

Roundtable One: Where have we seen progress, and what are biggest challenges?

Discussion Summary #1

Jenna Phillips, Tatyana Feiner and Ryan Durante

With the support of the Laurier Centre for the Study of Canada at Wilfrid Laurier University and the Balsillie School of International Affairs, this workshop brought together contributors with diverse knowledge and experience to share their research findings and undertake a collective 'taking stock' of the current state of governing the Green Transition in Canada. Reflecting the complexity of this sustainability governance challenge in Canada, the research team was interdisciplinary and diverse; contributors were political scientists and public policy experts, as well as geographers, lawyers, business professors, economists, sociologists, biologists and international relations specialists, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous experts.

Specifically, the project contributors were tasked with investigating, in their own subject matter areas, whether they see evidence of *transformational changes* with respect to: (1) *perspectives* and knowledge systems (how dominant values and attitudes, ways of understanding frame our choices); (2) decision-making *processes* (who is making decisions affecting our future and how they are made); and (3) *policies* (courses of action undertaken by government, including objectives, instruments and program design). Contributors were brought together to assess, compare and integrate their individual findings under these three 'umbrellas' in order to identify cross-cutting insights with regard to the opportunities for, and obstacles to, transformative change as well as to develop a set of policy recommendations on the way forward.

The first roundtable with contributors set the tone for the rest of the workshop. As part of their introductions, the authors began the roundtable by bringing forward key insights from their respective subject matter areas. They were prompted by two questions: first, what is the most positive development, activity, or trend you see in your area, indicating progress; and, second, what is one thing that remains a significant challenge in your area? The responses were grouped under the three umbrellas: perspectives, processes, and policies.

Where have we seen progress?

In terms of the *perspectives* broadly present in Canada, in general, contributors noted that the Green Transition and sustainability are being taken seriously and are on both public and private agendas. As one contributor put it: “From dairy farmers to organic producers to mega corporations, everyone is thinking about this stuff.” This shift is mirrored in public opinion, wherein Canadians prioritize environmental issues and climate change, and they want something done about it. Canada’s youth, in particular, seem to “get it” and are the source of considerable activism. Governments at all levels are integrating sustainability considerations into their policy objectives and programming. And private sector actors are considering more carefully the environmental impacts of their revenue-generating practices. While it was noted that there are often diverse conversations happening at multiple levels with respect to what exactly we are trying to operationalize – such as with respect to sustainable agriculture, for example – sustainability and climate change are nevertheless on people’s minds and seem here to stay. Moreover, one contributor also noted that there has been a greater openness recently to the phrase “environmental racism” at a federal parliamentary level as well as “environmental rights” and “rights of nature” – there might thus be some seeds of change here in how we are framing the Green Transition policy challenge.

Relatedly, contributors noted that there is a greater emphasis now on systems thinking and cumulative effects. The Green Transition clearly requires a holistic view of the challenges facing society today and collective action across public, private, and civil society actors. Contributors noted the growing linkage between environmental health and water as a human right, as well as human and environmental health. Systems thinking has been aided by a greater capacity for modelling change, especially in the energy sector. Modelling allows for a finer-grained analysis of what pathways or scenarios for the future look like and how to get there. It exposes the gaps in current processes and guidance for redirecting future processes. This modelling is aided by the burgeoning pool of environmental data being collected by research institutions and through citizen science alike.

Significantly, contributors also pointed to the growing recognition of the role of Indigenous peoples in this space, and the centering of Indigenous knowledge and values in governance and policy *processes*. This is very apparent in the water policy space, for example. Another contributor noted that a shift is occurring in the public and private realms from ‘consulting’ and ‘engaging’ Indigenous peoples to recognizing Indigenous leadership and authority in decision-making, as well as ownership of projects. It was pointed out that Canada’s adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2016 has helped to place Indigenous rights at the centre of domestic practices. The ‘language of consent,’ as one contributor put it, has become a foundational principle in these processes. This can be seen in environmental assessment processes under the new *Impact Assessment Act*, for instance, which another contributor considers a “game-changer” in terms of making governance practices more equitable.

This recognition can also be seen in the growing emphasis on indigenous-led renewable energy development, equity ownership arrangements and process-based experiments at the municipal level and in Northern and Indigenous communities. Real changes are also in evidence in the biodiversity field, with indigenous-led governance front-and-centre in the transition away from the traditional protected areas model to indigenous-led governance models via Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) and the Guardians program. A contributor also pointed to the potential for enhanced consideration of cumulative environmental impacts on treaty rights as a result of the [Blueberry River case](#), which could change assumptions about how natural resource and industrial development processes should occur.

This discussion was tempered, however, by one contributor who explained that there are real differences across regions in terms of the amount of strategic/policy influence that Indigenous communities actually have over natural resource development. It was noted that the James Bay Cree and Haida Gwaii have more fully developed and institutionalized arrangements (not quite co-management) that have provide better strategic influence over policy and objectives, as well as consultation structures that are much more explicit and go further, than is the case in most other forestry sector arenas.

Finally, these shifts in the perspectives and processes toward a focus on the Green Transition appear to be reflected to some extent in *policies*. There are legislative requirements for Ministers to deliver on sustainability objectives (e.g., *Fisheries Act*), and more requirements for public and private actors alike to deliver on sustainability criteria in projects that never used to make links to social or environmental health. A prime example raised by multiple authors is the rise of environmental social governance (ESG) standards in the business realm, and the impact this is having on industry strategies and capital investments. Further, several authors emphasized the extent to which carbon pricing has embedded itself into Canadian policy frameworks, with industrial carbon pricing particularly strong; while the details of carbon policies may look different across jurisdictions, there is a consensus on the need to address industrial emissions across Canada and on the broad idea of an emissions cap in oil and gas. The coal phase-outs were also mentioned as a substantive victory. In addition, the federal Sustainable Jobs Plan and the proposed legislation provide more institutionalized support for a Just Transition, and ties together many important policies with an emphasis on labour and industrial strategies. And, we can see the beginnings of a continental perspective in terms of developing value chains to shore up the electrification of transport and a critical mineral strategy through recent interactions with the U.S. Biden administration.

What are the key challenges?

The key challenge in terms of trying to change *perspectives* to support the Green Transition became known as “carbon tunnel vision” for the rest of the workshop. This refers to the over-emphasis on energy and carbon policies in the realm of sustainability, which is counterintuitive in terms of the need for systems thinking in Green Transition strategies. In this respect, the need to centre biodiversity protection in the Green Transition was a matter of considerable discussion, given its foundational role in health/wellbeing/prosperity – we thus cannot focus exclusively on climate change and the low carbon economy. It was noted that not a single indicator (ecosystem or taxonomic) shows improvement, and biodiversity protection must be a priority. In addition, given that there is public support not just for the energy transition, but for environmental values, framing biodiversity as an inherent part of the transition may be a public engagement opportunity that we are missing out on.

Related to this carbon tunnel vision, contributors noted that we are lacking a broad understanding of what a *just* transition is. *Green* does not inherently mean *just*, and an equitable, justice-oriented society requires a transition that prioritizes fairness across interconnected environmental, social, and economic systems. The need for a just transition has been advocated for by civil society organizations, environmental and social activists, and even government and private firms – yet there is no vision with a consensus that says our Green Transition will prioritize inclusivity, let alone a strategy for getting to such a future. Public opinion surveys also show that Canadians do not tend to recognize the social justice dimensions of the Green Transition.

Another dangerous perspective that hinders our ability to accelerate the Green Transition was described as “double-think” by another contributor. This refers to a deeply-rooted denial among Canadians that we must fundamentally transform the perspectives and processes that govern our carbon-dependent society; instead, we believe that we can continue our reliance on fossil fuels because there are surely technological innovations to reduce our emissions. It was pointed out that this perspective allows us to ignore the problem of over-consumption as the basis of our economy. This feeds into what the authors called the “myth of abundance,” even though our resources are actually finite. We want a fast transition, but don’t actually accept the changes that need to be made in order to effect any kind of transition; in fact, Canadians show low levels of willingness to change their behaviour and strong adherence to the belief that we can transition with technology, rather than transform the fundamentals of our economy and society.

The carbon tunnel vision and double-think is reflected in the *processes* that govern the Green Transition. Several contributors made reference to concentrated corporate power embedded in our decision-making structures which drains political will and resists transformation. Instead, we are seeing what one contributor called “the triumph of the incumbents”, whereby big corporate actors (e.g., mining, oil and gas, industrial forestry and agriculture) are hijacking the climate change agenda to pursue long-standing policy agendas that may or may not have very much to do with climate change mitigation, and in fact

may carry very significant climate change, environmental, economic, social and cultural risks of their own. At the very least, this shifts attention away from transformational strategies and instead toward incremental approaches that would only very gradually transition to more sustainable economic activities. Although we face, according to one contributor, the overarching problem of time and urgency, we are being prevented from moving past incremental solutions because the same voices are dominating dialogue with the same ideas and processes. Thus, we may very well end up keeping the same inadequate approaches to sustainability because of the persistence of corporate power in our political and economic power structures. The most high-profile example in this regard is the persistence of fossil fuel subsidies.

And there are perils for environmental organizations and activists here. Concern was expressed that environmental groups and civil society organizations taking part in transitional processes need to walk a fine line between fulfilling more traditional roles around knowledge generation and brokerage, policy advocacy and policy evaluation and forcing accountability on the part of government and the private sector vs. lending legitimacy to "intermediary" organizations and processes.

A lack of effective accountability and incentive structures, according to the contributors, undergird these power dynamics. One contributor referred to the complete absence of collective accountability in terms of the federal cabinet; instead, Ministers and staff stay in their narrowly defined 'lanes', and there is no chance that more cohesive decision-making occurs. Another contributor noted that a lack of transparency in the private sector impedes corporate accountability for unsustainable activities and that watchdog organizations are needed. And, as one contributor predicted, we are unlikely to get judicial remedies for missed climate targets or a lack of action, so improved accountability is not likely to result from legal action.

In addition, there was a broad consensus among contributors that there is a high level of fragmentation across Green Transition-related institutions and policies, and a long way to go to foster the intersectoral and horizontal collaboration necessary for an equitable, sustainable future. For instance, the authors found that issues related to energy, food insecurity, and health are rarely actually linked in policy practice. Further, practitioners specialized in each field seldom work together even though the success of their Green Transition work depends on being deeply interlinked with others. There are also siloes across sectors, with academics, scientists, politicians, business owners, and civil society activists all working to develop solutions to the same issue without collaborating. Contributors noted that this is a missed opportunity to pool resources, exchange knowledge, build skills, and foster a holistic perspective on the problems at hand.

One contributor summed up the broad sentiment about processes by noting that we need more inclusive, deliberate, long-term processes that bring in diverse voices and can foster learning. However, there is a lack of capacity in terms of understanding what transformational policy-making processes look like and how they can happen; instead, we end up with basic multi-stakeholderism which results in the most powerful voices having their preferences reflected in policy outcomes. In this vein, another

contributor noted that we lack good indicators to even assess whether ‘meaningful participation’ – i.e., of Indigenous peoples – is occurring. Another noted that policy processes are highly technical and bureaucratic, and opportunities for engagement are framed in the context of ministerial priorities, with the result that these processes are inaccessible to local and Indigenous communities; a good example here is the forestry sector. It was further noted that our federal and intergovernmental institutions and processes were not set up to facilitate policy learning and incentivize action.

As a result of process fragmentation, narrow accountability structures and a lack of meaningful participation by diverse voices, there is limited coherence among *policies* promoting the Green Transition, resulting in overlap or tensions between jurisdictions and sectors. These policies are seen to operate in siloes, even though what happens in forestry will affect water resources, and what happens in water will affect food and energy production, etc. With all of these disconnected and siloed policies that seemingly promote different visions, this ultimately led to a big question that the authors kept returning to over the span of the workshop: what does a Green Transition look like? They argued that each policy seems to promote a different idea and values of a Green Transition. This lack of consensus around the vision of our policies for a Green Transition is a fundamental gap that must be closed.

The Bigger Picture

As the roundtable came to a close, one thing was clear: we need coherence around a vision for the Green Transition, with normative commitments built into our overarching strategy. We then need to embed these normative values to make inclusive perspectives, processes, and policies “sticky,” that is, durable across temporal, spatial, and political boundaries. Durability is of considerable concern, given the level of political risk around climate policy currently. While even five years ago it seemed as if there was a political consensus on climate policy, partisan opposition to climate and environmental policy is growing on the right, both at the provincial and federal levels.

The ultimate takeaway from the first roundtable is that the Green Transition is a complex, iterative process with no single solution or strategy. Progress is being made toward the Green Transition, but it is too slow and siloed to achieve an equitable, low-carbon society just yet. The subsequent roundtables picked up on this conclusion to ask: where do we go from here?