

Sustainable Development: It's Time to Walk the Talk

Second Interim Report
of the
Standing Senate Committee on Energy, the Environment
and Natural Resources

The Honourable Tommy Banks, *Chair*The Honourable Ethel Cochrane, *Deputy Chair*

June 2005

Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français

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THE STANDING SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY, THE ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES

The Hon. Tommy Banks – Chair

The Hon. Ethel Cochrane - Deputy-Chair

The Hon. Willie Adams

The Hon. Isobel Finnerty
The Hon. David Angus

The Hon. Colin Kenny

The Hon. John Buchanan, P.C. The Hon. Raymond Lavigne

The Hon. Ione Christensen

The Hon. Lorna Milne
The Hon. Leonard J. Gustafson

The Hon. Mira Spivak

Ex-officio members of the Committee:

The Honourable Senators: Jack Austin, P.C. (or Bill Rompkey, P.C.) and Noël A. Kinsella (or Terry Stratton).

In addition, the Honourable Senators Chaput, Fraser, Gill, Harb, Hubley and Ruth were members of the Committee or participated from time to time during this study during this Session.

Staff of the Committee:

Ms. Lynne C. Myers, Research Analyst, Science and Technology Division, Parliamentary Research Branch, Library of Parliament;

Mr. Frédéric Beauregard-Tellier, Research Analyst, Economics Division, Parliamentary Research Branch, Library of Parliament;

Ms. Keli Hogan, Clerk of the Committee, Committees Directorate, The Senate;

Ms. Kae Schade, Administrative Assistant, Committees Directorate, The Senate.

ORDER OF REFERENCE

Extract from the *Journals of the Senate* of Tuesday, October 19, 2004:

The Honourable Senator Banks moved, seconded by the Honourable Senator Ferretti Barth:

That the Standing Senate Committee on Energy, the Environment and Natural Resources be authorized to examine and report on emerging issues related to its mandate:

- a) The current state and future direction of production, distribution, consumption, trade, security and sustainability of Canada's energy resources;
- b) Environmental challenges facing Canada including responses to global climate change, air pollution, biodiversity and ecological integrity;
- c) Sustainable development and management of renewable and non-renewable natural resources including water, minerals, soils, flora and fauna;
- d) Canada's international treaty obligations affecting energy, the environment and natural resources and their influence on Canada's economic and social development;

That the papers and evidence received and taken during the Third Session of the Thirty-seventh Parliament be referred to the Committee; and

That the Committee report to the Senate from time to time, no later than June 30, 2006, and that the Committee retain until September 1, 2006 all powers necessary to publicize its findings.

After debate,

The question being put on the motion, it was adopted.

Paul C. Bélisle *Clerk of the Senate*

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: IT'S TIME TO WALK THE TALK

INTRODUCTION

In the years since the Brundtland Commission released *Our Common Future* in 1987, sustainable development has become a stated objective for many nations, including Canada. The Brundtland Commission broadly defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The Commission challenged the world to fundamentally rethink the nature and structure of its socio-economic systems that are based on resource consumption. Long-term "sustainable" development, the Commission argued, could only be achieved by *balancing* our economic, social and environmental imperatives.

Today, many governments and corporations in Canada talk endlessly about sustainable development. But a lot of it is lip service. Too often they hesitate when it comes to taking real, meaningful action.

Most Canadians understand this. Most Canadians intuitively know that somehow, we must actually do something.

Like the Honourable Stéphane Dion, Minister of the Environment, they recognize that "the relationship between human beings and the planet since the advent of industrialization is becoming unsustainable and must change." Climate change, soil degradation, water and air pollution and an alarming decrease in biodiversity all signal the need for change. But are our government and business leaders acting on this knowledge? Some are, and sometimes quite effectively.

But too often, the answer to that question is "No!".

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⁽¹⁾ World Commission on Environment and Development ("The Brundtland Commission"), Our Common Future, United Nations, 1987.

⁽²⁾ The Honourable Stéphane Dion, Minister of the Environment, Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on Energy, the Environment and Natural Resources, November 16, 2004.

This widespread lack of meaningful action is more than just disappointing. It is having real and negative consequences for Canada's natural environment.

The Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development ("the Commissioner") testified before your Committee that, "There are 75 new endangered species and hundreds of contaminated sites in Canada. The cod fishery has collapsed; permafrost is melting in Northern Canada; cities issue smog alerts; polluted drinking water and boil-water warnings are affecting a country that has more freshwater than any other; and traces of toxic chemicals like PCBs are appearing in mothers' milk . . . The point is that the lack of sustainable development is taking its toll." (3)

We have to do more than just stand around wringing our hands over the lengthening list of very real threats to our environment. We must embark on a determined path to sustainable development. As Elizabeth May pointed out in her testimony to your Committee, "We are in huge trouble if we do not, because the changes we are effecting on the biosphere are unforgiving and in many cases irreversible."⁽⁴⁾

It is not only the Commissioner and environmentalists who are sounding the alarm bell. Many respected observers other than 'the usual suspects' now comment on Canada's sub-par performance. The Conference Board of Canada's latest examination of our country's environmental performance, for example, concludes that "Canada is a 'middle-of-the-road' performer" compared to other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. (5) The Conference Board found that Canada produces large amounts of hazardous waste, struggles with important urban air quality problems, and generates emissions of greenhouse gases that "are substantial by any measure."

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We must embark on a determined path to sustainable development.

Johanne Gélinas, Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on Energy, the Environment and Natural Resources, November 16, 2004.

⁽⁴⁾ Elizabeth May, Executive Director, Sierra Club of Canada, Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on Energy, the Environment and Natural Resources, December 2, 2004.

⁽⁵⁾ Conference Board of Canada, Performance and Potential 2004-05: How Can Canada Prosper in Tomorrow's World, 2004.

⁽⁶⁾ Ibid.

On a similar note, delegates at the 2005 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland heard that while we are blessed with abundant natural resources, Canada has done a poor job in reducing the pollutants it sends across the border, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, reducing air pollution, and managing its natural resources.

The OECD recently concluded that Canada still has a lot of work to do in order to make real progress toward sustainable development. While Canada has recognized the need for sustainable development, according to the OECD, "this has not yet resulted in practical policies and actions." (7)

These are polite understatements. There continues to be a huge gap between stated government commitment and government action.

GOOD INTENTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH

The picture is not entirely bleak. In some instances the Government of Canada has been quite successful in implementing sustainable development policies. As an example, Canada has made considerable progress in reducing emissions that contribute to acid rain and ozone depletion. These successes have been achieved only because of persistent, sustained Government action. Unfortunately such good-news stories are the exception rather than the rule. Much more needs to be done in a systematic way if Canada is to truly embark upon the journey toward sustainability. There is reason for hope. As David Boyd showed in his landmark book Unnatural Law, Rethinking Canadian Environmental Law and Policy, Canada has "tremendous potential for further progress towards sustainability." (8)

The Government of Canada must show leadership, and it must move beyond mere rhetoric about sustainable development. It must take concrete, well-thought-out action to move Canada along the path toward sustainability. This is not going to be easy to do. It will require a *sustained* commitment to doing things differently, more efficiently, and with a view to the future. It will require doing more to set a good example. Budget 2005 is encouraging in that respect. It

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⁽⁷⁾ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Press Release: "OECD Review of Canada's Environmental Performance: Good Progress, Much to Be Done", September 29, 2004.

⁽⁸⁾ David R. Boyd, Unnatural Law, Rethinking Canadian Environmental Law and Policy, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003.

commits substantial funds to new measures to address climate change and support the development and deployment of environmental technologies.

Time and again Canadians have heard great promises that have raised expectations. Unfortunately, progress has been slow, policies have been uneven, and backtracking has been frequent.

In 1990, shortly after launching Canada's Green Plan, the then Minister of the Environment proclaimed that, "Our broad goal is nothing less than making sustainable development a practical reality in Canada." That Green Plan was never fully implemented. It was gradually abandoned. The momentum was lost as other priorities pushed it off the national agenda.

Today, 15 years later, we are hearing a very similar message from the Government of Canada. The Minister of the Environment recently stated that the federal government will take the necessary action "to protect our environment and quality of life and to ensure that Canada is leading the way toward the sustainable economy. We need a project green for Canada."⁽¹⁰⁾

On April 13, 2005, the Government of Canada released its long-awaited revised Kyoto plan, thus revealing the first phase of "Project Green". We have pointed out disparities between past intentions and past results, and we look forward to real and sustained commitment from the Government now. We also look forward to the report on the implementation of the Kyoto plan that we expect shortly from the House of Commons Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development.

Project Green's goal is to support a sustainable environment and a more competitive economy. Right. While these are noble intentions that everyone can agree with, is the Government of Canada prepared to take the necessary steps to make this promise a reality this time?

We hope so. But we are obliged to point out that thus far, as the OECD has noted in its environmental performance review of Canada, "The translation of sustainable development goals into practical institutional and market-based integration has been limited and

⁽⁹⁾ Robert De Cotret, "Citizen participation is key to Green Plan," *The Record (Waterloo Region)*, page A7, December 18, 1990.

⁽¹⁰⁾ The Honourable Stéphane Dion, http://www.ec.gc.ca/minister/speeches/2005/050215 s e.htm.

institutional and market-based integration has been limited and pathways toward sustainability are still often unclear, uncharted, and long." (11)

That is bureaucratese for "Enough talking. Let's see some action."

The failure of successive governments to follow through on sustainable development promises is well documented. In 1997, Canada's very first Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development noted that there was an "implementation gap in which performance falls short of its stated objective. This gap reflects the failure to translate policy direction into effective action." (12)

That is a bit clearer, but even then it meant "All talk, no action".

Little has changed since. The current Commissioner recently echoed her predecessor's words by noting, "In our audit work, we have found significant failures with 'walking the talk'; that is, the implementation gap." (13) The announcement of plans and the launching of projects are fine, but Canada needs to put more meat on those bones. Canada needs *sustained* commitment. Canada needs appropriate policies to be actually implemented, and the Government already knows what those policies are.

This implementation gap has led the Commissioner to conclude that there is "a lack of leadership, lack of priority and a lack of will on the part of the Government of Canada. They have failed to make real progress in sustainable development and environmental protection." This is not surprising since, despite the rhetoric, sustainable development and environmental protection have rarely been at the front and centre of any government's agenda.

A telling illustration is the observation made to this Committee by the Minister of the Environment, reflecting on his years of experience in Cabinet. "I have been a Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs for eight years," he said, "and I do not remember one situation where the

The failure of successive governments to follow through on sustainable development promises is well documented.

⁽¹¹⁾ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Canada, 2004.

⁽¹²⁾ Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 1997 Report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Develoment (1997: 11).

⁽¹³⁾ Johanne Gélinas, (2004).

⁽¹⁴⁾ Ibid.

environment was a part of the discussion, unless it was a meeting of the Ministers of the Environment. This must change."⁽¹⁵⁾

The Minister is exactly right.

And as the Commissioner has noted, the challenge of climate change that currently confronts the world provides the Government of Canada with an opportunity to demonstrate leadership by "making environment and sustainable development a real priority, and providing incentives or disincentives for success and action." (16)

So why is action so slow in coming? What are the factors that, despite all the good intentions of successive governments, hamper progress toward sustainable development? The Committee offers the following observations and recommendations that we believe will get results if they are acted upon.

TOWARD SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CLOSING THE GAPS

Making real progress toward sustainable development requires a thorough re-examination of *all* aspects of government policy. Of necessity it must involve substantial change. The Government of Canada has the tools to do the job. However, time and again it has been reluctant to use those tools to put Canada clearly on the path to sustainability.

In particular, despite repeated assurances that it would do so, the Government has shied away from introducing the broad fiscal and regulatory reforms that are absolutely necessary to successfully integrate economic, social, and environmental imperatives. In fact, little, if any, progress has been made on the Government's commitment to gather baseline information on reforming the tax system to create incentives for sustainable development activities and disincentives for unsustainable activities. The House of Commons Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development had recommended the work in a 1995 report and the Government had accepted the recommendation.

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⁽¹⁵⁾ The Honourable Stéphane Dion, (November 16, 2004).

⁽¹⁶⁾ Johanne Gélinas, (2004).

As Dr. Glen Toner observed a number of years ago, "The federal government's reluctance to use its fiscal and tax-policy tools to support sustainable development, combined with its diminished scientific capacity and aversion to further regulation has meant that it is increasingly incapable of leading." (17)

Since he made that statement (in 2000) the Government of Canada seems to have recognized its veracity. The 2005 Budget notes that:

"A strategy for a productive, growing economy and a sustainable environment requires that the Government deploy the full range of available policy instruments to maximize its leverage. In the pursuit of environmental goals, this will include regulatory instruments . . . it will also include 'economic instruments' - such as targeted grants and subsidies, and tax measures — that are intended to leverage market forces and to induce efficient, environment-friendly market outcomes." (18)

Despite this apparent recognition, the pace of reform has been agonizingly slow. As highlighted in your Committee's November 2004 Report, *The One-Tonne Challenge: Let's Get On With It*, the Government of Canada continues to rely mainly on social marketing, education and other largely ineffective voluntary measures. (19) It has shown inexplicable reticence about using all of the tools at its disposal.

As Pierre Sadik of the Green Budget Coalition stated in his appearance before your Committee, "The Government of Canada . . . wants to use voluntary measures . . . it wants to use subsidies, but it does not want to use some of the implements that have some bite to them." (20) He further noted that:

"Canada places itself at an economic and environmental disadvantage in relation to other developed countries by failing to take advantage of fiscal instruments in combination with other measures to promote sustainable development." (21)

Despite this apparent recognition, the pace of reform has been agonizingly slow.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Glen Toner, "Canada: From Early Frontrunner to Plodding Anchorman," in W.M. Lafferty and J. Meadowcroft, eds., *Implementing Sustainable Development: Strategies and Initiatives in High Consumption Societies*, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 53-84.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Finance Canada, Budget 2005 - Budget Plan, Annex 4.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Standing Senate Committee on Energy, the Environment and Natural Resources, *The One-Tonne Challenge: Let's Get on With It!*, November 2004.

⁽²⁰⁾ Pierre Sadik, Program Manager, Green Budget Coalition, Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on Energy, the Environment and Natural Resources, February 3, 2005.

⁽²¹⁾ Ibid.

It's time for the Government of Canada to step up to the plate, to show leadership, and to introduce the necessary reforms. This requires greater political will, greater co-ordination and integration within and across federal departments, and perhaps most importantly, a greater recognition that sustainable development is one of the most pressing issues facing the country today.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consistently, polls have shown that Canadians *expect* their governments to show leadership on important issues like climate change and air pollution. Increasingly, we have come to recognize that these problems are "indicators of the unsustainable condition we face in the early 21st century." (22) They highlight the critical importance of moving toward a more sustainable form of development.

To that end, your Committee believes that the Government of Canada should take the following steps in order to close the "implementation gap".

1. The first and most basic step in this evolution is for the Government of Canada to develop and articulate a Federal Sustainable Development Strategy that will direct *all* federal departments in preparing their sustainable development strategies. This would offer a common vision for a sustainable future. The Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development has been exhorting the Government to take this step for several years now, but to no avail.

What is the result? Departments each pursue their own strategies, some more successfully than others, with no guarantee that these strategies are consistent with overall environmental policy or are mutually compatible. In 2001, after auditing the strategies of 28 departments and agencies over three years, the Commissioner concluded: "I am concerned that some departments view their sustainable development activities as a paper exercise rather than truly trying to make their activities more sustainable." (23)

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⁽²²⁾ Glen Toner, Submission to the Standing Senate Committee on Energy, the Environment and Natural Resources, December 2, 2004.

⁽²³⁾ Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/media.nsf/html/c1pr02 e.html.

Recommendation 1

Sustainable development must become a central organizational principle of the Government of Canada. This will require the creation of a clear Federal Sustainable Development Strategy.

2. Strategic environmental assessment of government legislative and policy proposals can be an extremely useful complementary tool to a sustainable development strategy, as long as that assessment is consistently applied. Such an assessment would help ensure that proposed actions will not contradict existing environmental policies, legislation, or government objectives.

The good news is that there is already a Cabinet Directive that such an assessment be carried out on all proposed legislation. The bad news is that the Cabinet Directive is simply not being enforced. The end result is that policy proposals are often presented to Cabinet without first having been adequately assessed. Just as each federal policy is examined by Justice Canada to ensure that it is constitutional, so too should it be reviewed through the lens of sustainable development before it is presented to Cabinet. The Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council Office must play leadership roles in that respect. This is the only way to ensure that sustainable development becomes an ingrained, fundamental organizational principle of the Government.

Just as each federal policy is examined by Justice Canada to ensure that it is constitutional, so too should it be reviewed through the lens of sustainable development before it is presented to Cabinet.

Recommendation 2

A Sustainable Development Secretariat should be established within the Privy Council Office to ensure compliance with the Government's Sustainable Development Strategy. All Government policy and legislative proposals should, before being acted upon, be assessed and approved by this Secretariat.

3. The Minister of Finance and his officials should, because of their unique understanding of the economy and of economic instruments, become intimately involved in making sustainable development a reality in Canada. This is not currently the case. Fiscal reform that supports sustainable development (so-called "ecological fiscal reform") must become a reality in Canada, and only Finance Canada can make it happen. As noted earlier, Finance Canada has recognized that "a growing economy and a sustainable environment require that the Government deploy the full range of available policy

Fiscal reform that supports sustainable development (so-called "ecological fiscal reform") must become a reality in Canada, and only Finance Canada can make it happen. instruments to maximize its leverage." Those should include economic instruments. The Minister of Finance must show leadership by transforming these words into action.

And yet this Minister, whose department must make ecological fiscal reform happen, is not a permanent member of the recently created Ad Hoc Cabinet Committee on Sustainability and the Environment.

Recommendation 3

The Minister of Finance should chair a permanent Cabinet Committee on Sustainability and the Environment, and the Minister should make ecological fiscal reform a priority.

4. Procurement reform in all orders of government is urgently needed. As an important purchaser of goods and services, the Government of Canada must lead by example. So far it has fallen short. Dr. Toner observed that, "Despite promises since the *Green Plan* to use its procurement power to support the growth of sustainable products and enterprises, the federal government has never developed a systematic approach to doing so . . . It has not 'walked the talk'." (25)

Procurement reform in all orders of government is urgently needed. As an important purchaser of goods and services, the Government of Canada must lead by example.

In this regard, your Committee is particularly concerned that the Government of Canada has been slow to introduce cleaner and more fuel-efficient vehicles into its fleet. In the 2003-04 fiscal year the federal government purchased 3,432 vehicles. Of those, only 11% were hybrid or alternative-fuel vehicles. (26) This violates the spirit of our own *Alternative Fuels Act*, and underscores the failure of the federal government to effectively use its considerable purchasing power to show leadership in moving toward sustainability.

Recommendation 4

The Government of Canada must introduce a green procurement policy to ensure that the federal government minimizes waste and purchases only the greenest and most efficient goods and services.

²⁴⁾ Finance Canada, Budget 2005 - Budget Plan, Annex 4.

⁽²⁵⁾ Glen Toner, (December 2, 2004).

⁽²⁶⁾ Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, Report on the Application of the Alternative Fuels Act – Fiscal Year 2003-04, http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/report/other/2003/afa2003-04-PR e.asp?printable=True.

5. As Elizabeth May explained to your Committee, ultimately, "The lack of implementation on all these issues is a problem of political will. Political will is a function of understanding that the [environmental] threats are real and urgent. For the most part, the system and the powers that be do not understand the threat or its urgency." This is in part because our ability to monitor and understand environmental change has been jeopardized by nearly a decade of cuts in government budgets for scientific research and monitoring programmes.

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Recommendation 5

The Government of Canada should substantially increase funding to Environment Canada, to universities, and to other science-based entities so that they can resume or initiate essential long-term environmental research and monitoring that will inform Canada's sustainable development policy.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable development is a priority for Canadians. It is important for our health and well-being, and for that of future generations. The challenge of climate change has made the need for sustainable development even more pressing.

It is time for the Government of Canada to show stronger leadership. It is time to act. Good intentions and voluntary measures are not enough. Too much time has already been wasted; it's time to get on with it. As the Brundtland Commission made clear in 1987, political vision, leadership, and determination can make sustainable development a reality. "In the final analysis sustainable development must rest on political will". (28)

Are our leaders, on all sides, up to this challenge?

Your Committee very much hopes so.

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⁽²⁷⁾ Elizabeth May, (December 2, 2004).

⁽²⁸⁾ As quoted by Glen Toner (December 2, 2004).

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APPENDIX A:

Witnesses heard

November 16, 2004 **Environment Canada:**

The Honourable Stéphane Dion, P.C., M.P., Minister.

Office of the Auditor General of Canada:

Johanne Gélinas, Commissioner of the Environment and

Sustainable Development; John Reed, Principal; Neil Maxwell, Principal; John Affleck, Principal;

Richard Arseneault, Principal.

December 2, 2004 Sierra Club of Canada:

Elizabeth May, Executive Director.

As an individual:

Professor Glen Toner, School of Public Policy and Administration,

Carleton University.

December 7, 2004 Natural Resources Canada:

The Honourable R. John Efford, P.C., M.P., Minister;

George R.M. Anderson, Deputy Minister;

Howard Brown, Assistant Deputy Minister, Energy Policy Sector;

Margaret McCuaig-Johnson, Assistant Deputy Minister, Energy Technology and Programs Sector;

Jan Boon, Director General, Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) – Sedimentary and Marine Geoscience Branch, Earth Sciences Sector;

Richard Davies, Manager, Office of Coordination and Technical Information, CANMET Energy Technology Centre, Energy Sector.

February 3, 2005 **Green Budget Coalition:**

Pierre Sadik, Program Manager.

June 7, 2005 **Privy Council Office:**

Alex Himelfarb, Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the

Cabinet;

Simon Kennedy, Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Economic and

Regional Development Policy.