

O Canada: How Good It Could Be

Zoë Caron

Zoë Caron is co-author of Global Warming for Dummies and editor of ItsGettingHotInHere.org. She is the climate policy and advocacy specialist at World Wildlife Fund-Canada and is involved in coordinating the Nova Scotia Renewable Energy Consultations, a joint project of the provincial government and Dalhousie University in Halifax. She is also a founding member of the Canadian Youth Climate Change Coalition.

Caron sees the chief climate change opportunities for Canada in new efforts on sustainable renewable energy development and political will toward action to meet the challenges ahead.



Activist and author Zoë Caron

Courtesy of Zoë Caron/Photo by Tracy Morris-Boyer

I pulled my iPhone from my pocket to catch up on the news in a public park, just blocks from my office in downtown Halifax, Nova Scotia. The headlines contrasted starkly with the serene surroundings: “Oil lobby to fund phony campaign against U.S. climate change strategy” (*Guardian News*); “Kyoto Protocol working group [closes] with Chair ... encouraging parties ‘to work twice as hard in Bangkok’” (International Institute for Sustainable Development); “Yvo de Boer: ‘At this rate, we’re not going to make it. Recognize that serious climate change is equal to game over’” (Global Campaign for Climate Action).

Not particularly uplifting, but such is the state of climate change discourse in Canada. Canadians have ranked the environment as a top priority in the recent past. Surveys suggest that Canadians are saturated with climate change awareness, but messaging has opted for shame over solutions, and we have reacted with nationwide paralysis.

The most serious challenge presented by climate change in Canada is our long-standing reliance on an economy rich in natural — but often finite — resources. Despite growing sparks of leadership in solar and wind power, we continue to promote development in the Athabasca tar sands, an underground oil reserve larger than the state of Florida. The province of Nova Scotia still depends on coal, and Ontario continues to develop nonrenewable nuclear energy.

Yet we have a tremendous opportunity to enjoy an economy that can thrive from today forward. Waste from Canada’s agricultural sector can provide for biomass-derived fuels. Wind across the prairies and off the east coast of Nova Scotia can generate electricity. Solar energy potential exists across many parts of the country. The possibilities for building the infrastructure for this could start in our own towns, creating new green jobs for our country.

What we crave as Canadians is a strong public mandate for sustainability at the federal level. Many young people who will live to see the results of today’s action — or inaction — on climate change are frustrated that the federal government seems to focus on other priorities.



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Permafrost melt resulting from global warming is damaging infrastructure across the Arctic. This section of the Dempster Highway in Canada's Northwest Territories collapsed because of thawing permafrost.

But provincial governments have taken up the challenge: British Columbia and Ontario have developed Climate Change Secretariats; British Columbia and Quebec have implemented variants of hydrocarbon taxes; and Nova Scotia has legislated an ambitious renewable energy target.

Our commitment to the Kyoto Protocol has been reduced, officially, to the lowest targets of all industrialized countries. Fortunately, Canadians are prepared to act, regardless of the federal response.

To date, Canada's primary partner on climate change has been the United States. Perhaps surprisingly, the United States appears to be far more committed than Canada is prepared to be. The United States is investing six times more per capita than Canada in green technology, for example. Transforming "comfortable" status-quo relationships into engagement with new strategic partners in sustainable technologies offers staggering potential for the Canadian economy to prosper in the long term.

Despite this response of policymakers and elected officials, or perhaps because of it, various communities — business, industrial, indigenous, and nonprofit — are growing sources of mobilization, awareness, and proposed solutions. The voice and political legitimacy of the youth movement, in particular, is building, largely as

a response to political inertia. Climate change is among the issues that galvanize young people simply because our government's actions don't make sense to us. The youth reaction to political decisions that we do not and cannot support reflects our values and convictions on justice and equity, as well as the desire for accessible government plans and processes, meeting the transparency demanded by a generation weaned on the Internet.

The young leaders in climate change have become ever-mightier stakeholders in this field. The Canadian Youth Climate Coalition was founded in 2006 to address the political issues of climate change. The U.S.-Canada Energy Action Coalition brings together dozens of organizations on climate justice. A global network of youth is working together across continents to mobilize young people and influence global policy. The examples abound.

Climate change is defining the lives of this and

future generations.

How to address these issues most quickly and effectively here in Canada ultimately boils down to our government satisfying the needs of future generations. While politicians may raise

eyebrows at such revolutionary reform, it is only this revolutionary reform that will bring about the changes necessary to act decisively on climate change.

A middle ground must be created to encourage continuous and mutual relationship-building between the government and the public, for it is only through creating a culture of proactive participation that policy truly will reflect the voice of the people, especially where the stakes are high and the clock is ticking. To be sure, this remains an ambitious objective, but we have yet to see a national response to climate change proportional to the risks. Supported by a vocal youth movement, a well-informed populace, and an abundance of renewable resources, it's time to stop being meek, modest, and polite, and rise to the challenge of creating an equitable and flourishing world. ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

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