

Candidates can't hide from climate change

By SIMON DONNER
Wednesday, June 2, 2004
Globe and Mail Update

The real issues at election time are often the ones our political leaders work hardest to hide. There is no greater skeleton in the electoral closet than climate change and the Kyoto Protocol.

In the Speech from the Throne back in early February, Paul Martin strongly reaffirmed Canada's commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions under the Kyoto Protocol and pledged to help lead the global fight against climate change.

The solemn pledge to reduce emissions and address climate change has received scant mention from the Liberals since that day. There has been virtually no promotion of the government's one-tonne challenge, which presents methods for every Canadian to reduce emissions, and no discussion of long-term climate policy.

The Martin government seems to wish climate change would just go away. Facing a disgruntled electorate, the government fears even mentioning climate change could turn some voters toward the anti-Kyoto Conservatives. At the same time, the Conservatives also wish to avoid the issue for fear of alienating any pro-environment Liberals angry with the Martin government. As a result, only the NDP and the Green Party have dared utter the word "Kyoto."

The disappearance of prominent environmental issues at election time is hardly a new phenomenon. In the battle for votes, everyone longs to appear green, but will not advocate any policy that might be perceived, correctly or not, as damaging to the voter's wallet.

This election in particular has fallen prey to the opportunistic notion that scoring a favourable headline in the morning paper on the issue of the day is more important than presenting an integrated vision for the country. The result is fragmented political platforms in which environmental issues are the big losers.

The high price of gasoline provides a perfect opportunity to promote the need for higher automotive fuel efficiency, more funding for public transit, and reduced smog in our cities. These are issues of interest to all Canadians; dealing with them would help reduce Canada's greenhouse gas emissions. Instead, the debate focuses entirely on which party can deliver lower gas prices.

The problem for the Liberals and the Conservatives is that climate change is one environmental issue that will not go away.

Canada is already experiencing the effects of climate change. The list of extreme climate events in Canada since the last federal election - severe drought in the Prairies, forest fires and insect infestations in B.C., tropical storms in the Maritimes, changes in Great Lakes water levels, frequent smog alerts in Ontario - mirrors the predictions of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The aggregate cost to Canada's economy of these events dwarfed both the federal government's and the Alberta government's maximum estimated cost of meeting the Kyoto commitments.

The cost of inaction on climate change looms even larger in developing nations with less capacity to adapt to climatic and environmental shocks. Recent droughts in countries such as Ethiopia and Afghanistan (similar in scale to the Prairie droughts) contributed to widespread famine, starvation and political unrest.

In the age of globalization, with threats such as terrorism, poor food distribution and spread of infectious disease, the effects of local climate disasters in vulnerable nations are felt around the world. Expanding international development and improving global governance - both central tenets of the Martin government - will require action on climate change.

The government that is elected on June 28 will have no choice but to deal with the issue. It will be responsible for achieving emissions reductions under the Kyoto Protocol and participating in international negotiations on longer-term climate protection policy, set to begin in 2005.

Voters need to know what to expect from another Liberal government or even Conservative minority. The progress on emissions reductions and climate policy during the next federal mandate will have lasting effects on the climate.

Scientists predict that, due to the long residence time of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, continued inaction on global emissions for only five or 10 years would make it impossible to avoid some of the worst impacts of climate change.

Canada is responsible for a small fraction of the world's greenhouse gas emissions and cannot stop climate change alone. But a serious Canadian effort to meet the Kyoto commitment and promote future climate policy could provide much-needed international leadership and restore this country's green reputation - which has been sullied by the passivity of the previous decade.

Will Canada become a leader in preventing dangerous climate change, in promoting new energy technologies, higher fuel efficiency, improved urban infrastructure and sustainable international development?

Those are the issues that should inspire an election.

Canadian scientist Simon Donner is a research associate at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University.