

Climate Sense and Sensibility

This article by Environment North president Graham Saunders was first published in the Chronicle Journal on Wednesday, December 11, 2019.

The Oxford Dictionary announced “climate emergency” as the word of the year: “a situation in which urgent action is required to reduce or halt climate change and avoid potentially irreversible environmental damage resulting from it”.

Professor Will Steffen of the Australian National University and a co-author of a recent article in the journal Nature noted, “Emergency can mean many things to many people. But there are some hard numbers behind why so many people are saying we are in a climate emergency”. Fire and flood losses in Australia and Canada confirm some of these hard numbers. A comparison of recent insured losses in Ontario with the early 1980s shows a 12x increase in catastrophic losses related to severe weather in Ontario (Insurance Bureau of Canada). Professor Steffen concluded, “To err on the side of danger is a stupid thing to do”.

Several governments in Canada seem oblivious to trends and the related catastrophic numbers. The Ford government blundered on various climate issues and facts in recent times. Early last week Premier Ford was doing damage control over his energy minister Greg Rickford. Greg, “as a well-studied person”, denied a human contribution to changes in climate and increases in severe weather. (He has since retracted his denial.) The report of Ontario Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk at mid-week noted that the Ford government's climate plan used emission reductions from cancelled “green” programs, overestimations and projects that do not exist yet (and may never come to be). The Ford plan “was not based on sound evidence”.

The Auditor General was perhaps being too polite. The Ford government has removed incentives for purchase of electric vehicles, removed requirements from the revised Ontario Building Code for electric vehicle charging for new homes, removed electric vehicle chargers from parking lots at commuter train stations and reduced emission checks on fossil-fuel vehicles. Yet, the Ford plan muses that 1.3 million electric vehicles will be on Ontario roads by 2030, resulting in a major reduction in emissions.

Ford responded last Friday to the Ontario Auditor's statement with his trump card that people should wait until 2030 before they criticize his plan.

Sometimes bad weather conflicts with policies and announcements by politicians.

Immediately after being elected in 2018 the Ford government boldly ended the cap-and-trade agreement and cancelled more than 700 renewable energy contracts as flooding inflicted nearly \$1 billion in damages in eastern Ontario.

Jason Kenney, Ford's kindred spirit in Alberta, was elected with a similar promise to “kill the

carbon tax". A big public news event at a gas station to celebrate the Repeal the Carbon Tax Act on May 30, 2019 had been planned. Black smoke from raging forest fires north of Edmonton blanketed the capital city and triggered the activation of streetlights. Kenney is cunning and cancelled the outdoor event. Instead Kenney was briefed on the status of the wildfires.

That morning in the Alberta legislature, member of provincial parliament Marlin Schmidt stated, "...Mr. Chair, it's not enough to just offer our thoughts and prayers to the people who are affected by climate change induced wildfires; it's incumbent upon us to actually take action to prevent these things from happening."

At the current United Nations climate talks in Madrid, Spain, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres's opening speech was appropriate. He criticized the lack of "political will" in advancing the Paris Agreement's goals. "Do we really want to be remembered as the generation that buried its head in the sand, that fiddled while the planet burned?" His scolding was intended for all for all attending but especially the Trump administration.

"Climate change has escalated into a global climate emergency" is the underlying theme of the talks in Madrid. Canada did declare a national climate emergency in the House of Commons on June 17, 2019. Good talk but that pesky problem of real political will surfaced a few hours later when the Liberal Cabinet (a decree, not a vote in the House of Commons) approved the building of the Trans-Mountain pipeline. Perhaps it was a ploy to win votes in Alberta. Oh well, but promising major fossil fuel infrastructure is an example of "To err on the side of danger ...".

There were recent announcements that construction of the Trans-Mountain pipeline is proceeding, and yet legal and environmental challenges remain.

Let us hope 2020 brings more climate sense and no more nonsense.