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Towards a Progressive Discourse on Climate Action and Sustainability: Canada in Perspective

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A b s t r a c t

Climate change, energy transition and sustainability are dominant set of themes in global development discourse. Stakeholders and researchers largely agree that, navigating the trio constantly requires urgency, strategy and innovation through a complex set of opportunity costs, policy choices, institutional actions and behavioural changes. In this article, a critical examination of three key themes in the climate change discourse is presented within the context of Canada's energy transition trajectory. The article reveals that, the complexity of climate change communication, the climate change-economic growth trade-off dilemma, as well as institutional enablers and inhibitors to climate action, potentially affect the level of attention stakeholders and policy actors allot to climate action and the need to live sustainably. It also sets the tone for the debate on how climate change research is communicated, the role of public policy and the challenge in achieving a balanced trade-off between economic growth, environmental protection and social development.

[K e y w o r d s]: Climate Change, Sustainability, Energy Transition, Communication, Public Policy

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INTRODUCTION

The energy-climate change nexus continues to attract global attention and dominates the policymaking space of most national governments. Stakeholders such as the science and research community, green interest groups, fossil fuel industry players, policy makers and political actors, continue to explore best possible pathways towards achieving a sustainable energy future that addresses climate change and guarantees global sustainability (Caradonna, 2014; Owusu and Asumadu-Sarkodie, 2016). The Canadian energy policy landscape is dominated by an array of policy players and instruments, for example, federal and provincial institutions ran by alternating political regimes, national policies and intergovernmental protocols on the environment and natural resources. These have been at the heart of Canada's green energy transition, climate change action and strategy, as well as sustainable development initiatives (Supran and Oreskes, 2017; The Hill Times, 2018).

Climate action and sustainability generally require strategic policy choices and implementation which come with opportunity costs, especially at the governmental level. Research (see Rahman et. al., 2017; Newman, 2017; Urry, 2015; UNEP, 2013) indicate that, the earth's eco-systems cannot forever support current levels of economic activities (mainly deriving from energy needs) and forms of material consumption. As a result, new means of living must be explored in ways that are satisfying and supportable of present quality life and within nature's capacity to continue to provide. In this article, we critically analyse selected themes from the literature on climate change and energy transition, while focusing on Canada's low carbon transition initiatives and public policy making and processes.

Climate change communication; the language, manner and medium

Climate change research and findings over the last century have been differently presented (IPCC, 2013; Friedman, 2018). Several national and intergovernmental policy instruments and studies over the period have sought to communicate the exigencies of global warming and its concomitant demand for urgent collective climate action (Newman, 2017). For example, the Kyoto protocol and the IPCC's Working Groups Assessment Reports highlighting the science of climate change,

institutional researches, policy statements by political actors, actions by powerful non-state actors, climate change media reportage as well as industry-funded climate action reports, all seek to communicate but varyingly and with different motivations. A critical appraisal of climate change headlines in Canada also reveals how uneven the tone and nature of language employed has been organised, and how that potentially fuels either denialism of the reality of climate change and despair or provides motivation for pragmatism in climate action (Wallace-Wells, 2017; Supran and Oreskes, 2017; Newman, 2017).

Language and communication in climate change discourse are powerful tools which can potentially sway the level of attention and commitment actors and stakeholders ascribe to climate action from both sides of the climate change divide (Supran and Oreskes, 2017). From the literature (see Friedman, 2018), it is evident that communication holds the power to either assuage denialism and despair or draw some awakening for mitigation. Thus, how actors use language can build or erode the credibility of climate change research, or the legitimacy and potential viability of broader socio-technical interventions aimed at mitigating climate change. Often, the communication approach adopted has failed to assuage the denialism and despair, the myths and sensationalism, but rather have further polarized the debate with regards to politics verses perception, fact verses fiction, and the general myths surrounding climate change (IPCC, 2013; Rosenbloom et. al., 2016). It is evident from the climate change discourse that, based on where one stands on the divide, the manner and inspiration of communication could vary greatly. Actors driven by panic communicate and receive climate change studies differently, whereas those driven by political and economic motivations owing to the status-quo, present and accept different perspectives. Also, traditional climate change activists have different sources of motivation and hence the high intensity and way they present the 'climate change gospel' (The Hill Times, 2018).

Climate change researchers and activists also face a challenge of credibility crises where critics fail to concentrate on the climate change research findings, but rather question researchers' background, expertise, political orientation and perceived motivations. Here, critics often tend to question how climate change research and studies are commissioned, by who and to what end. Such multi-level complexity invariably holds the potential to further fuel denialism and spread despair. Clearly, it is established that climate change advocacy, depending on how it is packaged and communicated, may

connote different exigencies to different 'publics', actors and stakeholders (Calderon, 2018; Supran and Oreskes, 2017; Rosenbloom et. al., 2016).

The climate trade-off; economic growth verses climate action dilemma

Stakeholders in climate action severally and jointly agree to varying extents that, a paradigm shift towards a low-carbon global economy and commitment to climate change mitigation strategies is imperative and economically beneficial (Friedman, 2018). Often, the dilemma among policy actors bothers on the question as to whether climate action is a zero-sum game or inherently has opportunities for a win-win trade-off. This dilemma essentially rests within the puzzle of how much economic growth ought to be traded for climate change mitigation considering that, advancement in one variable implies a decline in the action of the other (The Hill Times, 2018). While contemporary advocates and research continue to establish the economic viability of low carbon transitioning by developing and testing economic models for renewable and clean energy technologies, many also continue to view climate change mitigating strategies broadly as economically disincentive (Haley, 2018; Nelson and Anderies, 2009; Calderon, 2018).

In North America, supporters of a zero-sum assumption like president Donald Trump and his monumentally eccentric climate shift agenda in America, and Canada's Ontario premier, Doug Ford, essentially project climate change mitigation and economic growth as two distinct variable. Consequently, they see any such agenda for a low carbon transition ostensibly as suggesting a huge cut in massive potential revenues derivable from hydrocarbons to propel economic growth (Calderon, 2018). However, contemporary studies and advocacy continue to challenge this notion by projecting climate change mitigation as a strategy presenting opportunities for economic growth and rebate. For example, Haley (2018) highlights the existence of a robust carbon taxing and pricing regime in Canada as well as the investment viability that renewables and clean energy technologies generally hold in the global energy market.

It is evident from the literature that many actors in the climate change fix see climate change mitigation as a clear miss and a deviation in the economic growth equation. In this regard, political establishments in Canada motivated by political capital, and with ambitions to pursue rapid economic transformation, rarely see the essence to trade off growth for environmental protection

(Toner, 2016). This is often reflective in the policy direction assigned to environmental governance, the allocation of political will and the general commitment to climate action (Toner and McKee, 2014). For example, the Trump administration and Ontario's premier Doug Ford are classic cases of how eccentric the trade-off dilemma can make political actors deviate from the path of concrete global and national climate change mitigation agenda. In Canada and over the past decades, it is observed that friction exists between Harper's wedge political legacy in the past and Trudeau's current transformative climate action vision. Also, lack of climate change policy coherence and commitment between Ottawa and the Canadian provinces owing to provincial autonomy, makes any national agenda to achieve a collective balanced trade-off even more difficult (Toner and McKee, 2014; Nelson and Anderies, 2009).

Enablers and inhibitors to climate action

Essentially, climate action involves a wide array of policy makers and instruments, requires resources, players' commitment, policy coherence and direction as well as a broader institutional and attitudinal change at the global, national, industry and individual levels (Toner and McKee, 2014; Calderon, 2018). Like the cold war of the past, climate change and climate action is such a polarised crusade with visible factions and actors such that, both tangible and intangible institutional enablers and inhibitors exist, are often employed and are in constant friction at the global level between socio-economic, market and political ideologies, as well as regimes and their transitions (Rosenbloom et. al., 2016). In a broader sense, denialists and pragmatists exist and often hold diverging beliefs in different pathways to low carbon energy transitioning and the adoption of climate change mitigating strategies. At the national level, tensions exist between conservatives and liberals, government and industry, interest groups and state institutions.

Within Canada's federal-province policy jurisdiction for example, friction constantly abound between the federal power's climate action agenda and individual provincial agenda as is the current situation between Trudeau's eminent agenda of low carbon transition and Ontario premier Doug Ford's opposing energy policy direction (Rosenbloom et. al., 2016). These tension and friction often seep down to relations between interest groups on one hand and state institutions and industry on the other hand. In many jurisdictions, advocacy and activism is matched with hard opposition, where

state and institutional apparatus are deployed to physically obstruct a course of action or advocacy. This raises serious concerns about state power, ethics, and climate activism. Again, inasmuch as policy, power and bureaucracies as instruments have enhanced the implementation of climate action the world over, critics argue that excessive red-tapism, unsophisticated regulatory regimes and lack of policy coherence undermine energy policy efficacy (Livesey, 2017; Toner and McKee, 2014).

Coherent climate action policy and consistent regime support are essential enablers to climate action progress. Many studies also point to political transition and democratic institutions generally as having the potency to impact energy and environmental policy durability (Toner et. al., 2016; Toner and McKee, 2014; Rosenbloom et al 2016). They establish that transitions, regulatory regimes and bureaucracies tend to inhibit progress towards a uniform and concrete climate action agenda. These studies point to Canada's classic example of Trudeau verses Harper at the federal level; suggesting how Harper's perspective regarding the environment shaped his policy direction, and how he structured state institutions as against Trudeau's chosen path where seemingly there is more transparency and cooperation. Again, Kathleen Wynne and Doug Ford at the provincial level where regime change is significantly reshaping energy policy in Ontario. Thus, regime change often implies change in climate action policy which often may reverse progress and gains made. Often, political actors embark on different institutional reforms that seek either to promote or downgrade gains made in previous climate change agenda. Thus, scholars generally agree that for climate change policy to be effective and durable, they must withstand the test of electoral turns (Toner et. al., 2016; Toner and McKee, 2014; Rosenbloom et. al., 2016).

Conclusion

This article sought to explore literature on climate change by critically examining three core thematic areas within the broader climate change discourse; that is *(1) the complexity of climate change communication, (2) the climate change-economic growth trade off and (3) the institutional enablers and inhibitors to climate action.* The objective is to continually set the tone for ongoing and future discussions on climate change and energy transition in Canada. As noted, most provincial elections in Canada are decided mainly on the green transition and climate change issues. Again, the federal government, industry players and the oppositions in Canada are in constant engagements

to present the best policy alternative that assures Canadians of an accelerated green economy transition. Stakeholders such as Canadian researchers, the media in Canada and green interest groups across North America also continue to shape policies on climate cange and energy transition. It is the recommendation of this paper that, such constant engagements and deliberations are crucial in promoting sustainability ideals and hastening the green economy transition agenda in Canada. Again, the transition from fossil fuels to green energy must happen in a more strategic way so as to curb climate change while upholding economic growth. Finally, climate change research must be presented in simple, non-complex language devoid of sensationalism in order to inspire the need for action now among policymakers and stakeholders.

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