

## 22 Geopolitics, Ecology and Stephen Harper's Reinvention of Canada

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### Abstract

The election of the Conservative Party to power in Canada in 2006 brought with it a vision of the world that was much more competitive than previous Liberal or much earlier conservative visions. Key to all this, and the focus of this chapter, is an attempt to reinvent Canada as a player in a world of competitive geopolitics rather than as a good citizen in a shared biosphere. Foreign and domestic policy have been shaped by this new view, leading to the abrogation of the Kyoto protocol and, given the identification of Canada as an energy superpower and oil exporter, substantial attacks by the government on environmental science and regulatory processes, apparently because these might obstruct resource company projects. What is being sustained in this process is a vision of Canada antithetical to what in most parts of the world would be considered sustainable. The lessons to be learnt for sustainable transitions are many, most notably the importance of thinking carefully about conventional politics and the dangers of narrowly-cast nationalist and populist attacks on environmental policies and sustainability initiatives.

**Keywords:** Canada, geopolitics, Harper Government, neoconservative, political strategy.

### 22.1 Whatever Happened to Canada?

In the 1980s Canada had a reputation as a leader in developing environmental policy. The establishment of the *International Development Research Centre* (IDRC) with its international network of activists and academics made development a key theme in policy discussions. The *Canadian International Development Authority* (CIDA) delivered aid, at least some of which was environmentally sensitive. Much of the background work on the *World Development Commission on Environment and Development* (WCED) in the 1980s was done in Ottawa. The Montreal Protocol, a key part of the international framework for controlling and subsequently stopping the production of ozone-depleting chemicals, was named after a Canadian city where some of the key negotiations were conducted. The Global Atmosphere Conference of 1988 was held in Toronto, and issued statements

that explicitly linked climate change to global security in terms that are now familiar a generation later.

Focusing more explicitly on the domestic scene, environmental regulations were a fairly widespread matter for the Federal Government in the 1970s, although the division of powers in the confederation does give the ten Provinces responsibility for overseeing the exploitation of natural resources. Nonetheless given Federal responsibilities of fisheries, oceans and water issues, and the system of national parks, there was an active Federal presence on environmental matters. Major research efforts to develop plans for a "Conservation Society" were undertaken in the 1970s (Solomon 1978). By the early 1990s, coincident with the Earth Summit in Rio, 'Green Plans' were in place to deal with many matters of sustainability. Connecting the domestic and the international spheres, Canadian businessman Maurice Strong oversaw both the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development twenty years later in Rio de Janeiro.

Another twenty years later the Canadian situation is very different. While both the 1980s government and the Harper government in power from 2006 include the term 'conservative' in their name, they

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were very different political entities. Canada abrogated its Kyoto protocol commitments, walking away from the agreement rather than dealing with the consequences of its failure to abide by its obligations. By 2014 CIDA effectively no longer existed. The Tar Sands in Alberta were a cause célèbre among environmentalists looking for a symbol of everything that is wrong with contemporary economic trajectories. The huge tailing ponds and massive infrastructure tearing up the boreal forest while using natural gas to power the transformation of bitumen into petroleum is the classic example of carboniferous capitalism run amok. Prime Minister Stephen Harper proudly boasted of Canada as an energy superpower while defunding environmental research and silencing scientists. Some of his ministers hinted darkly at sinister foreign interests behind environmental objections to the extraction of Canadian resources and the operation of Canada-based mining companies in many other parts of the world. Canada's environmental performance was rated with Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia in the international environmental hall of shame! This was a very different Canada (Kaplan 2011) and one with a foreign policy that was narrowly focused and little interested in multilateral arrangements (McLeod Group 2012).

Given the ideologically driven nature of the Harper government's silencing of dissent and abandonment of much environmental science, activists and scientists ruefully joked that Canada has moved from "reality-based decision-making" to "decision-based reality-making". Watching the Federal political scene in recent years in Canada there is much truth to this assertion; the agenda for Canada's Conservative government (2006-2015) was driven by the resource sector and short-term extractive industry profitability. The mining boom stretched round the world; it wasn't just a domestic matter (Gordon 2010). The electoral support the Conservative Party drew from rural and resource extractive industries was coupled to an ideological argument that this is the route to material wealth, and hence environmentalists who would regulate the industry and examine its project proposals too closely in regulatory hearings were a danger to the prosperity and suburban lifestyle that is portrayed as the envy of much of the world. After all, immigrants supposedly come to Canada precisely to get the benefits of this mode of consumption, based on Canada's traditional economic priorities of providing resources to the North American industrial system, if not to the global economy.

While the environmentally-friendly image of Canada was never the whole story, and there are histories of industrial pollution and resource exploitation across the country that are by no stretch of the imagination 'sustainable' (Baldwin/Dalby 2010), nonetheless the abandonment of anything more than the pretence to be good environmental stewards on the part of the current Federal government is noteworthy. The rhetoric of environmental protection persists, when necessary, as in making the case that Tar Sands petroleum is extracted in a manner that is supposedly environmentally benign, but the reduction of monitoring and research and the effective muzzling of federal scientists makes it clear that this is only public relations.

There are some important lessons to be learned from the sad example of Canadian federal politics that need to be remembered in thinking about strategies for sustainable transitions in other places. The first lesson is that environmentalists forget about the finer points of politics at their and the planet's peril. As Australians with the Howard and more recently Abbott governments have also learned, the departure from power of parties sympathetic to at least some environmental causes can set sustainability back dramatically. It makes getting sustainability back on track all the more difficult by entrenching the power of certain sectors of the economy and scrapping research and monitoring that allow environmental matters to be assessed and debated in a reasonable manner. This is precisely what the Federal government in Canada set about doing in 2006 with very worrisome consequences for both Canada and the planet. All this matters because a politics very different from the policies of the Conservative Party in Canada are needed if sustainability is to be taken seriously.

## 22.2 Canada's Conservative Government

After a couple of minority parliaments from 2006 to early 2011, and some political manoeuvrings that raised the ire of many Canadians, the Conservative Party formed a parliamentary majority government in May 2011. Given the peculiarities of the "first past the post" Westminster-style electoral system, this was achieved with the support of only about forty per cent of those who actually voted. While the name Conservative is still there, this was a corporate agenda led government with a populist right-wing rhetoric (drawn from its 1990s predecessor "The Reform Party") determined to remake the country, and one apparently

more obsessed with partisan motivation than has usually been the case in Canadian federal politics (Nadeau 2010). The result was an ideological agenda supporting the oil industry in Alberta and Saskatchewan mainly, and defining energy security in terms of fossil fuel production. Canada is supposedly an energy superpower, and the supplier to the North American market, and possibly in the future elsewhere further afield if the Keystone pipeline to Texas or the Northern Gateway one across the north of British Columbia get built in coming years.

Stephane Dion, the former Liberal environment minister who had been a key part of the Kyoto process, was ridiculed when, as subsequently leader of the Liberal Party he introduced a set of policy suggestions for a green shift in Federal taxation to tax carbon and compensate by reducing income taxes. Populist rhetoric against taxes was used to ridicule the proposed policy and ensure that it never got reasonably discussed. Dion lost the 2008 election when he ran on a "green shift" electoral platform. This has made carbon taxes more difficult to implement in Canada, although the province of British Columbia has one that has been used to fund popular public services which might have potential for wider application should political entrepreneurs emerge willing to promote such a system elsewhere (Elgie/Mackay 2013). Michael Ignatieff who mostly ignored climate change in his subsequent unsuccessful attempt to remove Stephen Harper in the 2011 election subsequently replaced Dion as leader.

The Conservatives long made the argument that they will follow American policies when it comes to climate change so as not to impinge on Canadian business, but in the process abandoned any attempt to take the initiative and develop a comprehensive 'made in Canada' policy. Despite useful reductions in coal-burning power station emissions, mostly as a result of Provincial initiatives in Ontario in particular, it is clear that even the modest Federal promises for reductions in fossil fuel emissions are unlikely to be met. No Federal strategies on renewable energy development emerged; windmills and solar panels were left to the provinces concerned with their own energy grids and sustainability issues. While this makes sense in that these are mostly provincial responsibilities in Canada, an energy superpower means in this case one that supplies natural gas and petroleum, not one that thinks seriously about the long term and about how sustainable futures are to be powered. It was a policy that effectively locks Canadian policy into a carbon trap

dependent on markets for high-priced marginal petroleum supplies long into the future (Haley 2011).

Abandoning much of the earlier legislation and regulations that required environmental reviews of developments, the omnibus budget bill of April 2012 eviscerated Federal environmental regulations and cut government science capabilities, while censoring scientists' public statements and refusing to allow them to do media interviews without prior clearance from government political overseers (Turner 2013). This led to unprecedented protests by scientists in the summer of 2012 focused on the theme of the "death of evidence". This theme also captures other government changes such as the evisceration of census information gathering and reducing the functions of Statistics Canada as part of the overall reduction in public knowledge about Canada. Further cuts to Federal oversight of lakes and waterways followed in 2013 and the trend to abandon environmental protection continued; the mantra of business self-regulation was related to the abandonment of data collection and monitoring across the country.

Kyoto protocol abrogation fitted into this agenda too. While it was clear that Canada was never going to make cuts in energy use that would get overall emissions down to the 1990-based targets, "Canada's New Government", as the Conservative Party wished to be known in its early years in power, abandoned even the pretence that Canada would try. There was certainly no intention of spending money on offsets to pay for non-compliance. Arguing that remaining in Kyoto would unreasonably hamper Canadian oil companies and that it was obviously an ineffective agreement; the decision to abandon it was entirely in keeping with a government focused only on resource development. The lack of concern with the precedent, or the abrogation of any attempt at political leadership on a matter of global importance, was in keeping with the Conservative ideological agenda that showed scant concern for the wider world (Bosold/Hynek 2010). Unless, of course, there were domestic constituencies whose votes might count in the electoral calculus that kept the government in power by a narrow margin; foreign policy was understood here as important in so far as it generates electoral benefits.

In turn this was related to what at least initially was seen as a much more militaristic foreign policy by Harper, who was happy to lend Canadian forces to imperial actions in Afghanistan and subsequently Libya, although the total amount of resources channelled to the military was not in keeping with a major shift to a more muscular foreign policy (Lang 2012). A

persistent series of failures in the procurement process for the F-35 fighter jet programme undermined the credibility of at least some of this focus on the military (Nossal 2012/13); subsequent budget constraints in 2014 severely limited military purchases and caused outrage among veterans' groups where health benefits are limited while money is spent on commemorating past military actions. But the tone of foreign policy is clearly much more militarist than Canadian policy in previous governments; peacekeeping is a thing long abandoned by Canadian governments despite its earlier useful contributions to international affairs. NATO actions in support of American initiatives have been undertaken, including in Afghanistan and Libya; UN peacekeeping missions mostly have not (Charbonneau/Cox 2010).

The ideological orientation of the government was one where the world is understood in competitive terms, one where international action is a matter of self-interested action, a matter of "enlightened sovereignty" in foreign minister John Baird's (2011) terms where temporary coalitions of interest matter, and international institutions don't. Unless, that is, Israel was concerned, where by specifying it as a democracy surrounded by non-democracies, unabashed support for whatever it does was apparently the obviously morally correct foreign policy (Martin 2012). The abrogation of a nuanced foreign policy in favour of moralistic slogans and the periodic denunciation of Iran was quite clear. Some of this was plainly driven by domestic electoral considerations appealing to immigrant groups, but a confrontational geopolitics underlay this explicitly.

Domestically the removal of many environmental regulations and the effective *carte blanche* given to resource companies violated the provisions of many of the treaties signed with the indigenous groups who were conquered and dispossessed in the process of colonization by European settlers (see Grant 2014). This in turn caused protest movements and continued political opposition to the Conservative government, who disregarded their obligations to meaningfully consult with many native peoples about environmental changes and developments that take place on their territories. This may turn out to be a major source of conflict should the decision to build the Northern Gateway pipeline from Alberta to the coast of British Columbia near Kitimat be taken despite the vehement opposition of many native groups whose land would be crossed by the pipeline.

In so far as lip-service to environmental matters was served, it was entirely in environmental moderni-

zation mode; technological innovations ensure "safe" production. In the case of the Tar Sands, industry groups repeatedly invoked improved techniques in television advertising campaigns in particular, supposedly making products both more secure and environmentally benign. The argument that this is ethical oil, in contrast to petroleum imported from conflict-ridden areas or non-democracies, was simply added on to this formulation (Levant 2010). Nowhere was it countenanced that leaving the bitumen in the ground might be sound strategy and that renewable energy development would be a better priority. This was a policy devoted to resource extraction rather than building an industrial base in Canada; rent from resources rather than innovation in production reprised much of the history of Canadian development but is also a policy that, not least by inflating the Canadian dollar, undercut industrial exports too (Stanford 2008). In the Arctic where the consequences of climate change are most obvious the Harper Government's northern strategy has been to enhance resource extraction and extend property rights of corporations to facilitate their access even if this comes at the cost of indigenous inhabitants' environments and food supplies (Medalye/Foster 2012). Whatever this may be it wasn't Canadian leadership on anything that matters in terms of sustainability or responsible environmental stewardship. When the price of oil collapsed in mid 2014 the folly of an economic policy so dependent on one sector of the economy became abundantly clear.

### 22.3 Political Ontologies

Running through all this was a simple will to power, an agenda that saw disagreement as opposition and a view of politics that was both narrowly focused and concerned with winning rather than with the consequences that are not immediately reflected in the proverbial bottom line. The bottom lines that mattered were both the corporate balance sheets and the electoral calculus that ensured the persistence of Conservative rule. This was a view of the world that assumed competition as the given context for human activity, and one that was unconcerned about matters of environment. Indeed environmentalists were the enemy, given that they apparently obstructed corporate plans for resource extraction and hence they had to be silenced or denigrated. Therefore their expressions of alarm about climate change were to be either dismissed, or finessed with arguments that suggested

economic activity is a far more important priority in a harsh competitive world.

Such formulations relied on a worldview that discounted the consequences of Canadian actions while simultaneously boasting of being a superpower. They operated as though Canada, being a sovereign country, and an enlightened one apparently, was in some key senses simply separate from the rest of the world—foreign policy action was frequently about domestic electoral advantage, not it seemed about shaping the international order beyond pressing Canadian business advantages abroad and issuing moral condemnations of regimes outside the Western world. In such an ontological universe winning and ruling is what matters; having a sustainable biosphere isn't important given that as winners, and rulers, if environmental disruptions happen 'we' will apparently be either wealthy or powerful enough to evade the consequences. Anyway Canada is only a small player on the world scene, with half a percentage of the world's population and only a few per cent of the world's oil production so what we might do on the matter of environment is unimportant, so why pay attention if it will deprive our corporations of profits in the immediate future?

This contradiction-ridden thinking runs directly in opposition to an ecological worldview of any sort where the interconnections between things and the common placement of all beings in one biosphere is the starting point for discussions of sustainability. It assumes a given context that simply provides the opportunity to make money, and failure to take these opportunities suggests moral and political inadequacies that should be swept aside by those who obviously know better. Ecological science simply gets in the way of what is important and so should be silenced, dismissed or ignored. This was politics in the raw, a matter of power first and foremost, as Steven Harper's political biographers make very clear (Martin 2010; Wells 2013). A strategy for a sustainable future simply has to deal with these political challenges from a corporate sector armed with both a neo-liberal ideology and a populist rhetoric if it is to be effective. This is no small challenge especially when, as is the case with the Canadian Conservative Party, it explicitly tried to use political divisions and wedge issues as a mode of political rule.

The other important point in all this is that environmental gains are not necessarily permanent. As the American environmental movement learned to its cost in the 1980s when the Reagan administration set about dismantling at least some of the legislative and administrative systems set in place in the previous dec-

ades, getting laws made is only the initial step in a sustainability agenda. Keeping the political pressure on to ensure that they are enforced and that the long-term benefits are forthcoming requires a permanent political and cultural effort. The danger of formulating matters in terms of a sustainability transition is that there is an assumption of a stable end point. Another lesson from the Canadian case in the last decade is that environmental progress can be overturned if corporate agendas driven by resource extraction priorities in particular regain the political initiative. Politics is an ongoing process, not an end point, and discussing sustainable transitions cannot afford to operate on the assumption that there is a stable end point where sustainability is ensured in perpetuity.

## 22.4 Neo-Conservative Rhetoric

Looking to the Canadian example it seems that at least six key sources of political thinking fed into the ideological *mélange* that supported the right wing coalition that constituted the Conservative party. Given the distance that they have travelled ideologically from the earlier Progressive Conservatives who were in power in the 1980s when the Montreal Protocol was negotiated, the Global Atmosphere conference was convened, and national Green plans formulated, it's perhaps appropriate to call this neo-conservatism, and not only because of its militarist inclinations. Backed by media outlets that were sympathetic to both business interests as well as populist stories of moral clarity and victimhood in the face of supposedly big government, think tanks including the Fraser Institute have shaped the predominately corporate policy agenda. The lessons of the last decade in Canada suggest clearly that policies for sustainable futures need to directly tackle all these ideological components, albeit in different combinations in particular places around the world.

The first political configuration is the larger neo-liberal logic that prioritizes the market as that which is the primary object of wealth creation, the focus for government promotional efforts and the supposed provider of welfare for the population. This notion of prosperity is the key to the good life and that agenda was key to the re-articulation of Canadian identity in terms of winners on the global stage in comparison to other states, and the provider of a commodity and real estate vision of the good life at home. Most obviously this translates into aspirations for a suburban lifestyle, one that developers are happy to provide in



the sprawling automobile suburbs that now house so many Canadians (Blais 2010). This has apparently entrenched the power of both petroleum companies and property developers in shaping the political economy of Canada. The shift of power has been both to the West, where most of the oil industry is based, with its headquarters in Calgary, and in electoral terms into the suburbs of most Canadian cities.

Second is the ambiguous impact of religion on public policy. While many of the Conservative party are what are called 'social conservatives' there are clearly networks of religious institutions especially in the Western provinces that draw on 'fundamentalist' doctrines, not least those that don't take things like climate change or evolution seriously. While it isn't clear that Prime Minister Harper's religious proclivities actually shaped his policy preferences, it is certainly a matter of discussion among those who have traced the rise of new religious organizations and their connection to the Conservative Party (Macdonald 2010). What is more important than the specifics of religious dogma is that these religious themes support the larger cultural politics of moral rectitude and the focus on personal salvation and economic success that underlies the assertion of conservative values. The alternative much 'greener' engagements between religion and environmental advocacy in North America (Wilkinson 2012), with their notions of environmental stewardship and responsibility for caretaking the earth were noticeably absent from the social conservative discourse.

Third, the rhetoric of the Conservative Party frequently used the figure of the persecuted outsider in appealing to numerous perceived grievances among Canadian voters. The regional dimensions of this were clear in the slogan used repeatedly by the Western-based Reform Party as in 'the West wants in'. Supposedly excluded from the halls of power in Ottawa, the Federal capital, and in Toronto where the financial heartland of Canada resides, the absence of parliamentary representation was a longstanding source of complaint. The social aspirations of Westerners and the much older social hierarchies in Central Canada supplied a very simple if misleading rhetoric of them and us that populist politicians used to good effect in election campaigns.

This social aspiration and sense of entitlement denied fed, fourth, into simplistic geopolitical formulations and imperial throwbacks in the formulation of Canadian foreign policy. Naïve assumptions of moral superiority were used to justify involvement in the bombing of Libya as well as the presence of Canadian

troops in Afghanistan. Language that contrasted democracies with dictators and terrorists painted the world as a dangerous place requiring moral certainties and the necessity to use force to ensure that Canada and the West is triumphant in a series of violent confrontations with evil and dangerous Others. The necessity of using virtuous violence is a given once the geopolitical formulations of distant danger and imminent threat dominate the script. It all fit with the Prime Minister Harper's proclivities for controlling things too.

Such Manichean formulations with their differential attribution of virtue and threat also spilled over into the highly charged partisan attacks on domestic political opponents. This fifth factor, the ad hominem politics, focused on the personalities and their supposed failings much more than it did on the policy prescriptions that those politicians or activists might be espousing; messengers are more important than the content of messages. While this was a widespread tactic, not least in the vitriolic campaigns against climate change activists and scientists which spilled over into the Canadian political scene, its prevalence as a way of silencing serious political discussion was especially dangerous when linked to 'gotcha' journalism and the personality politics in the talk show format of political commentary. Winning the argument was what apparently mattered. Reasoned political discussion and simple matters of factual accuracy are difficult to use effectively in such venues, a matter of considerable difficulty for sustainability advocates who unwisely assume a common acceptance of environmental values and reasoned debate as the basis for a democratic politics.

Sixth is the link between prosperity, threat and security. A key part of the Harper government's political rhetoric was the protection of Canadians from threats to their prosperity, and environmentalists who might object to pipelines and tar sands exploitation were of course linked to dangerous foreign funding arrangements. Where external threats are formulated to suburban prosperity the task for sustainable transition advocates becomes especially difficult. The insidious cultural messages celebrate conspicuous consumption as praiseworthy rather than excessive, irresponsible and eminently taxable! The inverted quarantine of suburban living where private provision of everything from security systems to bottled water is premised on a spatial division of safe internal domestic spaces from external threats, and the related cultural politics of family, masculinist safety provision and the necessity to rely on force in a dangerous

world, presents a geopolitics of division and violence that is antithetical to an ecologically sane mode of life for most of humanity (Szasz 2007).

These assumptions, powerfully reprised in conservative thinking of the Canadian variety, are now precisely the problems that need to be confronted. The claims to moral superiority, and the implicit assumptions of competition as the ontological given for humanity, likewise need once again to be confronted by a more complex geopolitical ontology that neither accepts the territorial assumptions of modern states as the final word on human organization, nor the ever-larger consumption of materials and energy as the aspirational motivation for politics. In short, the growth dynamics of capitalism and the dominance claims of extractive resource sector corporations and their political allies has to be confronted by both an alternative set of ontological premises and a political strategy that offers plausible alternative modes of governance.

## 22.5 Anthropocene Geopolitics?

Calls for a sustainable transition suggest the necessity of limiting consumption precisely because we live in an interconnected biosphere in which we are linked fairly directly to one another. The conservative political rhetoric and the ontological assumptions of autonomy and competition are antithetical to all this. Reinforcing assumptions of sovereignty and rivalry, of a world divided into competing states, with morality related to our success, even if that is part of a zero-sum game, the conservative invocation of the necessity of virtuous violence to ensure dominance of the current suburban mode of consumption is precisely what needs to be transcended. But that is not enough intellectually or politically now in the epoch of the Anthropocene (Brauch/Dalby/Oswald Spring 2011). Spelling out some of the implications of the Anthropocene, as the next few paragraphs do here, emphasizes how radically different a sustainable politics has to be from the kind of thinking epitomized by the Canadian Conservative Party.

The ecological premises for sustainability frequently assume a stable situation; life lived in ways that doesn't compromise the possibilities of future generations, to finesse the classic definition of sustainable development in *Our Common Future* (World Commission 1987). What the earth system analyses are making increasingly clear is that the geopolitical premises of modernity, of competing territorial states and expanding industrial power, don't work as the tools for think-

ing sustainably about the future. Neither should state boundaries be simply assumed (Fall 2010), although they are much more stable since the United Nations system has become the established institutional framework for international politics.

Ecological geopolitics has yet to come to terms with these conundrums; much hard thinking needs to be done on these matters. The irony that governance and hence political rivalry is understood through a series of categories specified in territorial terms precisely when what matters apparently crosses those boundaries is key to understanding the current dilemmas and to suggesting modes of analysis that can more effectively grapple with what is coming (Bulkeley/Andonova/Betsill et al. 2014). Shifting from a physics model of power, one of competing autonomous entities, of surveillance, territorial demarcation and military enforcement to an ecological sensibility that recognizes interconnection and change rather than permanence and fixity as key to flourishing life, is a fundamental ontological challenge to conventional understandings of politics and society. On the largest scale, that of the biosphere as a whole, this is exactly what now has to be brought into political discussion.

Many of the more thoughtful analyses of climate change have tried to tackle the matter beyond the conventional formulations that apply resource management or state administrative apparatus to the problem. The multifaceted nature of climate change, coupled with the urgency of addressing it, makes this a 'super-wicked' problem that defies a simple solution (Levin/Cashore/Bernstein et al. 2012). There are many technological innovations that are less carbon-intensive, but no technical fix that can resolve the issue in engineering terms. Climate change is part of the larger transformation of the global biosphere and as such touches on the most basic conditions of human existence. How it is tackled, or not, goes to the heart of politics, and to the big questions of world order that are the key matters of geopolitics.

Put most simply, humanity has changed the composition of the planet's atmosphere and raised the level of carbon dioxide close to 400 parts per million, well above levels that the planet has known in the last few hundred thousand years. This will inevitably set off disruptions to how weather systems function and do so in unpredictable ways. Unpredictable precisely because there is no analogous state in the recent history of the planet to which we can refer for indications as to how things might play out. Humans are part of this picture and will either suffer the consequences of disruptions or reap some benefits from

new opportunities dependent on the political and economic circumstances they find themselves in.

In so far as people avoid the worse consequences of climate disruptions, it will be because governments make reasonable preparations, but at least in terms of formal state structures so far many don't seem to be adapting quickly to the new realities of climate change. The Canadian Conservative government simply ignored climate realities in its rush to promote petroleum production and eviscerate the scientific knowledge systems that monitor changes and investigate ecological responses. Making these less susceptible to the vagaries of partisan politics is clearly something that needs further attention from all those concerned about sustainability. European states are further ahead but their record is patchy at best. Attempts to negotiating binding arrangements under the umbrella agreement of the widely adopted *UN Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) have generated huge conferences and numerous other meetings but the carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere continue to rise at an accelerating rate.

It is important not to focus on climate alone. The global economy has been constructed by large-scale environmental change in terms of the extension of agriculture into most of the world's ecosystems that can support crops (Ellis/Goldewijk/Siebert 2010). The loss of habitat for other species has led to the extinction of a sizeable percentage of the life forms that the planet supported until recently. Fishing combined with pollution and now increased acidification of the oceans due to rising carbon levels has transformed aquatic life systems too, with untold future consequences for many species apart from humanity. Human industrial systems 'fix' more nitrogen for fertilizers than natural processes do. Phosphorous likewise is increasingly an artificial cycle. Most large rivers have been dammed, diverted and modified, some to the extent that the waters in them don't reach their estuaries. Artificial urban habitats have been built that transform regional ecosystems as they provide the basic necessities of life for the burgeoning global population.

This is the new context for the human drama, one of our own making (UNEP 2012). It is within this new context of an increasingly artificial world that human vulnerabilities, and all sorts of insecurities, play out now. Given these new circumstances it seems fitting to many earth system scientists to designate the current period in terms of the Anthropocene, literally the age of humanity. In the Anthropocene, artificial circumstances define our existence and infrastructure,

markets and politics matter much more in terms of who lives and who dies than the immediate consequences of weather events, however severe or dramatic (see chapter 3 by Dalby in this volume). This is a global urban system that stretches beyond the actual boundaries of individual cities enmeshing people everywhere in the economic and ecological linkages that are globalization. This is a view of the world nearly entirely at odds with that of the Canadian Conservative Party.

## 22.6 Rethinking Politics

While the ontological premises for thinking intelligently about sustainability are easy enough to outline there remain major difficulties in challenging the dominant understandings of 'environment' that are no longer very helpful in thinking about the future. Most obviously what climate change and the discussion of the Anthropocene make clear is that what needs to be focused on much more clearly than in the past is matters of what is now being made. The point of the Anthropocene is just that; we are making the future (Brauch/Dalby/Oswald Spring 2011). The commodities, houses, roads and energy systems that power our constructions are the new ecological context, not an addition to an environment, parts of which have to be protected in the sense of preserved. Obviously crucial ecosystems need to be protected from some aspects of development, but now they need to serve also as migratory pathways for species set in motion by climate change. Stability is over and ecological responses are happening simultaneously with human changes to environments. Thinking in terms of ecological sustainability now has to work in terms of mobile ecologies.

This is antithetical to much of the territorial thinking that traditionally structured parks and preservation. Ecological planners understand this well; the questions are whether the territorial administrative tools we use to control the mobility of those considered undesirable, both human and other species, can now be adapted appropriately to facilitate migrations. A static cartographic imagination of virtuous locals facing threatening foreigners, the nationalistic impulse all too readily mobilized in the face of changes that are rendered dangerous, is precisely the wrong geographical framework for dealing with what is coming. But it is implicit in many of the formulations that contemporary 'conservative' thinking uses. If the projections of dangerous climate change that are increas-



ingly appearing in both climate science and now in the international investment analyses of future risks (PIK 2012), come to pass, rapid adjustments to changing circumstances will be needed, not militaristic attempts to prevent change by force.

In the Canadian case there has been considerable attention paid to the rapidly changing configuration of the Arctic as the ice retreats and the prospects of both new trade routes as well as oil and gas production in the newly accessible waters loom. While alarmist stories of imminent conflict there, and arguments about whose jurisdiction applies where, make good headlines, they are not what matters most (Kraska 2011). Arguing about who owns which island or what agency gets jurisdiction over sea-lanes isn't grappling with the bigger story. These are however familiar tropes that allow politicians photo opportunities and nationalist sound bites and journalists easy story lines that don't require much thinking about the causes of these changes. But this is dealing with symptoms of climate change, not dealing with the causes. It's adaptation after a fashion rather than mitigation, and while that is necessary now it's a focus that once again displaces attention from the more important issues of how to decarbonize capitalism quickly to slow the changes to many ecosystems.

Focusing only on the resource extraction sector deals with part of the problem of an unsustainable political economy, rather than the whole Canadian story. The consumption landscapes being built around the major urban centres without effective public transport, uneconomical because of the low density, and requiring extensive infrastructure construction as well as on-going energy consumption because of automobile use and the large houses that are key to the whole lifestyle, are the other side of the unsustainable ecology of this exemplary North American profligacy. The 'lock-in' of energy consumption for coming generations is part of the problem but the larger cultural politics of privatized consumption makes a politics of solidarity more difficult. Mobilizing around keeping taxes low, given the large expenditures involved in suburban houses, plays into the rhetoric of small government, not into innovative governance arrangements and the need to construct ecologically sustainable infrastructure with an eye to the long term in a changing climate.

## 22.7 Conclusions

At least six not particularly novel conclusions can be drawn from the Canadian federal political story of the last decade for those who wish to think seriously about sustainabilities and transitions to a post-carboniferous economy and society.

Most obviously is the simple lesson that activists concerned to make a more sustainable world ignore politics at their peril. Focusing only on narrow technical matters of environment, and assuming that legislation to protect various things will remain intact in the long run, are two dangerous tendencies that may appeal to academics in particular. The dynamics of multiple parties in the Canadian federal parliament are another factor that is less pronounced in other democratic states that have more equitable seat allocation systems than is the case in the Canadian 'first past the post' electoral arrangement. Nonetheless the rise of reactionary parties in times of crisis is a danger that sustainability campaigners need to anticipate. We do after all live in a political world, not a reasonable one. Thinking carefully how to make sustainability initiatives survive political storms is as important as building infrastructure that can survive extreme weather events.

The second lesson is that political economy matters! Confusing the rhetorics that legitimize states as the provider of services to all citizens with how power actually operates is a political trap. The rise of neo-liberal ideologies involves both numerous modes of rule that involve markets and management techniques that reassert the power of states, and does so in ways that underscore their primary function in facilitating capital accumulation. Rising inequality has been the result in most states where the business ideologies and managerial arrangements have been reasserted in the name of efficiency and prosperity. Power has also slipped away from states as they become enmeshed in complicated international trade agreements where foreign companies have the rights to sue governments trying to initiate social and environmental regulations deemed a challenge to corporate profits. In these situations states become dependent on external economic logics rather than domestic political priorities. Power doesn't reside simply with states; inter-governmental arrangements increasingly matter.

Which suggests, third, assuming that policy-making is actually coherent within states is also sometimes a mistake. Not only do different parts of state apparatuses have different priorities, forces outside the normal assumptions that modern states are coherent uni-

tary entities often drive them. This is frequently exacerbated by nationalist rhetoric and the assertion of sovereignty in perverse ways that obscures the international economic situation. In the Canadian case provincial powers are often in conflict with federal priorities and the solutions are complex political compromises, or at least they were until the Stephen Harper conservatives became the majority government and set about limiting cooperation and consultation and imposing solutions where they could.

Fourth, is a reminder that governance by market is frequently a chimera. Markets can't decide many things, not least the most important things like what the future of the biosphere should be! They may be good at some distributional issues, but the profit motive and the failure of markets to signal long-term environmental dangers have brought us to the climate crisis. In Nicholas Stern's terms (2006), in his crucial economic analysis of the issue, climate change is the biggest market failure the world has ever seen. The early 2013 crisis in European carbon markets only emphasizes the point that market mechanisms are only as good as the rules that run them and these are unavoidably political issues (Paterson 2012). Focusing on production decisions and national policies about what gets produced rather than assuming that markets will make the things we need without being constructed to do so is important. Feed-in tariffs and other financial measures have been key to getting renewable energy industries started in many places; there is a politics to this that forces innovation. But such innovations are apparently easier in states without fossil fuel producers who understand such innovations as the competition.

That said, fifth is the simple but important point that in the globalized world economy of the present authority as well as climate governance initiatives (Bulkeley/Andonova/Betsill et al. 2014) is diffusing to new sites—provinces, cities, corporations and international arrangements. Sustainability strategies need to bear in mind that cooperation in all sorts of venues is going to be needed, and in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of the last few years and the exposure of the flawed assumption that financial systems work reliably or that banks are best left to their own devices, new opportunities to use the tools that they have developed for other ends may arise. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin (2012) close their recent overview of the rise of global capitalism by musing on the political conditions that might yet turn international financial institutions into public utilities devoted to very different priorities from profit-making through

ever more abstract derivative trading schemes. This point also needs to be remembered in coming discussions of sustainable institutions.

Finally, to return to the ontological premise point made earlier in this chapter. The assumptions that the world is an intrinsically competitive place and the only option is to play to win have to be confronted directly in any discussion of sustainable futures. The task ahead for scholars concerned about sustainable transitions is to change the assumption that politics is necessarily only about dominating a divided world. Instead we need to focus on matters of how to share a crowded one (Dalby 2014). This is going to require a much larger discussion of inter-generational and intra-generational equity and a focus on making useful things that do not foreclose future ecological flexibilities. It is going to require thinking hard about how to adapt to changing circumstances in cooperative ways, rather than trying to resist change by using old-fashioned borders and the threats of force. Such geopolitical premises have no place in a sustainable future once it is realized that we are all part of a single biosphere that we are collectively remaking at something close to breakneck geological speed. Above all it is going to require much more careful thinking about political strategy where, based on short-term economic and parochial nationalist premises, there is intense opposition to sustainability initiatives.

While the Canadian Conservative Party was defeated in a Federal Election in October 2015, their actions over a period of nine years to dramatically reduce the capacity of the Canadian state to both monitor environmental change, and facilitate policies of transition to sustainability, is a warning to transition advocates that pre-empting such political programmes has to be part of any strategy that looks to the long-term future. The Liberal Government sworn in on November 4<sup>th</sup> 2015 with Justin Trudeau as Prime Minister has much work to do to repair the damage to Canada and its international reputation. It will probably help that Stephane Dion will serve as foreign affairs minister in that new government; his record on climate will probably ensure that at least Canada will no longer be an obstacle in climate negotiations. But a possible transition to a more sustainable Canadian future has been tragically delayed by at least a decade.

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