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Remember climate change?

Less than two years ago, it seemed that Canadians had finally woken up to the reality of climate change. For many, this was partly due to the extremely mild winter we had that year, a winter that really didn't start until almost February. It provided a first-hand glimpse of what future winters may be like. Public opinion polls showed the environment skyrocketing to the top of our list of concerns. More importantly, people said they were ready to support tough government action on this problem, even if it might affect one's own pocketbook. How quickly things change.

Looking at voting intentions in the coming election, it's clear we have slipped back into complacency on climate change, even in the face of 5000 year old ice shelves collapsing in the Canadian Arctic and one of the worst cyclone years on record in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. It would seem that when the ravages of climate change are occurring in far-flung places, we no longer pay attention. Maybe the rather cool, wet summer we've just been through is partly to blame, as well. The weather has lulled some of us into thinking: "What climate change?" Ironically, some experts are saying the constant rains were themselves linked to a changing climate.

Maybe we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves, though. The very nature of the human brain can also be blamed for our apathy. To humans, the world is primarily one of sight and sound. CO₂, the main greenhouse gas, is not accessible to our senses - we can't see or smell it - so our minds can't really grasp its build-up in the atmosphere. It's not like smoke or other pollutants that are literally in your face. Our brains also have a trouble reacting to slow, incremental change. This makes us vulnerable to the legendary "boiled frog" syndrome. Like the frog sitting motionless in a pan of water that is slowly heating up to the boiling point, we seem unable to act. Despite years of hearing that climate change will wreak havoc on our planet, it is approaching too slowly to trigger our "fight-or-flight" response.

Clearly, knowledge is not enough. It seems to be human nature to act only when we're hit head over the head with a crisis that effects us personally. We block out science's message, especially since some of the more dire impacts are still years away. Maybe we just don't see climate change impacting our own lives enough.

Compare this to the anti-smoking debate. As the scientific evidence of the danger of smoking has rolled in, government action has been decisive and extremely effective. It has produced a societal shift away from tobacco use. To a large extent, this has happened because just about every family has been touched by cancer. Ironically, the science is in on climate change, too. Science knows what it's in store for us and what we have to do to mitigate the worst impacts. However, Canadian governments have essentially done nothing, with the exception of British Columbia. Once again, climate change hasn't affected a critical mass of us yet to really change voting behaviour. It's sad to think we almost need an "environmental Pearl Harbour" before we can act.

Given the reality of human nature and the biology of our brains, climate change is an area where strong political leadership is essential. I'm not talking here about looking and behaving tough, like Mr. Harper. We need politicians who are brave enough to tell us how things really are and forward-thinking enough to propose credible solutions, even though they may appear unattractive at first glance. Ironically, according to the Sierra Club of Canada, every federal party except the Conservatives has a viable program to address climate change.

Take the Liberal Party's idea of a carbon tax, a part of their Green Shift plan. It would put a tax on pollution, in other words a tax on the carbon produced by burning fossil fuels. All of the money raised through this tax would be paid back to people in the form of income and business tax cuts. Both the environment and one's personal finances would benefit. The Green Party's proposal is very similar but even more aggressive. It should be noted that a carbon tax has long been a Green Party position. The N.D.P. also have a strong plan in their cap and trade proposal. It would set mandatory limits on pollution. Companies that reduce emissions below their allowed limit can sell pollution credits to companies that cannot meet their goal.

These are exactly the sorts of policies that the world's leading climate scientists have been asking for. Both approaches have also garnered support from Canadians for Climate Leadership, a group of prominent citizens that includes four former prime ministers, two of which are Progressive Conservatives. Despite all of Stephen Harper's denials, we have to change the way we live and the way we make our money.

Dr. Andrew Weaver, one of Canada's most prominent climate researchers, a co-winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and author of the new book, "Keeping our Cool," argues that the public has not yet captured the scale of the problem. This is not about light bulbs or hybrid cars. According to Dr. Weaver, there is now a consensus that if the worst impacts of climate change are to be avoided, the planet cannot go above 2 C of warming. Because the degree of warming depends on the total amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere, we will hit the 2 C tipping point in 40 years - that is, if today's emissions stay the same. Unfortunately, they continue to go up every year. He goes on to argue that if we are to stay within a capitalist system, emissions have to be priced, and eventually the price has to become so high that emissions essentially stop altogether. This is the only viable way to stabilize the planet's climate systems. By pricing carbon, we will be able to move much more quickly to a world where, for example, electric cars will be running off electricity generated by nuclear energy and wind turbines - a technologically and behaviourally different world. If we continue to do nothing of substance, Weaver sees us heading towards a world of strife in which, among other horrors, environmental refugees fleeing the hardest hit regions of the globe will completely overwhelm neighbouring countries and cause global turmoil.

It's therefore easy to feel a sense of outrage when it comes to the Conservatives' climate change program. According to the Sierra Club, it sets "completely inadequate" targets for reducing greenhouse gases and is also criticized for relying on intensity targets to meet its goals.

In a nutshell, the Conservatives are trying to sell a do-nothing policy. Now, Harper has even proposed to cut the excise tax by half on diesel fuel. This is exactly the opposite of what government should be doing. Even the Globe and Mail, in the lead editorial from September 5th, supported higher gas prices because of the many positive environmental ramifications they have - everything from reducing urban sprawl to encouraging technological innovation.

Steven Harper's blanket dismissal of Dion and his carbon tax is a huge slap in the face to anyone who takes climate change seriously. It is grossly insulting to see how progressive, intelligent, expert-supported policy has been so unfairly trashed by bullying, ridicule and outright lies. I am not arguing this because of any particular political affiliation. I have supported all of the political parties over the years, including Joe Clark's Tories.

Stephen Harper is himself an economist and almost certainly understands that a carbon tax is a good idea. That's probably why he is so vehement in opposing it. A tax on carbon is simply the cheapest way to lower greenhouse gases. At the same time it will lower income taxes which, more than anything, are the taxes that slow the growth of the economy.

Mr. Harper is hoping to convince us it can be business as usual. He says we must be cautious, that now is not the time to bring in change. The subliminal message seems to be that the warnings of scientists don't really need to be heeded. However, we cannot afford another round of posturing and denial about climate change in this election. The lack of a viable program on the part of the Conservatives is profoundly destructive. Unfortunately we might not realize this for a few years to come.

A young man was talking to me the other day about his passion for fishing. It reminded me of my own obsession with birding at the same age. However, I couldn't help but feel somewhat sad. Because of climate change and other environmental threats, his experience of the fishing experience is almost certain to be far less than what present and past generations have been able to enjoy. I feel the same way when talking to any young people who are passionate about the outdoors.

Because of climate change, the natural world is in the process of changing irrevocably. The experience of nature, an immense source of joy and spiritual fulfillment in life, stands to lose so much of the richness it has today. Added to this are the hugely negative economic and social impacts, many of which are totally unpredictable. Future generations will have been deprived of so much. Science is telling us that the worst impacts of climate change can be avoided if we begin to act now, but this is not an issue like the others. There is a time limit, and the clock is ticking.

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