

Global Justice and Canada's Climate Crossroad

By Graham Saul



Deep and Drastic Cuts Parade organized by The People's Action on Climate Change highlighting the extreme vulnerability of the most marginalized sectors to climate change. ©Asia Pacific Research Network

Canada is at the crossroads when it comes to climate change. The United States Congress is poised to pass climate legislation and the most important United Nations climate summit in history will begin in Copenhagen in just a few weeks. Our country will also play host to world leaders from G8 and G20 countries in 2010, and climate change is going to be on the agenda.

In all of the doom and gloom associated with the climate crisis, it's easy to overlook the fact that we have come a long way in the struggle against climate change.

On the whole, Canadians are now convinced that climate change is real and that people are causing it. Canadians are also beginning to understand that taking action is in our own self-interest. Climate chaos will be bad business for everybody and the rest of the world isn't going to sit back and give Canada a free ride. It will cost less to invest in solutions today than to be forced to clean-up the mess and take even more radical action in a decade or two.



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More immediately, the clean energy revolution is the biggest economic opportunity of the twenty-first century and the federal government is sitting on the sidelines while Canada's most important trading partners pass us by.

But will these perfectly rational arguments, based as they are on self-interest, be enough to convince Canada to do its fair share? Although these arguments have a central role to play in stimulating climate action, an ethical and moral understanding of the problem needs to be embraced if Canada is to rise to the challenge.

First, Canada is probably the worst country in the industrialized world when it comes to taking action on climate change. Canada has a long way to go just to achieve mediocrity.

One of the top ten polluters on Earth, Canada fell to last place in the latest [G8 Climate Scorecard](#) issued by the conservation organization World Wildlife Fund and the global insurance firm Allianz SE. The report notes that Canada is one of the few G8 nations whose emissions are still increasing.

Similarly, Canada ranked 56 out of 57 countries assessed in the 2008 [Climate Change Performance Index](#), published annually by Germanwatch and Climate Action Network Europe. The report, which compares the climate protection performance of 57 industrialized countries and emerging economies, found that only Saudi Arabia was doing a worse job.

The second thing to keep in mind about what it's going to take to get Canada to do its fair share is that the scale of the challenge is much greater than most people realize.

The European Union and, more recently, G8 leaders (including Canada), set a goal of limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The argument is that if global warming exceeds 2 degrees it would be dangerous for life on Earth and risk triggering tipping-points that would set off run-away climate change.

The best science indicates that in order to stand a reasonable chance of keeping global warming below 2 degrees, industrialized countries need to reduce their greenhouse gas pollution to roughly 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2020 and come up with over US \$150 billion per year to help developing countries adopt clean energy technology and adapt to the impacts of climate change. This US \$150 billion includes not only adaptation funding, but also forest protection, energy-related mitigation, support for agriculture and technology research and development.

What does all this mean for Canada? The more than 100 Canadian organizations that make up the [KyotoPlus](#) coalition argue that if Canada wants to do its fair share, it will have to cut its emissions in half in the next 10 to 15 years.

In other words, an industrial revolution needs to be triggered the likes of which has not been seen since World War Two.

The third thing to remember is that the vast majority of Canadians still don't understand the implications of what the science is telling us will happen if we fail to take action.

The world is already about 0.7 degrees Celsius warmer than the pre-industrial era and the impacts are already being felt. Oxfam International's recent report, [The Right to Survive](#), estimates that about 240 million people each year are affected by climate related disasters such as droughts and floods, and this figure could grow by up to 50 percent by 2015 due to climate change. These numbers do not include many of the impacts that are already being felt from accelerating desertification, the expansion of diseases such as malaria into new areas, growing resource conflicts, etc.

In its last major report, the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) outlined the risks associated with allowing temperatures to rise above 2 degrees Celsius. It argued that hundreds of millions of people would be exposed to increased stress on water supplies, malnutrition, heat waves, floods and droughts. Cereal production would decline in tropical areas, coasts would suffer increased damage, and hundreds of thousands of species would be at increasing risk of extinction.

Given the scale of these impacts, it is understandable why Canadians are having trouble coming to terms with the implications of the fact that the course is set to shatter the two degrees threshold.

The International Energy Agency, a body governed by the richest countries in the world, including Canada, acknowledged in its 2008 [World Energy Outlook](#) that humanity will have committed itself to up to 6 degrees of global warming by 2100 if we continue with business as usual. The Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change acknowledged the possibility of a six degree scenario years ago.



This is a profoundly moral decision. It is a decision that, in ethical terms, deserves to be placed beside any other atrocity in human history, including slavery, segregation and colonialism, major genocides, and the denial of women's and workers' rights.



During the last Ice Age, a time when most of Canada was covered by two kilometers of solid ice, the world was on average only about 5 degrees Celsius colder than it is today.

The last time the world was 5 degrees Celsius warmer was about 30 to 50 million years ago, and it has been at least a few million years since we've seen a 3 degree rise, so it is hard to come to terms with what this would look like.

Put simply, under this scenario agriculture would be destroyed and life would be impossible over much of the planet. Large parts of southern Europe would look like the Sahara, major rivers of the world would dry up in the dry season, and billions of people would have to relocate as a result.

While this is obviously a catastrophic scenario, three things need to be kept in mind about the current and future impacts of climate change. First, this problem can be solved. We know what we have to do and we can do it without significantly undermining our standard of living.

Second, Canada can choose to do its fair share, or it can continue to turn its back on this problem, but either way a choice is being made.

Third, this is a profoundly moral decision. It is a decision that, in ethical terms, deserves to be placed beside any other atrocity in human history, including slavery, segregation and colonialism, major genocides, and the denial of women's and workers' rights. The impacts are on the same scale and the outcomes are just as avoidable.

Canada is among the top ten polluters in the world and Canadians produce two to three times more greenhouse gas pollution per person than most European countries, five times more per person than China, and over ten times more per person than India. Canada is among the richest countries on the planet and for more than 15 years we have repeatedly promised to reduce our greenhouse gas pollution and we have failed.

Our way of life is killing people in the poorest parts of the world, it is driving species to extinction, and it is hurting the prospects of our children and grandchildren. Developing countries want to achieve a standard of living that affords the same comforts and opportunities as ours, and we are refusing to show that this is possible without tearing at the very fabric of life.

When our leaders produce a weak climate strategy and then do nothing to implement it, when they argue that we should sit back and wait to see what the United States does, or when they suggest that India and China are the real problem at the global climate negotiations, we need to help Canadians understand just how depraved these positions are.

It is wrong for humanity to choose a path that will drive hundreds of thousands of species to extinction. It is wrong for a rich minority to create a problem and then refuse to do its fair share to fix it when billions of the world's poorest people will suffer first and worst. And it is wrong for this generation to destroy the habitability of the planet and ruin the prospects of future generation.

We need to find a way to explain this to Canadians not only because it is the right thing to do, but also because we are called upon to create great change. In doing so, we will face huge

resistance from those that have been convinced to fear this change as well as those that benefit from business as usual.

There are unprecedented opportunities in the clean energy economy of the twenty-first century and, as the necessary political changes are won, the market will play a powerful role in solving the climate change problem. But there is no reason to believe that the challenge of climate change will be met by simply telling Canadians that solving this problem is in their own economic interest. Arguments that speak to very souls of Canadians and not just their pocket-books are needed. People don't move beyond their sheltered lives into the arena of agitation unless some deep moral conviction fires their blood and captures their imagination.

Personally, I consider myself lucky to be part of a generation that has the opportunity to do something this important. I am proud of my country and I want it to succeed in the clean energy economy of the twenty-first century and benefit from the millions of jobs that this will create. I have no doubt that we will be better off for embracing these changes, but I'm also unapologetic about the fact that our government's refusal to move in this direction represents anything but a moral and profoundly political failure. We must demand change now, before it is too late.

The problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of humanity's relationship to life on Earth. This story is already being told through the lives of people in impoverished countries and vulnerable communities, the extinction of species, and the fate of our children and grandchildren. It is a profoundly moral story and, more than any other single issue, it can be seen through the lens of climate change. The climate crisis presents us with a line in the sand that can unite and inspire people from diverse constituencies, and the clean energy revolution is the legacy that we will leave.

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Find Out More

- [Climate Action Network](#)
- [G8 Climate Scorecard](#)
- [Climate Change Performance Index](#)
- [Right to Survive](#)
- [World Energy Outlook](#)
- [KYOTOPlus](#)