada. Among them is Thomas Homer-Dixon, who holds the Centre for International Governance Innovation Chair of Global Systems at the Balsillie School of International Affairs in Waterloo, Ontario.

In a December interview, Mr. Dixon asserted that “our political processes in Canada are being corrupted by narrow energy interests.”

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He said some policy options— such as major constraints on tar sands development— have become third-rail issues for politicians, and are virtually beyond discussion within elite political circles in Canada.

“It’s not overt corruption in a money-passing-under-the-table kind of way, it’s subtle, in that democratic conversation becomes radically constrained,” he said. “That’s the role of power and money speaking in political system.”

Politicians who raise such options, he said, can be seen as “almost treasonous ... and are declared to be almost persona non grata.”

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