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Beyond Carbon Pricing: An Assessment of the Major Parties' Other Environmental Policies

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Matter Commented On: [Secure the Future](#) (Conservative Party of Canada); [Forward, For Everyone](#) (Liberal Party of Canada); [Ready For Better](#) (New Democratic Party); [Be Daring](#) (Green Party of Canada)

Climate change is widely recognized as the most important environmental problem facing humanity. Indeed, in its recent opinion upholding the constitutionality of the federal Liberals' carbon pricing regime, the Supreme Court of Canada acknowledged not only that climate change is real and caused by human activity, but also that “it poses a grave threat to humanity’s future” (*References re Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act*, [2021 SCC 11 \(CanLII\)](#) at para 2). The unsurprising result is that climate change now dominates environmental law and policy discourse. Indeed, at times – such as the current election period – it feels like climate policy has *displaced* all other environmental policy entirely. As one manifestation of this, Canadian voters have access to several independent and expert assessments of the parties' climate policies (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), but very little with respect to the parties' remaining environmental commitments. This post is intended to help remedy that situation by focusing on the non-climate aspects of each of the major federal parties' environmental policies. We do also provide some relatively minor commentary on those aspects of the parties' climate policies that we feel haven't been sufficiently addressed.

Before jumping in, a couple of methodological points. First, while all of the parties' platforms have a dedicated section on the environment, these vary in their breadth. Some environmental sections (or chapters) are very broad while others are more conventionally, or narrowly, framed. The latter group has separate sections with inescapable environmental implications, e.g., sections on forestry, fisheries, and energy. Time and space (mostly time) did not permit a comprehensive assessment of all of the platforms in their entirety, but we do try to flag the issues that we thought important and were able to speak to. Three critically important issues that we do not cover here are climate adaptation, just transition policies for workers, and Indigenous reconciliation; we are hopeful that others will tackle these before the polls close on September 20, 2021.

Second, our assessment is not based on a pre-existing framework or defined set of criteria. In the climate policy context, there are scientifically established thresholds and targets (e.g., 1.5 – 2°C) against which to measure both ambition and progress. There are no such overarching targets with respect to the environment generally. There are, however, a suite of recognized environmental challenges, both internationally and domestically. For example, globally there is a [biodiversity crisis](#) and a general consensus that more land and water need to be set aside for conservation; indeed, Canada has [committed to conserving at least 17% of terrestrial and inland water, and 10%](#)

[of coastal and marine areas by 2020](#) as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. There is a [plastics crisis](#). There is also a [looming water crisis](#). Each of these crises finds some expression in Canada (see *e.g.*, [here](#)). We can reasonably expect the parties' platforms to speak to these issues, and for the most part they do, though with varying degrees of detail and ambition. It is also indisputable that our environmental laws and policies have to move in the direction of greater stringency, not less. Canada, like all nations, is still a long way from ecological sustainability.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the parties' broader environmental platforms stack up similarly to their climate plans. The Conservative Party of Canada's (CPC's) environmental platform is the least ambitious, and in fact includes significant and problematic rollbacks, especially with respect to Canada's impact assessment regime. The Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) and New Democratic Party (NDP) have a lot of overlap between them, with the NDP having the edge in terms of ambition but the LPC with respect to concreteness (most likely a reflection of its incumbent status). The Green Party of Canada's (GPC's) platform is undoubtedly the most transformative, particularly in relation to mainstreaming environmental justice concerns, but this invariably raises feasibility concerns.

Conservative Party of Canada (CPC)

The CPC devotes three pages of its [platform](#) to environmental issues ("A Detailed Plan to Secure the Environment") and another seven to discuss its climate plan ("A Detailed Plan to Tackle Climate Change"). The environment section kicks off with a nod to the conservation ethic of "farmers, hunters, and anglers," themes of the previous conservative government of Stephen Harper, and then goes on to discuss the following issues: building public transit, conservation, water quality, and plastic waste (at 73).

There are no details here with respect to public transit, beyond a commitment to "invest in projects that will put Canadians to work, cut commute times, and clean up the environment" (at 73). The reference to commute times stirs up uneasy memories of recent highway proposals in [Ontario](#), where additional lanes were dubiously justified as reducing GHGs by reducing commuting times, neglecting the induced demand that such lanes would create.

With respect to land and water conservation, the CPC notes that in 2010 the Harper government set a target of 17% and commits to that target while *seeking* to increase it to 25% (the current Liberal target). It notes that quantity doesn't necessarily mean quality, and that it will pay particular attention to conservation efforts in Canada's "southern working landscape" (at 73). The CPC also commits to working with Indigenous peoples to expand the Liberals' Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA) program, but also to restoring funding for the National Wetland Conservation Fund and the Recreational Fisheries Conservation Partnership Program. These latter two programs were cancelled by the Liberals in the wake of their effort to "[restore lost protections](#)" in the federal *Fisheries Act*, [RSC 1985, c F-14](#), which was itself a response to the very ill-conceived changes to the *Fisheries Act* introduced by the Harper government's 2012 [omnibus budget bills](#). The CPC also want to expand land-based offset credits for agriculture and forestry and invest \$3 billion (over 9 years) in natural climate solutions.

With respect to water quality, the CPC's focus remains fairly narrow, as reflected by its continued invocation of Montreal's [2015 sewage dump](#). The CPC commits to working with the provinces, territories and municipalities to end "the practice of dumping raw sewage into our lakes" (at 74). It is not clear whether this would involve changes to the current regime under the *Wastewater Systems Effluent Regulations*, [SOR/2012-139](#) (*WSER*), which already prohibits this practice subject to some narrow exceptions, including system maintenance (see s 43(2) of the *WSER*).

With respect to plastics, the CPC acknowledges the "need to reduce the use of single-use plastics, minimize how much plastic ends up discarded, and keep plastic out of our oceans" but accuse the Liberals of going too far in designating such plastics "toxic" under the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act, 1999*, [SC 1999, c 33](#) (*CEPA, 1999*) (at 75). Instead of what the CPC describes as the Liberal government's "showy ban" on single-use plastics, they would work on reducing their use, ban the export of plastic waste (unless the exporter can show that it will in fact be recycled), work with the international community to combat ocean plastic, and work to improve value recovery from plastics (at 75).

As noted above, each of the parties' climate change plans have already been scrutinized. We won't repeat that analysis but do want to flag what we perceive as a few important omissions. With respect to the CPC's plan, our primary concern is the time and effort that will be required to set up the proposed "Personal Low Carbon Savings Accounts" (at 77). University of Alberta energy economist Andrew Leach previously identified some of the challenges [here](#), while CTV News' Glen McGregor identified several additional glitches and gaps in a recent [Twitter thread](#). The CPC plan also appears heavily reliant on provincial cooperation, which history has shown will be problematic. Assuming that a CPC government will move immediately to repeal the current regime under the *Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act*, [SC 2018, c 12, s 186](#), we are deeply concerned that Canada could go years without a nation-wide carbon price at the outset of what many consider to be a critical decade for climate action.

Finally, the CPC commits to once again opening up the federal impact assessment regime to further changes. This would be the fifth time in as many decades of federal impact assessment legislation in Canada, which is in and of itself problematic (ironically, the CPC claims to recognize the importance of "a predictable and consistent Impact Assessment process" (at 141). Worse still, the changes would be based on the deeply misguided amendments proposed by the Senate in 2018 but rejected by Parliament. One of us previously wrote about some of those amendments [here](#), and appeared before the Senate when it travelled to Calgary as part of its [hearings](#). With few exceptions, the Senate's proposed amendments would seriously undermine impact assessment.

Liberal Party of Canada (LPC)

The Liberals also commit ten pages to the environment and climate change ("A Cleaner, Greener Future"), with the bulk of those pages dedicated to climate change. The LPC's [platform](#) is a bit of a mix of prior accomplishments and future promises. Under five broad headings (cutting pollution, green jobs, climate adaptation, protecting nature, tackling plastic pollution and building a circular economy), the LPC platform tackles thermal coal exports, clean power, critical minerals and batteries, clean technologies, sustainable finance, cleaner transportation, natural climate solutions, healthy oceans, freshwater, and single-use plastics.

With respect to cutting pollution, and again setting aside the carbon pricing aspects, the LPC commits to [phasing out thermal coal exports](#). This follows on the heels of two Liberal government announcements from this past summer relevant to coal: (i) a [policy statement](#) by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada, pursuant to his authority under s 17 of the *Impact Assessment Act*, [SC 2019, c 28, s 1](#) that he would not grant federal approval to any new thermal coal mining projects (due to their climate impacts); and (ii) a [decision](#) to subject all new metallurgical coal mining projects to the federal impact assessment regime, regardless of their size (production thresholds are the presumptive trigger for federal impact assessment), out of concern for selenium pollution in particular. The potential resurgence of coal mining has been met with [considerable opposition in Alberta](#).

Following signalling from our [American neighbours](#), the LPC is also proposing a Clean Electricity Standard to create a net zero electricity grid by 2035 and a Pan-Canadian Grid Council to promote infrastructure investments (in fairness, the CPC also refer to “investing in transmission infrastructure to bring clean energy to where it’s needed” but don’t provide any further details (Secure the Future, at 78).

With respect to green jobs and setting aside energy retrofits and zero-emission vehicle (ZEV) mandates, the LPC also commit to “an end-to-end, sustainable battery supply chain,” (Forward, For Everyone, at 46) with a couple of concrete proposals such as doubling the Mineral Exploration Tax Credit for materials on the Canadian list of critical minerals. This is a key area to watch; while the mining industry has made some progress through their [Towards Sustainable Mining](#) (TSM) initiative, there is still concern that current mining practices pose a threat to Canada’s watersheds. There are also commitments with respect to sustainable finance and further investments in public transit, including a Toronto to Quebec City high speed rail corridor.

With respect to protecting nature, the LPC recognize that “nature is under enormous stress” (at 49) and concretely, if somewhat arbitrarily, commit to establishing ten new national parks and ten new marine conservation areas in the next five years, aiming to achieve its 25% by 2025 and 30% by 2030 targets. They will continue to support new Indigenous Guardians programs and support Indigenous communities to build more Indigenous Protected and Conservation Areas (IPCAs). With a nod to the recent controversy over old growth timber harvesting in British Columbia, the LPC also commit to working with the province and establishing a \$50 million BC Old Growth Nature Fund.

In addition to various ocean-related commitments, the LPC platform also contains concrete commitments to freshwater, including a (re)commitment to establishing and fully funding a Canada Water Agency, modernizing the *Canada Water Act*, [RSC 1985, c C-11](#) (which is currently essentially toothless) and implementing a strengthened Freshwater Action Plan. Some readers may recall that prior to the dropping of the writ, the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainability (ENVI) had just initiated [a study into Canada’s freshwater](#). Although the election call effectively cancelled that study, these commitments do reflect a relatively consistent Liberal focus on this issue.

Like other parties, the LPC platform also refers to environmental justice in the context of toxic substances, committing to implement a “right to a healthy environment” (at 42) within the context of *CEPA, 1999* (*CEPA, 1999* amendments to this effect were [making their way through Parliament](#) when the election was called). The LPC also appear to have endorsed the need for new legislation that would require the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada to consider and address the links between race, socio-economic status and exposure to environmental risk, and to develop strategies that address environmental justice (Liberal Member of Parliament Lenore Zann introduced [a private bill](#) (C-230) to this effect in the last Parliament). The LPC platform reiterates their ban of non-recyclable single use plastics and commits to requiring that all plastic packaging in Canada contain 50% recycled content by 2030.

New Democratic Party (NDP)

The [NDP’s platform](#) lays out its environmental commitments in a section titled “[Protecting our air, land, and water, securing our future.](#)” Organized under 7 categories (Taking climate leadership and getting to net zero; Creating good jobs in all regions; Improving where we live and work; Changing how we get around; Powering our communities carbon free; Protecting our lands and waters; and Working together), the NDP platform dedicates 12 pages to a very broad range of fairly general commitments.

The commitments in the first category of the NDP’s platform, climate leadership and getting to net zero, have been well traversed in the myriad of independent and expert assessments of the parties’ climate policies already available. However, as with the CPC’s plan, a few points warrant highlighting. First, in addition to recognizing existing 2030 climate targets, and emphasizing the importance of the carbon price (with general reference to closing loopholes and making it fairer), the NDP’s platform promises to address existing weaknesses in the brand new *Canadian Net-Zero Emissions Accountability Act*, [SC 2021, c 22](#) (Bill C-12), which was rushed through Parliament and the Senate in June. Specifically, in line with the [UK Climate Change Act 2008](#) and [calls](#) from Canada’s leading environmental organizations, the NDP commits to establishing “multi-year national and sectoral carbon budgets” (at 45) and to funding a Climate Accountability Office to provide independent oversight of federal climate progress. The NDP platform stops short of explicitly naming the oil and gas sector, as the LPC has done, although undoubtedly sectoral carbon budgets would include this high emitting sector. Second, the NDP are promising to review a range of financial legislation (including the *Bank of Canada Act*, [RSC 1985, c B-2](#), the *Export Development Act*, [RSC 1985, c E-20](#), and the *Canada Pension Plan Investment Board Act*, [SC 1997, c 40](#)) to advance a net-zero focus, and to put in place a framework for corporate climate accountability to ensure mandatory transparency on carbon risk from publicly traded companies, with the latter consistent with momentum in several other countries, [including the United States](#). Finally, and of particular note for the Albertan oil and gas sector, the NDP also commits to pass legislation banning any future oil, gas and pipeline subsidies, in keeping with a longstanding G-20 commitment to eliminate fossil fuel subsidies. The consequences of this commitment, together with the reference to tightening of loopholes associated with the carbon price, raises important questions about Part 2 of the *Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act*, or provincial systems such as Alberta’s *Technology Innovation and Emissions Reduction Regulation*, [Alta Reg 133/2019](#) (*TIER*), which each substantially subsidize the carbon price of large emitters, including those within the fossil fuel sector, through the output-based pricing system they employ. Justified as a

means to avoid carbon leakage, the NDP platform favours a carbon border tariff as a means to address the issue of leakage, a tool that is now finding favour in many jurisdictions around the world.

Like every party, the NDP platform promises to create “good jobs” (at 43) across the country. The focus, however, is on the low carbon future and jobs associated with building green infrastructure in communities across the country. On the basis that Canadian products “have some of the lowest carbon emissions in the world” (at 47) the NDP platform commits to a requirement to use Canadian-made steel, aluminum, cement, and wood products for these infrastructure projects. The free trade complexities associated with “Canadian-made” (at 47) focus are not addressed. Environmental justice concerns are, however, recognized with a commitment that marginalized communities disproportionately impacted by climate change will enjoy the job-creation and community-building benefits of these investments. A broad commitment is made to support the just transition of those adversely impacted by the shift to a low carbon future.

The NDP’s commitments directed at “Improving where we live and work” (at 48) includes setting a target to retrofit all buildings in Canada by 2050, with accompanying incentives for large scale retrofitting programs. Long overdue improvements to the National Building Code are also promised, to ensure that by 2025 new buildings are net-zero, with energy efficiency and sustainable building practices also at the core of a new national housing strategy. Recognizing the inevitability of extreme weather events, the NDP also commits to work with provinces, municipalities, and Indigenous governments to provide the resources needed to plan and adapt. The NDP also reference the creation of a Civilian Climate Corps, creating jobs associated with restoring wetlands and planting billions of trees.

The “Changing how we get around” (at 49) commitments focus on investments in public transportation and electric vehicles. With the particular emphasis on scaling up low carbon transit projects, the NDP make significant commitments to modernize and expand public transit both within and between Canadian communities. Significantly, this includes a commitment to help provinces and municipalities transition to fare free transit and to support smart community planning and active transportation. However, the NDP platform also makes provision for personal transportation (endorsing the LPC target for ZEVs but increasing the incentive for made in Canada vehicles).

Within the “Protecting our land and water” (at 51) category of commitments, the NDP makes a range of aggressive, albeit general, commitments. With a nod to inter-generational equity and environmental justice concerns, the NDP commit to “protecting land and waters” while “safeguarding a good quality of life for generations of Canadians to come” and to “stand[ing] up to the abuse of power by polluters – the harms of which disproportionately impact remote and marginalized communities” (at 51). A string of important commitments support this goal. This includes a commitment to enshrine the right to a healthy environment in a stand-alone Canadian Environmental Bill of Rights, “to ensure all communities can enjoy a guarantee to clean water, land and air” (at 51), and to strengthen the *CEPA, 1999* to better protect Canadians from toxins, with an unspecified promise that the latter would build on and improve on the Trudeau Government’s [Bill C-28](#) (the “right to a healthy environment” legislation referred to above). Legislation is also promised to ban single use plastics, to ban the export of plastic waste and to recognize the right to repair in order to reduce the export of electronic waste. A series of

commitments also promises to “hold companies responsible for the entire lifecycle of their plastic products and packaging” (at 51), improve municipal waste management and recycling systems, and support improved standards around labelling products as recyclable.

Based on a commitment to pursuing a “Nature agenda” (at 51) and protecting 30% of our land, freshwater and oceans by 2030, the NDP promise to expand urban national parks and restore urban biodiversity. Notably, they also commit to ensuring the *Species at Risk Act*, [SC 2002, c 29](#), (SARA) is enforced (with unspoken consequences for resource development putting pressure on many threatened and endangered species), expanding marine protected areas, implementing a national freshwater strategy, and supporting Indigenous-led nature conservation and land-use and climate planning, including by growing the Indigenous Guardians Program.

A last commitment within this heading, to “support environmental remediation and job creation by getting tough on polluters and forcing big oil companies to pay to clean up inactive wells” (at 51) sends a shot over the bow [to large companies who successfully lobbied](#) the Trudeau government to receive a very substantial amount of federal funds for cleanup through the Site Rehabilitation Program.

Green Party (GPC)

It perhaps comes as no surprise that the [GPC Platform](#) as it relates to environment and climate change occupies 32 pages (“Green Future” (at 3)). A substantial portion up these pages is focused on climate change and the green transition, including making provisions for a just transition for workers and green infrastructure. While again the focus of this blog is on commitments related to the environment other than climate change, it is noteworthy that the GPC clearly commits to ending all fossil fuel extraction, and contemplates waste management, plastic bans, and reduced consumption and the circular economy within its climate commitments. Beyond climate change, the GPC Platform includes a fulsome array of commitments clustered under headings relating to fulfilling international commitments, environmental justice, conserving and restoring natural ecosystems, green innovation, agriculture and food, fisheries and oceans, rural revitalization, municipal affairs, and transport.

In relation to environmental justice, the GPC commits to establish a high-level Office of Environmental Justice at Environment and Climate Change Canada and to support the passage of the above-noted Bill C-230, the National Strategy Respecting Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice Act proposed by Liberal MP Lenore Zann. Recognizing systemic barriers and access issues for racialized communities, commitments are also made to provide universal access to green and public spaces. Climate change considerations are also integrated into the environmental justice commitments, with the promise of an independent, scientific, non-partisan, diverse Climate Council to advise the government, and the mobilization of international climate finance to address intergenerational environmental justice responsibilities existing beyond Canadian borders.

Recognizing the rapid degradation of ecosystems and biodiversity, the GPC Platform makes a range of commitments relating to protection of fresh waters, habitat destruction and restoration of negatively affected ecosystems and wetlands, committing to protect a minimum of 30 per cent of freshwaters and lands in each Canadian ecosystem by 2030 and 50 per cent by 2050. Commitments are also made to scale up funding for nature-based solutions and, again recognizing the international nature of these environmental problems, commits to implement Canada’s

international commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity and follow-up protocols. As with the NDP and LPC, the GPC commits to modernizing *CEPA, 1999* and ensuring the right to a healthy environment, specifying that this right will be enforceable in law. Recognizing the need to protect forests, the GPC Platform also commits to develop and implement a National Forest Strategy, which includes fire mitigation and suppression strategies. Recognizing indigenous governance systems, a commitment is also made to support Indigenous-led protected and conservation areas and fund stewardship of these lands and waters by Indigenous guardians.

In relation to green innovation, the GPC platform commits to investment in research and development, increasing Research and Development spending to 2.5% of GDP in order to bring Canada in line with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, and increasing funding for Canada's granting councils, which are a significant source of funding for research within Canadian universities. Commitments are also made to restore and augment funding for important scientific bodies such as the Climate Change and Atmospheric Research (CCAR), the Polar Environment Atmospheric Research Laboratory, and a long-term funding program for water infrastructure.

In relation to agriculture and food, the GPC considers that agricultural and food systems are highly vulnerable to both environmental and economic risk. In this regard, the GPC make a number of commitments. In addition to creating programs which recognize the potential for carbon sequestration, a commitment to restructure the \$3 billion Next Policy Framework to shift support from corporate-controlled industrial agriculture to agriculture on ecological and animal welfare principles, offers an interesting policy response to an important sector of the Canadian economy. In order to increase social license within the agricultural sector, the GPC also include a number of commitments relating to animal welfare, the rights of farmers to save seed, and encouraging a shift away from the consumption of animal-based protein in a manner consistent with the recently revised Canada Food Guide.

In relation to fisheries and oceans, a key area of focus is reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in marine conservation and resource management, with commitments to develop a National Framework for Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) that includes collaborative governance arrangements, co-management decision-making bodies, and supporting administrative structures together with investment in Indigenous-led sustainable ocean economies and Indigenous Guardians Programs that make space for Indigenous Peoples' worldviews, knowledge, and governance systems. The GPC also focuses on commitment relating to sustainable fisheries, which includes addressing knowledge gaps for stocks where their status is uncertain, by implementing the 20 recommendations of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans report, [*West Coast Fisheries: Sharing Risks and Benefits*](#) (May 2019) (Chair: Ken McDonald).

A substantial focus of this portion of the GPC Platform is the reduction of threats to ocean ecosystems, with a broad range of commitment relating to a moratorium on deep-sea mining until 2030, and the establishment of effective systems of marine protected areas (MPAs) and restoration at-risk ecosystems. A ban on single use plastic, to be finalized by the end of 2021, together with an expanded list of banned plastics and a requirement that all plastic packaging contain at least 50% recycled content by 2030 are also committed to, with a view to protecting fisheries and oceans. Presumably included here because of the Southern Killer Resident Whale, the GPC Platform also in makes significant commitments relating to the *SARA*, promising a compliance

plan with specific actions for all critical habitat protected under Section 58 by 2022 and to complete independent scientific reviews of the effectiveness of recovery measures for all threatened and endangered species listed under *SARA* by 2025.

Transportation also forms an important piece of the GPC Party Platform. Beyond ZEV mandates, the GPC Party Platform contemplates an investment in green transportation that extends to airline travel, passenger rail, freight and ferrie, and also includes a commitment to expand cycling and walking and accessible infrastructure.

Of final note, the GPC commits to ban the further development of nuclear power in Canada.

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