

From: Heather Exner-Pirot and Charles DeLand
To: Energy and Environment Policymakers
Date: July 8, 2024
Re: **A REALITY CHECK ON CANADIAN CLIMATE CHANGE THINKING**

This country needs to have a serious conversation. One that recognizes the challenges posed by a warming world – not least an increase in wildfires, drought and heat waves that have affected almost every Canadian – and grapples with the challenge inherent in matching our climate policy ambitions with taxpayers’ appetite to pay for them, government capacity to implement them, and society’s ability to transform its energy use.

Other countries can only dream of Canada’s enormous reserves of natural resources, and our standard of living depends greatly on exports of minerals, coal, hydroelectricity and, especially, oil and gas. As with most human activity, extracting and using these resources often imposes negative environmental effects. But the response cannot be to punish and phase out our extractive sectors. There are substantial negative economic trade-offs and logistical constraints (such as constitutional challenges) to such a strategy.

So much of the debate is dominated by the loudest, most vested interests. But what do the silent majority of Canadians – those who care more about paying their bills or picking their kids up from childcare than arguments about pipelines or heat pumps on the op-ed pages or on social media – think about these issues?

To hear their perspective, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute and the C.D. Howe Institute commissioned new [polling](#) from Nanos Research to gauge Canadians’ views on energy and climate – surveying 1,237 people, 18 and older, over the course of three days in April.

Not surprisingly, it found that Canadians are a pragmatic bunch. Affordability was ranked as their top energy concern in the next five years, with reliability coming in second. Lowering emissions was most likely to be ranked last among energy concerns, coming after safety. Canadians’ preoccupation with the cost of living also coloured views on the carbon tax: 55 percent opposed it, while just 32 percent of respondents supported it.

There is growing consensus in Canada on the role, and rights, of Indigenous peoples in energy development. A strong majority – 79 percent – thought it important for the government of Canada to consult with Indigenous peoples when developing energy development policies, and 78 percent thought Indigenous peoples should play some role in informing energy policies.

Canadians are also pretty clear on the role oil and gas plays in our economy and in our place in the world. A majority – 65 percent – support building liquified natural gas export facilities, versus just 20 percent who are opposed. The oil and gas sector is currently important to Canada’s economy, say 74 percent and just over half (53 percent) think it will remain so.

In general, respondents were dissatisfied with the federal government’s handling of energy and climate policy. Only 28 percent think it is doing a good job meeting Canada’s climate targets, and only 27 percent think it is doing a good job ensuring energy is affordable for Canadians.

Finally, on the topic of developing a shared long-term vision for Canada’s energy future, 59 percent say the government is doing a poor or very poor job, versus just 9 percent who replied good or very good.

Where does that leave our conversation? If there was ever a time where Canadian energy policy could be determined looking only through a lens of climate change, that time is over. The desire for economic growth, affordability, reliability and security will trump sustainability when push comes to shove. Addressing these issues holistically can help avoid the unsavoury task of choosing between them.

Many of us have acted as though energy and climate policy is about driving a narrative; about convincing enough of our fellow Canadians of the merits of our respective arguments that we finally get our way.

This has turned into a cynical shell game unworthy of the challenge ahead of us. Policymakers and governments, federal and provincial, must be pragmatic and rational, alive to the unintended consequences of our actions, and honest about the real costs and trade-offs involved in energy and climate strategies.

There is more consensus among Canadians on these strategies than our polarized politics would indicate, from approval for more resource development, to prioritization of affordability issues, and support for greater Indigenous involvement. Rather than aggravating divisions and spouting unrealistic aspirational statements as gospel, Canadians expect their leaders to have the adult conversations necessary to build a future based on consensus and pragmatic solutions.

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A version of this Memo first [appeared](#) in The Globe and Mail.