A Program for the Ecological Transition

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Updated November 29, 2018, with respect to the number of signatures on A Pact for the Transition and an addition to the urban agriculture section about beef and pork consumption.

Some time ago, stage director Dominic Champagne and 500 members of Quebec’s entertainment industry released our society’s Pact for the (ecological) Transition. Since then, over 260,000 Quebeckers have signed the pact. I was one of them.

The premise of the Pact is simple. We know our planet is in bad shape. Science tells us that climate change, the depletion of natural resources, and widespread pollution are caused by human activity and that the problem is getting worse by the day. We must take action, and we must do so immediately. The Pact sets out a simple strategy: individuals commit to reducing their carbon footprint and, in return, they call on the government, industry, business and finance to do their part. The following proposals may be considered an addition to the strategy delineated in the Pact. Together, they constitute an action plan and a way to pay for it. This Program for the Ecological Transition must be put in motion immediately.

As it stands, the Program is designed for Quebec, but it is applicable to the rest of Canada.

1. Vehicle Electrification

Starting now and over the next 20 years, Quebec should replace all internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles with electric vehicles. This program builds on the Government of Quebec’s Transportation Electrification Action Plan. Electric cars are still too expensive. Until sales volumes increase enough to bring purchase prices down, the government should increase subsidies that make the cost of electric vehicles comparable to the cost of ICE vehicles.

To facilitate the transition, the government should reach agreements with automakers and dealers to ensure the availability of electric vehicles, guarantee sales volumes and eliminate delivery delays. Quebec should also tax conventional cars, especially gas guzzlers.

Similar agreements xxx target trucks, buses and other utility vehicles.

These agreements will provide a context for pressuring auto makers to improve vehicle design, making them stronger, safer, longer lasting, better suited to our climate, easier to drive and so on. The government xxx also ensures that the electric vehicle manufacturing process is not polluting. A pledge to buy six million electric vehicles over the next 20 years would give Quebec a fair bit of bargaining power.

The government should end all subsidies and suspend all projects that support the use of fossil fuels and financially support businesses that eliminate or transform plastic waste.
The government should reach a two-part agreement with Hydro-Québec to ensure the availability of electricity by building new power generation and transportation infrastructure and to speed up the installation of vehicle charging stations at service stations, on private properties and in public parking lots all over Quebec.

The government should also launch a program to help service stations and garages shift from ICE technology to electric technology and to train mechanics. The government must also launch a recycling program for batteries and other worn-out electric vehicle parts.

Lastly, the government must create a research and development program to capitalize on solar power, such as by installing solar panels along highways to provide power for the vehicles on those roads.

2. **Electrifying and improving public transportation**

In conjunction with electrifying road transportation, Quebec should enhance clean public transportation in its major cities over the next 10 years. For Montreal, this means increasing the frequency of Metro trains, adding more lines if necessary, improving rider safety and comfort, replacing ICE buses with electric models, adding more electric buses to the fleet, making bus service more reliable, expanding the REM by adding a tramway to serve east Montreal, the South Shore and Laval, and improving commuter rail service. For Quebec City, this means stepping up electrification of public transit and adding tramway lines. More electric buses should be added with service to Quebec’s medium-sized cities. Rural areas should have a fleet of electric shuttles providing on-call service like a shared taxi service.

3. **Eliminating overpackaging**

Over the next five years, Quebec should eliminate excess plastic packaging in all businesses, including e-commerce deliveries. This would apply to grocery stores, greengrocers, hardware stores and pharmacies and would affect big box stores and multinationals more than small local businesses. For example, many items sold in hardware stores are sealed in plastic packaging that serves no purpose other than merchandising. After the product is sold, the non-biodegradable packaging ends up in the landfill. Greengrocers sell some of their fruits and vegetables in bulk, but many of their products are packaged on foam trays wrapped in non-biodegradable plastic.

That excess packaging is useless and extremely polluting. It must be eliminated.

We also need a program to help local businesses that sell bulk goods. That same program can subsidize reusable bags made of recyclable materials such as paper, cotton and linen.

4. **Reducing the use of plastic containers and objects**

Over the next 10 years, Quebec should replace non-recyclable, non-biodegradable plastic containers with containers made of glass and other reusable and recyclable materials. This program would affect pharmacies and large grocery stores, among others. It would also apply to bottled water, which would be heavily taxed at the source and could not be bottled in plastic, only in glass. The government would also ban bottled water from its facilities, except in certain specific
situations, such as in hospitals. Plastic bottles currently used for substances such as cleaning products, shampoo and soft drinks would be replaced by recyclable containers for which consumers would pay a deposit. That means retailers would be required to take back containers and manufacturers would be required to recycle them. The SAQ and grocery stores would be obligated to take back wine and cider bottles and so on, just like beer bottles.

Another change we need to see has to do with toothbrushes. Currently, toothbrushes sold in Quebec and around the world are made of plastic and packaged in plastic. Neither the toothbrush nor the packaging is biodegradable or recyclable, so it all goes to landfills and eventually makes its way into nature and waterways that flow into the ocean, where it ends up in the stomachs of fish and marine mammals. This must stop. At least one Montreal pharmacy sells bamboo toothbrushes imported from Asia. Why not subsidize a factory that makes toothbrushes out of Quebec-sourced wood and sells them in sterile paper packaging?

5. **Promoting urban agriculture**

Over the next five years, Quebec should launch an intensive urban agriculture program in Quebec cities. The goal would be to make fresh, affordable, high-quality fruits and vegetables with no carbon footprint available to city-dwellers year-round. We need to make use of city rooftops. To support this program, we need a new urban agriculture center of excellence in Montreal. Imagine an experimental greenhouse atop the roof of a massive building housing labs, demonstration spaces, an industrial incubator, gathering and teaching spaces and more. The center would be surrounded by experimental orchards and gardens. Its dual mission would be to collaborate with universities, institutions and industry to develop expertise in urban agriculture, including the architectural and engineering expertise to design rooftops and build greenhouses, and to launch major urban agriculture projects.

The program would also help community gardens.

The program to promote the cultivation of fruits and vegetables would go hand in hand with a program to gradually reduce the industrial farming of cows and pigs. The goal would be to reduce consumption of red meat and the pollution it creates. There would be a program to support butchers and livestock producers through the green transition.

6. **Innovation**

The Program for Transition would endorse and finance a series of initiatives to promote and share scientific and social innovation to improve the program’s ecological activities and ensure the longevity of cultural changes arising from the transition. The program would enable Quebec to serve as an incubator for experts in green transition and as a model society known for leading environmental programs.

7. **Management**

The Program for Transition would be managed by a group of experts reporting to the Government of Quebec. These experts would be action-oriented innovators who spearhead initiatives. That description applies to many of us. The current governmental Fonds Vert executive would be
involved as well. Fonds Vert activities would be subjected to a critical analysis, and those that are effective would carry on. Program management would be transparent, and contracts would be public. There would be a website detailing the program goals, its projects, and its progress. The people of Quebec would be invited to participate in program activities, propose projects, share their comments and even express their satisfaction.

8. **Funding**
The Program for Transition would require $11 billion in funding. That would include $1 million from the existing Fonds Vert and $10 billion in new funding. To raise the funds, Quebec would issue $10 billion in special bonds called “Transition Bonds”, which the Bank of Canada would purchase. It is essentially a zero-interest loan repayable over 30 years. The funds would be made available to the government as needed and at predetermined intervals. Should the Bank of Canada refuse to participate in Quebec’s environmental transition, the government would create a public bank, initially funded by the Quebec treasury, whose assets and loans would be guaranteed by the economic potential of Quebeckers, which is in the trillions of dollars. The bank would buy the Transition Bonds. The fractional reserve banking system currently in use in all private banks would make it possible to generate $10 billion from a $1-billion down payment.

9. **Revenue**
The Program for Transition would bring in revenue from various sources, including economic sectors that currently contribute little to the tax base. Appropriations would have only a minimal impact on individual sectors but would add up to enough to fund the program. Revenue would come from five main sources: fees attached to transactions involving financial products, such as securities (the Tobin tax), fees attached to electronic transactions (see, for example, the work of University of Zurich finance professor, Marc Chesney), fees attached to interbank transactions, fees attached to currency speculation transactions, and a tax on the commercial activities of multinationals currently engaging in tax evasion or tax avoidance.

Just like everyone else, people in finance must help save the planet.

Naturally, program activities would generate additional tax revenue. Let’s keep in mind that eliminating the use of fossil fuels would improve Quebec’s trade balance and that reducing plastic waste would save money. Investments related to the Program for Transition would drive many other green economic activities.

10. **Urgency**
What I have proposed is a rough draft to be discussed, improved upon, fleshed out and perhaps even completely overhauled. The important thing is xxx to implement immediately the Pact for the Transition strategy, and to take action now.

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