



# **Hot Button Issues in Canadian Foreign Policy since September 11, 2001**

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### **Beyond the Promise Land**

**The time for excuses is over: Canada can deliver on its 10-year-old pledge to make climate change a priority by ratifying the Kyoto Accord.**

*By Elizabeth Dowdeswell*

At the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, there was a legitimate mood of celebration because the signing of the Framework Convention on Climate Change signaled that climate change required serious attention. Today, as the world community gathers for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, it is obvious that the promise of Rio has not been fully realized. There is clearly a disconnect between the sustainable-development agenda we negotiated and what we have delivered

I have many memories of those intense days leading up to Rio: the learning, trying to understand a complex field of climate science full of uncertainties; the dedication of researchers patiently trying to explain the nature of the risks to cautious, if not doubting, policymakers: the inequities of negotiating teams, some numbering more than 100, with an expert for every subject, while others

consisted of two people and a typewriter; the late-night strategy sessions with enthusiastic and persistent NGOs; the fatigue and exhilaration, in equal measures as the gavel was brought down.

Most of all, I remember that my days at Rio were spent looking ahead, designing a “Quick Start” proposal that Canada hoped would build on the momentum generated and take the next steps with some urgency. Naïve? Perhaps. But in 2002, the objectives of that “Quick Start: agenda are more important than ever.

Whether or not climate change is on the “official” agenda at Johannesburg, it will once again be front-and-centre in our s\consciousness. Ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, the implementation agreement of the climate-change convention, will be the indicator of commitment. The protocol only becomes legally binding with 55 ratifications including countries representing at least 55 per cent of the total 1990 emissions. To date, 76 countries representing 36 percent of emissions have ratified. Others – such as Poland, New Zealand and Russia – are likely to be next. Canada has not yet ratified Kyoto. Will we be left behind?

Climate change is the quintessential global issue, raising profound questions of equity. It is a policy problem of unprecedented scope and complexity, striking at the basis of our economic development, our security and our ways of life. This issue, more than most in history, tests our skill in public policymaking and diplomacy as well as our political will. It will require leadership of a sort that has so far been scarce. Amid the din of vigorous defences of special interests, very few voices offering leadership, much less self-sacrifice in the name of collective well-being, can be heard.

Thankfully, there is some good news. While governments ponder, people are acting. Leading corporate players are moving out ahead of government, pushing technology development and seeking strategic alliances in trade. The municipal sector is designing policies and programs that reduce greenhouse gases and coincidentally improve air quality and urban livability. The leading union in the energy sector has endorsed Kyoto and is supporting cleaning energy sources. And some thoughtful NGOs continue to articulate Canadian solutions to meeting our Kyoto commitment.

But there are still many who are not engaged in finding those solutions. At both the federal and provincial levels, some leaders are sending signals shrouded in ambiguity, still indicating a reluctance to honour earlier commitments. Notwithstanding exhaustive analysis and attempts to build consensus, 10 years after Rio there is no universally agreed national strategy, and our emissions continue to rise. The bottom line is that we have much unfinished business.

Leadership is of preeminent importance and Canada can still be a leader in contributing to a multilateral response to climate change. This climate change

treaty is really about how we cope with a changing world. How we share burdens fairly. How we build confidence. The kind of leadership we need goes well beyond bean-counting, to imaginative and knowledgeable statesmanship to overcome the powerful momentum toward mediocrity.

It is inexplicable that we cannot agree on achievable and low-cost strategies that can limit the extent of climate change and delay its onset. There is a great deal of evidence to show that real emission reductions are achievable and will not lead to the disastrous economic claims that some make. That's why British Petroleum, IBM, Alcan and many other leading multinationals have already instituted significant emission reductions and made money doing so.

It is inexcusable that we are not putting in place precautionary, no-regrets policies that will ease our confrontation with climate change. Fostering innovation on new technologies will reduce energy use at home and feed a global market seeking the same objective. Canada has had such a vision and history of brokering international agreements in the interest of humanity. I know that action will not happen simply because at a visceral level environmentalists want to save the planet. Even exquisite logic is not on its own going to convince our publics to alter our comfortable way of life. But we must not be the generation that squandered this opportunity or paralysed our future. Our common vulnerability must be met with courage and boldness. Simply put, we must move beyond promises. We must begin by meeting our international commitments. An announcement by the prime minister in Johannesburg that Canada has ratified the Kyoto Protocol would be welcomed as a sign of Canada's re-engagement.

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