

Sustainability within a Generation

A NEW VISION FOR CANADA

BY DAVID R. BOYD LL.B.

Canadians are among the most staunchly pro-environment citizens on the planet. According to Statistics Canada, nine out of ten Canadians rate the environment as one of their top concerns.¹ However, despite our strong values and extraordinary natural assets, Canada is struggling environmentally.² We finished 28th out of the 29 developed nations in an extensive Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study that examined 25 key indicators in categories including air, water, energy, waste, climate change, ozone depletion, agriculture, transportation, and biological diversity.

There is a disturbing gap between our environmental values and poor environmental record. To close this gap, Canada needs to develop and implement an ambitious new environmental, economic, and social agenda.

The goal of this new agenda is to make Canada a world leader in sustainability by 2030.

Sustainability is neither a lofty ideal nor an academic concept, but an urgent imperative for humanity. Sustainability means living within the Earth's limits. In a sustainable future, no Canadian would think twice about going outside for a walk or drinking a glass of tap water. Food would be free from pesticide residues, antibiotics, and growth hormones. Air, water, and soil would be uncontaminated by toxic substances. In a sustainable future, it would be safe to swim in every Canadian river and lake; safe to eat fish wherever they were caught. Clean, renewable energy would be generated by harnessing the sun, the wind, water, and heat of the Earth.

A sustainable future would mean a global climate undisturbed by human impacts. Canadians would no longer fear sunburn or cancer caused by damage to the ozone layer. No one would worry about nature's extraordinary diversity diminishing at human hands. Endangered ecosystems and species would recover and thrive. Canadians would be confident that future generations would enjoy the same spectacular natural heritage and quality of life that we enjoy today. Canada should strive to be the world's most environmentally friendly nation, making waste, pollution, and ecosystem destruction remnants of the past.



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SOLUTIONS ARE IN OUR NATURE

ROOT CAUSES OF CANADIAN UNSUSTAINABILITY

Over-consumption is the main reason for Canada's environmental woes.³ As the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation points out, our "prevailing emphasis on consumption – with high levels of waste, energy use, and greenhouse gas emissions – jeopardizes the capacity of natural resources and systems to support future generations."⁴ In this context, consumption refers to the energy and resources consumed not only by individuals, but by the entire industrial economy in Canada.

Reducing our consumption of resources does not mean reducing our quality of life. For example, switching to a car that uses half as much fuel or a refrigerator that uses one-tenth of the electricity, protects the environment, saves money, and provides the same level of service and satisfaction. Reducing consumption of resources does not mean the end of economic growth either, since we can exchange more dollars while using fewer resources. Our economy could continue to grow by adding value to natural resources extracted and harvested in Canada and providing services rather than producing more products.

MOVING FORWARD: CRITICAL CHALLENGES

In order to move towards a prosperous, just and sustainable future, Canada must concentrate its efforts on nine critical challenges:

GENERATING GENUINE WEALTH: Supplementing the narrow goal of economic growth with the objective of genuine wealth

IMPROVING EFFICIENCY: Increasing the efficiency of energy and resource use by a factor of four to 10 times

SHIFTING TO CLEAN ENERGY: Replacing fossil fuels with clean, low-impact renewable sources of energy

REDUCING WASTE AND POLLUTION: Moving from a linear "throw-away" economy to a cyclical "reduce, re-use, and recycle" economy

PROTECTING AND CONSERVING WATER: Recognizing and respecting the value of water in our laws, policies, and actions

PRODUCING HEALTHY FOOD: Ensuring Canadian food is healthy, and produced in ways that do not compromise our land, water, or biodiversity

CONSERVING, PROTECTING AND RESTORING CANADIAN NATURE: Taking effective steps to stop the decline of biodiversity and revive the health of ecosystems

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE CITIES: Avoiding urban sprawl in order to protect agricultural land and wild places, and improve our quality of life

PROMOTING GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY: Increasing Canada's contribution to sustainable development in poor countries

POLICY SHIFTS

Addressing the foregoing challenges requires a number of innovative policy initiatives that cut across jurisdictions and departmental mandates. They must also provide benefits at multiple levels. Isolated environmental policies and actions will not work. The next generation of environmental laws and policies must embody fundamental principles including intergenerational equity, polluter pays, user pays, pollution prevention, ecological design, extended producer responsibility and adaptive management.⁵

Ecological fiscal reform is the use of various financial incentives and disincentives to achieve ecological sustainability. These are tools that continue to allow the market to send price signals but overcome market distortions that ignore environmental costs. Three key policies that are part of ecological fiscal reform are tax shifting, eliminating perverse subsidies, and increasing investment in the environment.

- The basic premise behind ecological tax shifting is that society should stop taxing activities it wants to encourage and start taxing activities it wants to discourage. Instead of taxing employment, work, and investment, taxes should gradually be applied on (or more heavily) on natural resource use, pollution, and waste.
- Perverse subsidies occur when governments subsidize environmentally destructive behaviour. This penalizes Canadians twice. First, Canadians pay for subsidies such as direct financial payments or tax credits. (For example, both federal and provincial governments continue to subsidize the exploration and development of fossil fuels.) Second, Canadians bear the direct and indirect costs of ecological damage such as degradation of natural resources, environmental restoration expenses, losses suffered by other sectors, and increased health care costs.
- Increasing investment in the environment means Canada must reverse the shrinking budgets devoted to environmental protection. As a general rule, a nation's commitment to sustainability can be measured by the amount of money budgeted for environmental protection.

In addition to ecological fiscal reform, governments can spur sustainability through their own purchasing and procurement policies. Governments are one of the largest spenders in the Canadian economy. Law reform is also vital to require corporations to pursue the “triple-bottom-line” of economic, social, and environmental responsibility instead of merely maximizing financial returns to shareholders.

It is a basic tenet of fairness that if Canada as a whole benefits from changes in the way we protect and use natural resources, the costs of those changes must be widely shared and not borne by one particular group, community, or region. To do this entails “just transition” strategies for workers and communities.

Furthermore, there needs to be a renewed commitment on the part of governments to use regulations to protect the public interest. In recent years there has been a decline in government's willingness to enact, implement, and enforce environmental regulations, supplanted by an increased preference for voluntary approaches. As the OECD concluded in 2000, Canadian “voluntary agreements have not proved up to the task of dealing with resource and environmental challenges.”⁶


Notes

- 1 Statistics Canada. 2000. *Human Activity and the Environment, 2000*. Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada; Baxter, James. 2000. Canadians not Happy with Liberal Spending Priorities. *Edmonton Journal*. 7 October, E19.
- 2 Boyd, David R. 2003. *Unnatural Law: Rethinking Canadian Environmental Law and Policy*. Vancouver: UBC Press. www.unnaturallaw.com.
- 3 Boyd. 2003. Ch. 10.
- 4 North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation. 2002. *The North American Mosaic: A State of the Environment Report*. Montreal: CEC.
- 5 Boyd. 2003. Ch. 11.
- 6 OECD. 2000. *Economic Survey of Canada 2000*. Paris: OECD, p. 17.
- 7 *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*. 1997. 3 S.C.R. 1010; *Regina v. Marshal*. 1999. 3 S.C.R. 456; *Regina v. Marshal*. 1999. 3 S.C.R. 533; *Council of the Haida Nation v. B.C. Minister of Forests and Weyerhaeuser*. 2002. B.C.C.A. 0147. Feb. 22, 2002.

The recognition of the constitutional rights of aboriginal people is forcing governments to change the way some environmental and natural resource decisions are made.⁷ This is part of the new reality and it is vital that aboriginal title and rights disputes be properly resolved before further industrial development proceeds.

CONCLUSION

To succeed in achieving these goals, Canadians must demand a renewed commitment from all levels of government. We can no longer accept talk when action is required or voluntary programs where standards are necessary.

The overall thrust of this vision is to ensure that our quality of life improves in the years and decades ahead. Major changes are required to fulfill the vision of achieving sustainability and generating genuine wealth. These changes require Canadians to summon unprecedented ingenuity, wisdom, and compassion. Yet our successful track record of innovation on issues such as protecting the ozone layer and banning land mines inspires confidence that we can achieve our goal of a prosperous, sustainable future. 

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