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Clean up your Act, Ottawa

The Clean Air Act could use some tweaking—and Elizabeth May could help



PATRICK
ROSS

In recent months, various polls have determined that the environment is the top political issue among Canadians today. Particularly important are the toxic emissions related to climate change and air quality. Toxic emissions have also become an issue in an unlikely place: within the House of Commons itself.

Ottawa's leading producer of these noxious fumes—the Liberal, New Democratic and Conservative parties, as well as the Bloc Québécois—have been working overtime since 19 October, 2006, when the controversial Clean Air Act was introduced in Parliament.

Since its introduction, the Clean Air Act has met stern resistance from the opposition parties. In particular, they've criticized the intensity targets contained in the bill, which could allow greenhouse gases to increase as the consumption of fossil fuels increases. On 1 November, Prime Minister Stephen Harper agreed to submit the Clean Air Act to a committee for revision.

Since then, the co-operation between the various parties has been uninspiring, however. Newly appointed Environment Minister John Baird's

testimony before the Clean Air Act committee degenerated into vicious partisan bickering over the previously governing Liberal party's dismal performance on the greenhouse gas issue, as compared to the action (or, to date, lack thereof) taken by the current Conservative government.

Given the critical importance of the environmental portfolio—especially in relation to climate change—the current, largely partisan, deadlock on the issue is entirely unacceptable.

New blood is desperately needed. Unfortunately, the person who may be best suited to provide the leadership that is so sorely lacking is sitting firmly on the sidelines.

With the government and opposition parties content to snipe at each other in what has become a blatant example of pre-election campaigning, a real leadership deficit has emerged, and it clearly needs to be filled.

New blood is desperately needed. Unfortunately, the person who may be best suited to provide the leadership that is so sorely lacking is sitting firmly on the sidelines.

Green Party leader Elizabeth May has been akin to a ghost recently,

haunting Parliament Hill and eager to insert herself into the environmental debate in any way possible. To date, her contributions on the matter have mostly consisted of a number of television and radio interviews—she could definitely be making a much more significant contribution.

What seems to be needed, more than anything, is an effective arbitrator: someone to bring the two parties (in this case, the government and opposition) together to discuss the issue, to determine how that issue will be discussed, and to moderate that discussion. The Green Party's Elizabeth May could be just the right person for the job.

With no Green Party MPs currently in the House of Commons, May wouldn't be placing her party at risk by playing the role of arbitrator in this matter. The Green Party has nothing to lose, and everything to gain.

While the Green Party clearly has lessons to learn before it will be prepared to take on any great significance in Canadian politics, the current importance of the environment and the Clean Air Act in particular, could use the kind of constructive, non-partisan leadership that Elizabeth May could offer.

All of this adds up to a golden opportunity for virtually everyone involved—especially Elizabeth May. Perhaps our political leaders could give May her first big break in this regard by giving her an opportunity to regulate the "toxic emissions" being disgorged over the Clean Air Act.

A polarized nation isn't very attractive



JARED
MILNE

no special considerations whatsoever. Any attempts to accommodate Québec nationalism, such as the Meech Lake Accord, only fuel separatism.

Unfortunately, this approach just hasn't worked, in that the Quebecois simply haven't responded to it. In fact, in many ways it's only made the problem worse. Ignatieff took a tremendous political risk in saying otherwise.

The sad thing is, both Rae and Dion supported Meech Lake and criticized Trudeau's efforts to oppose it before they joined the Liberals.

At least three

supports negotiation with Québec is accused by Trudeau of being a separatist." Unfortunately, now it seems you have to be either a Trudeauist or a separatist—there's no room for compromise, conciliation or finding the middle ground.

This problem can surface in other areas as well. Either you support a province like Alberta or Newfoundland in its oil disputes with Ottawa and are accused of being parochial and not caring about the rest of the country, or you defend the intent of Ottawa's actions and are accused of not caring about the provinces' needs. Either you support recognition of Canada's Aboriginal people and are accused of promoting "ethnic nationalism," or you defend Canada to the Aboriginals and are accused of promoting colonialism and assimilation, in extreme cases.

What's happened to attempts to understand where the other side is coming from in a debate? Why must we simply shout down people who dare to disagree with us? Maybe, by studying how the Fathers of Confederation made exceptions and exemptions for Québec, seeing why the aboriginal treaties exist in the first place, seeing things from the province's point of view or seeing why Ottawa has to take the needs of all Canadians into account, we could maybe try to avoid this polarizing, and see that Canada was built on understanding and compromise, not simply shouting the other side down. One can only hope.

leading supported recognition of Québec in some form or another, but do they feel like they can say it openly without becoming political pariahs?

Tommy Douglas, the "greatest Canadian" (as dubbed by CBC viewers), once claimed that "anyone who

During the Liberal leadership race last year, candidate Michael Ignatieff proposed recognizing Québec as a "nation within Canada." Bob Rae, Stéphane Dion and Gerard Kennedy, Ignatieff's main rivals, criticized the proposal, saying that it risked badly dividing a Liberal party struggling to reassert itself. Stephen Harper since openly accepted the motion, which some observers feared might set off another round of divisive constitutional negotiations that could easily lead to misunderstandings and animosity like that of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords.

The recent debate over recognizing Québec as a nation wasn't one between federalists and separatists, but between different groups of federalists who want to see Québec remain in Canada but who can't agree on how it should fit into the country. This debate on the Québec issue shows just how alarmingly polarized Canadian politics risks becoming.

In some circles, the only way to deal with Québec is the way Trudeau did—treat it like any other province, with