

Practitioner Roundtable: Reflections on the Green Transition in Canada

Discussion Summary

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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 the 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 the 3Ps: (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 workshop included two different discussions with leaders outside of academe to gain more insight into trends and dynamics in Canada that are impacting Green Transition efforts, and we include their insights in this Summary. First, workshop participants had an online discussion on Day 1 with John McNally, Program Director, Clean and Resilient Growth, Smart Prosperity Institute and James Meadowcroft, from the Transition Accelerator and Carleton University. In addition, the culminating event of the workshop on Day 2 was a practitioner roundtable discussion with: Sandra Schwartz, the National Executive Director of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS); Theresa McClenaghan, Executive Director and Counsel of the Canadian Environmental Lawyers Association (CELA); Peter Massie, Manager of Strategic Policy and Techno-Economic Analysis with the Office of Energy Research and Development in National Resources Canada (NRCan); and Marisa Beck, Clean Growth Director at the Canadian Climate Institute (CCI).

How do we know that a Green Transition is occurring?

The first issue addressed by all of the practitioners was how *they* understood the ‘Green Transition’ term itself, i.e., what do they look for when seeking signs that a transition is occurring? One practitioner immediately pointed out that the Green Transition involves not one transition, but rather multiple transitions. Even in order to achieve the more narrow goal of a net-zero economy, multiple sectors of Canada’s governance structure must be tackled, and this means that there are many different places to start as well as destinations to focus on, when practitioners and scholars are thinking about the Green Transition. Broadening the focus to encompass biodiversity, equity and Reconciliation – an enduring theme at the workshop – makes the picture considerably more complex.

Within the discourse on transitioning towards cleaner economic growth, another practitioner introduced a conceptual framework that defines clean growth as the “process of decoupling economic growth from carbon emissions, while simultaneously incorporating strategies for adaptation”. In the Canadian context, this framework necessitates the development of initiatives aimed at enhancing the country’s resilience to extreme weather events, which can also contribute positively to the country’s economic prospects. This can be achieved through the adoption of catalyzers such as low-carbon resilient trade, investment in sustainable infrastructure, development of green jobs, and technological innovation, all founded on principles of affordability, resiliency, and environmental sustainability.

While Canada has generally been seen as a ‘transition-taker’ and has considerable work to do as it positions itself to compete in the burgeoning green economy, it was argued that the country is moving in the right direction, given the entrenchment of carbon pricing in policy frameworks and the concentrated focus on attracting green capital investments. Another practitioner noted that, with the passage of the *Inflation Reduction Act* in the United States in 2022, Canada has responded in kind with the 2023 federal budget allocating a substantial investment in renewable and sustainable energy and infrastructure (Department of Finance Canada, 2023).

A different approach to seeking out signs of a Green Transition discussed by practitioners involved examining dynamics *within* those organizations that need to be leading, i.e., are government departments changing their goals and objectives, are they mainstreaming climate change, are they using tools to implement ‘policy pushes’ for change and are they more inclusive in terms of how they make decisions? In this respect, one practitioner feared that there has actually been very little change within government, which remains mired in structural and political constraints, automatically opposes significant change and has not changed its decision processes. Even Environment and Climate Change Canada, which has considerably more power in the federal decision-making system than it used to have, was portrayed as being reluctant to push or to be a leader.

On the other hand, another practitioner argued that we have begun to see a value shift on the part of businesses and governments, particularly within regard to openness to supporting and pursuing new

technologies. And, as renewables and green technologies have experienced a significant reduction in their costs, consumers have demonstrated an increasing interest, e.g., electric vehicles (EVs). Some practitioners observed that Canada is primed to be able to take advantage of these changing dynamics on the international stage.

It was noted, however, that there does *not* appear to be a strong consensus on the values that we associate with the Green Transition in Canada. It may seem that the primary focus is on the low carbon economy. But if so, why invest any resources in the oil and gas industry? Why the persistence of subsidies? Is there a broader mandate, i.e., where does equity fit in and what does it look like? There was agreement around the table that “a lot has changed over the past few years” in terms of Canadians and their public officials, as well as private sector leaders, accepting and acting on environmental and climate concerns, yet it was also noted that there is strong opposition to key elements of the Green Transition, which appears to be gaining strength politically. As a result, policies are contradictory or half-hearted.

What is the role of Equity in the Green Transition?

Practitioners also discussed the need for attending to equity concerns associated with a Green Transition, with one practitioner kicking off this topic by asking: “is it worth decarbonizing an unjust society?” In other words, what is the point of decarbonization, both domestically in Canada and in the broader context of the global climate regime, if there is no sustainable and equitable access to food or water, etc? Several practitioners noted that there needs to be a concerted effort to shift the values associated with the Green Transition, with one practitioner pointing out that, even within academia, equity consistently receives little recognition within the climate debate.

Throughout the workshop, scholars had noted that there seems to be a “carbon tunnel vision” with the way the discussions were unfolding, which leaves out vast areas of the climate conversation, such as conservation and biodiversity loss, Indigenous reconciliation, and social equity. Practitioners agreed. One practitioner pointed to systemic barriers to equity-driven environmental policies, stating that there is a very small chance that institutions and systems will change to facilitate new types of policy approaches.

It was also argued that policy elites (scholars and those within government and policy circles) must recognize and pursue Indigenous Reconciliation, despite the difficulties associated with changing institutions and governance systems. One practitioner emphasized that environmental organizations also require significant structural reorganization and recognition of their elitism to effectively support Indigenous Reconciliation, for example. It was recommended that those who are currently in positions of power should prioritize supporting Indigenous efforts towards climate transition rather than imposing their own agenda. This is the very work that is being done, for example, within CPAWS: there has

historically been massive amounts of Indigenous oppression with parks and conservation policies and actions, and CPAWS has recognized this. Much of the effort to conserve 30% of Canada's land, it was argued, needs to be Indigenous-led, and this policy shift will affect not only how CPAWS works with government, but also the various Indigenous Nations who will engage with CPAWS, not simply as stakeholders, but owners and leaders.

In the course of this discussion, one of the project contributors touched on the issue of 'elitist' notions of transition, and climate action more broadly. While we *should* be looking for the decline of incumbent industries such as oil and gas – that diminishment of power also goes hand in hand with job losses. It is virtually impossible, both practitioners and scholars agreed, to avoid having winners and losers in the course of the various transition processes that are occurring. Green Transition policy and programming must directly address these realities.

One practitioner also highlighted several so-called 'invisible' inequities within the governance system: the lack of participation by underserved communities, the limited access to the decision-making table and, indeed, the mechanisms that serve to exclude particular groups from key conversations. Focusing on and attempting to tackle these inequities, with respect to the Green Transition, is very threatening to those who wish to continue with a 'business-as-usual approach' and engenders opposition.

In addition, the practitioners recognized that there was an anthropocentric and carbon-centric focus in the overall aims of the Green Transition workshop, and that the Green Transition was still centred around humans, not the planet. There was a recognition of a greater need for the Green Transition to have a focus on biodiversity loss, as biodiversity is equally if not more important than simply decarbonizing our economy as it is foundational to life itself.

How can we get progress faster?

Under the current Trudeau government, economics and environment are being considered hand-in-hand to a greater extent than before, and Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) has become an increasingly influential Department within the state apparatus. However, it was also noted that transforming Canada towards a Green Transition requires a whole-of-government approach – finances for subsidies to traditional industries need to be re-evaluated, modelling for critical issues such as biodiversity must be met with the same enthusiasm as it is for carbon modelling, and solutions need to be taken out of a partisan context and re-framed into an embedded *Canadian* outcome. This is currently lacking. And practitioners agreed that the doors of power and influence must be pushed open to allow more individuals with interdisciplinary backgrounds at the decision-making table, with an emphasis on youth and Indigenous people.

While some change is occurring (as discussed above), it was observed that this is happening at a slow pace, due to a variety of obstacles in the governance architecture. One issue that practitioners highlighted was the lack of understanding within government about what “net-zero” actually means for policy and the economy, and how business-as-usual must change. One practitioner explained that there is pressure for significant change from junior- to middle-level officials, and from politicians, but that the “deputy minister cohort” is very conservative, risk-averse and really slowing things down. It also doesn’t help, as another noted, that DMs are generalists and not knowledgeable about the issues and the crisis. Neither do they tend to be interdisciplinary, a skill which is needed in engaging in Green Transition planning.

One practitioner argued that it is possible to get around structural obstacles to change if there is enough time to build appropriate coalitions – the problem is that we don’t have enough time. Another explained that many, if not most, of the things that hold back clean growth and climate policy are the same problems that we see in other areas, e.g., regulatory capture by large corporations, a lack of cohesion between levels of government, etc. Thus, we need to focus on removing these obstacles, many of which are not in explicit opposition to climate progress but rather are simply the products of a point in time when environmental protection did not figure into our economic and social planning. In fact, it was remarked that we have a tendency to overlook how small, focused, strategic change at multiple points in the decision-making system can add up to transformation – we tend to look for revolution instead of reform. Practitioners emphasized that most of the change we accomplish in the future will likely emerge out of reforms using the models we have, through detailed analysis of process, understanding what is wrong and what stakeholders need, and then undertaking change. One hope is that the focus on “industrial policy” is putting some creativity back into policy-making for the first time in a long time. An example here is the Resource and Energy Tables organized by NRCan that are regionally focused, are bringing federal and provincial governments into collaboration and are helping to identify strategic objectives and a vision in certain sectors.

Another practitioner pointed out that the transition process “looks different for every sector, every region, every community.” While more broadly-based socio-technical or market-based mechanisms needs to be put in place, there are many clean growth problems that can only be solved via a “place-based approach”, they argued. Local governments often understand challenges better, recognize that policy solutions need to address multiple problems at once and, because of resource constraints, can come up with creative solutions. Yet local authorities have real capacity and resource constraints that need to be directly addressed.

The seeds of change and progress can also be found where “intermediary organizations” are operating, organizations which are neither government nor business and which involve think tanks and civil society groups in collaborative arrangements with a specific purpose, e.g., electrification, Edmonton Hydrogen Hub, critical minerals supply. Such intermediary organizations help governments better understand what problems need to be solved by fostering a common understanding across sectors and groups. In

this respect, Canada has much to learn from the European context, which has a rich community development framework, including funding that is collaborative and non-competitive, as well as a model that encourages dynamism. But another significant strength of boundary organizations is that they ask tough questions about how to actually achieve the Green Transition-related targets that governments have set.

How can we create more durable Green Transition governance and policy frameworks? Concern was expressed by several participants at the roundtable about the possibility of a reversal in climate policy advancements made over the past decade in the event that a new government that is ideologically opposed to climate policy, energy transitions, Reconciliation etc. comes to power. The practitioners and several scholars agreed that while the parliamentary process is an important way to facilitate change and nongovernmental organizations have more influence in pushing forward Green Transition planning and policy, governments (especially in a majority situation) can effectively scrap any policy or legislation that runs counter to their political agenda, with climate currently being a hotly contested political issue. How then to make Green Transition policies more durable?

One practitioner argued that, from an economic perspective, reversing the Green Transition path that Canada is moving towards would be very damaging to Canada. The risks of *not* participating in the green economy and staying out of emerging green markets would negatively impact the future prospects of the Canadian economy – and this will be evident to any government coming in.

Another noted that intermediary organizations, mentioned above, serve to build up links between innovative businesses, governments and civil society, which may increase the durability of resulting policies and initiatives.

References:

Finance Canada. 2023. “A Made-In-Canada Plan: Affordable Energy, Good Jobs, and a Growing Clean Economy”.