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Leadership lacking on carbon 4

Backtracking: Harper and now Trudeau want provinces, not Ottawa, to deal with issue

Wait, what? We're not going to put a price on carbon? Or not, at any rate, at the national level? That's no longer federal Liberal policy? We're to be deprived of the edifying spectacle, come the next election, of the federal Conservatives roaming up and down the land warning of the "tax on everything" the Liberals have planned?



MARK RALSTON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES FILES

Alberta has 'sort of a carbon tax,' B.C. has a broad-based levy and Ontario is talking about one too. The only entities not willing to take charge of the issue nationally are our federal politicians.

No, hang on, they'll do that anyway. But it would certainly appear the Liberals have just discarded one of the few distinctive policies they had hitherto been good enough to share with us.

Or what else are we to make of Justin Trudeau's comments on an Ontario radio station this week? In an interview with radio station AM980 in London, Ont., Trudeau appeared to back away from any commitment to federal action on climate change. Rather, the role he envisages for it now seems confined, in essence, to cheering on the provinces.

"We've had nine years of Stephen Harper's government," Trudeau told his host, "where there's been absolutely no leadership on the environmental file, and failing that kind of leadership ... a number of different provinces have moved ahead." Specifically, on pricing carbon: "B.C. has a carbon tax, Alberta has picked up a sort of a carbon tax, Ontario's bringing in its own plan. Quebec is part of a cap and trade with some other regions."

So if the Harper government has failed to provide "leadership," would he? Not exactly. Rather, it "should be up to various provinces because they've already taken the lead on that, and what the federal government needs to do is coordinate that and oversee the implementation."

This is fairly spectacular, even by the standards of federal politics. Hardly a speech has passed Trudeau's lips in the past two years that has not included some reference to the need to "put a price on carbon."

For example, during an October 2013 speech in Calgary, he called for "a national approach" to energy development, "within an overall framework that includes a policy that puts a price on carbon." The clear implication, if not the explicit statement, was that the Liberals were the party to do it.

To be sure, the Liberal leader has been careful not to say "carbon tax," the central policy plank in Stephane Dion's illfated 2008 election campaign. But this is playing with words. It may suit different parties at different times to insist there is a difference between cap-and-trade — the policy currently favoured by the NDP, and formerly favoured by the Conservatives, allowing companies to emit a certain amount of carbon dioxide each year, beyond which they must purchase credits on the open market (and short of which they can sell them) — and a carbon "tax," levied as such.

But they both make it costlier to release carbon into the air, whether as consumers or producers.

Similarly, while the NDP, like the Conservatives, like to pretend their policy would only apply to "the big polluters," one way or another that tax is certain to be passed on, whether to consumers or workers or shareholders. Which is to say, you. And until this week, Trudeau was among the brave few willing to sort of admit it. He might not have been clear on which sort of carbon "price" he preferred, but he was clear that he would be the one to impose it. Or at least, he seemed to be. If that is no longer the case — if the policy of the federal Liberal party is limited to "co-ordinating" and "overseeing" what the provinces are already doing on their own, from a "carbon tax" to a "sort of a carbon tax" to "cap and trade" to whatever it is Ontario has planned — then there is not much left of Liberal policy on climate change.

Which is to say, it now closely resembles Conservative policy.

You'll recall the prime minister's own fairly spectacular volte-face, in the course of his annual round of year-end interviews, in which he let slip that he was no longer unalterably opposed to pricing carbon, so long as someone else does it. Specifically, he mentioned Alberta's carbon tax — whoops, carbon price — as "a model" for the sort of "continental" approach he prefers. Provincial, continental, anything as long as it's not national. And not a tax: "It's not a levy, it's a price," he told the CBC's Peter Mansbridge.

This is the sort of narrowing of party differences you often see before an election, especially on these sorts of big, difficult issues — the kind the public might prefer to see debated in the campaign. The question is whether this new bipartisan consensus makes any sense as policy. There's lots of room to experiment on which kind of pricing model works best, and provinces often make good laboratories for this sort of thing.

But climate change is a global phenomenon, requiring global action.

Whether Alberta, Quebec or any province brings in a carbon tax is frankly immaterial: it won't make a dime's worth of difference to the planet. Neither would a national program, come to that — on its own. But Canada is at least morally obliged to do its part (as perhaps in time it will be legally): to share in the costs of reducing global carbon emissions.

Much of the negotiations in Paris later this year, as in previous rounds of global climate talks, will be taken up with how to allot those costs equitably. And much of the debate domestically will be the same: what share of Canada's allotment should each province have to assume?

Perhaps there's room for every province to choose its own means of meeting its emissions- reduction target — though business would surely prefer to have to deal with one carbon pricing regime, rather than 10 — but it cannot possibly be left to each to decide what its target should be.



Which is where we are now. Alberta's "sort of a carbon tax," for example, isn't anything like B.C.'s: neither as broad, nor as costly, nor as effective. Somebody needs to provide leadership on this file — not oversight, not co-ordination, but leadership — and that somebody is the federal government.

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