Navigating Climate Change in Canada: A Comprehensive Study on Securitization, Policy Dynamics, and Future Strategies

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Course Information

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Abstract

Worldwide, countries continue to grapple with the devastating consequences of climate change. Canada emits a large amount of greenhouse gases each year, worsening global climate conditions. While the State has sought to lower its emissions in the last decade, it has consistently failed to reach its targets. This essay first examines the history of Canadian climate policy since 2006, then evaluates whether climate change should be regarded as a security issue by detailing its impacts on human security. Subsequently, it explores how climate change has been securitized in Canada, and finally, analyzes why the Federal government repeatedly falls short of its climate pledges. Using both quantitative and qualitative data from secondary sources, the author argues that climate change should be regarded as a security issue because it threatens human security, and that Canada's national-Federal structure and its trade relationship with the US hinder its efforts to address climate change. The paper concludes with a series of policy recommendations addressing these challenges.

Canada and the Climate Crisis

When talking about climate change, one must first understand the meaning of climate. Climate is defined as a "composite or generalization of the variety of day-to-day weather conditions . . . [and] includes factors such as expected seasonal shifts and the range of expected extremes" (Dearden, Mitchell, and O'Connell 2020, 217). With this definition in

mind, one can describe climate change as the long-term alterations in an area's climate. For scientists monitoring this phenomenon, temperature recordings serve as a clear-cut indicator. Based on the available data, from 1880 to 2012, the Earth's temperature has risen by 0.85°C, with the last three decades having been the warmest on record (Bush and Lemmen 2019, 33). A majority of researchers blame "anthropogenic (human-caused) activities" for this dramatic increase (Leiss 2022, 38). This is because human activity has led to a rise in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Winfield, Hill, and Gaede 2023, 3–4). Carbon dioxide and methane are the most harmful GHGs. These emissions raise global temperatures through the greenhouse gas effect, whereby heat originating from the sun and reflected by the Earth's surface is trapped by these atmospheric gases, preventing it from easily escaping back into space and thus warming the planet. Using fossil fuels, such as oil and gas, for energy purposes introduces a significant amount of GHGs into the environment. To avoid the most severe effects of a warming planet, global emissions must be halved by 2030 and eliminated by mid-century (Klein 2020, 33). Otherwise, the international community will have to deal with more extreme weather events such as floods and heatwaves.

As one of the major greenhouse gas emitters internationally, Canada plays a vital role in efforts aimed at reducing global emissions (Stone 2018, 342). Throughout the years, Canada has sought to curb its emissions through various means—which are discussed at length in the essay's second section. Despite these efforts, the country has consistently failed to achieve the required reductions. In fact, except for a brief period during the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada's GHG emissions have constantly been on the rise. Canada's ability to control its GHG output is hindered by two primary factors addressed in this paper: the State's trading relationship with the United States of America, and the country's national-Federal structure.

Because of its vast oil reserves, Canada is one of the world's top oil exporters (Carter 2020). Out of all the countries that rely on Canadian oil to fulfill their energy needs, the United States is arguably the most important. A staggering 90% of Canada's oil exports are directed to the United States. On the other hand, for the US, roughly 40% of its total crude oil imports come from Canada. Given the US reliance on Canadian oil, any significant Canadian action to reduce GHG emissions by drastically cutting oil production could disrupt this supply. This dependence creates a potential vulnerability for Canada; a US administration, regardless of its own climate commitments, might perceive such a disruption negatively and potentially retaliate, for instance, by restricting critical American

exports to Canada, impacting the 50%–60% of Canadian imports sourced from the US. So, when Canadian officials decide to reduce GHG emissions by targeting the oil industry, they must take into account how such an act will impact the country's trading relationship with the United States, directly linking economic stability to climate policy decisions, a core aspect of this paper's thesis.

Another obstacle is the state's national-Federal structure (Bernstein et al. 2008, 24–25). Within Canada's Federal structure, Provincial governments command a considerable amount of power and their agendas frequently conflict with that of the Federal government. As a result of these clashing interests, agreements between the Federal and Provincial governments are often difficult to negotiate and uphold. Such regional divisions were on full display from 2015 to 2022 (Boyd 2024). During this time frame, climate policies enacted by Justin Trudeau's Federal government encountered setbacks when initial Provincial supporters turned hostile with the changing of government at the Provincial level. In 2019, for instance, the newly elected United Conservative Party (UCP) in Alberta announced that it would challenge the Federal carbon pricing backstop in court. Yet, prior to the UCP's electoral victory, the ruling New Democratic Party (NDP) in Alberta had been supportive of the Federal government's climate strategies. This illustrates that for a proposed piece of legislation to be successful in the Canadian context, it must have the backing of the Provinces, highlighting how Federal structure complicates national responses, another pillar of the thesis.

By adopting a maximalist approach to security, this article argues that climate change should be considered a security issue because it threatens multiple key components of human security—namely, economic security, food security, and health security (Persaud 2022; Stoett 2015, 212–14). Whereas traditional approaches to security center on nation-states and national boundaries, human security approaches focus on the variety of threats that confront individuals; these threats can take economic-, food-, and health-related forms. Extreme weather events caused by climate change can have direct economic consequences for individuals. For example, wildfires and floods can lead to people losing their homes, appliances and automobiles. Countless Albertans lost their residences and personal belongings due to the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire, representing devastating economic shocks for average families, requiring costly rebuilding or relocation, and causing significant psychological distress. Furthermore, such disasters disproportionately affect marginalized communities, including lower-income households often lacking adequate insurance or resources to recover, and Indigenous peoples whose

traditional lands and livelihoods may be irrecoverably damaged by fire or flood. Food security is impacted by storms and heavy precipitation since they "can cause sewage overflow, carrying pathogens from the ground and sewage into water bodies, and contaminating crops in fields" (Berry and Schnitter 2022, 23). Additionally, "climate change is projected to affect global food availability, as rising temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, extreme weather, droughts, and sea level rise (saltwater flooding of coastlines) could all directly damage crops and decrease yields" (24). Ontario's loss of the strawberry crop in 2012 due to shifting climate patterns is a pertinent example, demonstrating threats not only to farmer livelihoods but also potentially impacting food prices and availability for average citizens, particularly lower-income families who are more vulnerable to food cost inflation. In terms of health security, "climate change affects air quality, as higher temperatures can increase pollutants in smog" (20). Constant exposure to air pollutants can give rise to respiratory illnesses and lung cancer. Moreover, as Canada's climate warms, infectious diseases are likely to emerge and spread throughout the country. Research suggests that "Lyme disease emerged in Canada and spread northward as a result of climate change, causing a dramatic increase in human cases from 2009 to 2017" (22). These concrete examples affecting Canadians' economic stability, food sources, and physical health directly support the thesis that climate change constitutes a significant human security threat.

Environmental Policies and the Securitization of Climate Change

This section critically analyzes the major Federal environmental policies developed by Canada from 2006 to the present, explaining how certain actors have securitized climate change, and how Federal policies intersect with Provincial jurisdiction and international obligations. Within Canada's Federal system, the Provincial governments maintain control over their natural resources, while the Federal government possesses regulatory powers over the energy sector's greenhouse gas emissions (Olive 2019, 241). On top of this, international treaties and trade agreements fall under Federal authority. This constitutional division complicates national climate action, as implementing treaty obligations—like those under the Paris Agreement—often requires cooperative policy or legislative changes from Provinces, which control many relevant sectors like natural resource development and electricity generation, leading to potential jurisdictional conflicts and implementation delays. Because Federal policies operate at the nexus of domestic and international affairs, this paper concentrates on climate policies developed and implemented by Ottawa.

Securitization refers to the process through which particular matters are elevated in status to become security concerns. According to securitization theory, introduced by the Copenhagen School, politicians utilize “speech acts“ to convince the public that a problem is an existential threat necessitating an extraordinary response. Speech acts consist of the language, words, speeches and discourses used by elites to frame a subject in a specific way (Thomson and Baele 2022). The degree to which a policy is accepted depends, in part, on how it is framed. Hence, evaluating Canada’s environmental policies requires considering how climate change is securitized.

When Stephen Harper’s Conservative Party came to power in 2006, Canada’s position on the environment changed drastically. Harper’s Conservatives made numerous amendments to existing legislation that eased pressure on Canada’s highest emitting sectors (Maciunas and Saint-Geniès 2018, 6–9). The Conservatives’ most shocking maneuver, however, was withdrawing Canada from the Kyoto Protocol. With this move, Harper, citing economic concerns, signalled opposition to internationally mandated GHG emission reductions. Domestically and internationally, Canada’s withdrawal drew immense criticism. Rajendra Pachauri, president of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2007, asserted that the Conservative Party “has been a government of skeptics. They do not want to do anything on climate change“ (7). At home, this sentiment was echoed by activists and opposition groups.

By the time Justin Trudeau’s Liberals formed government in 2015, surveys revealed Canadians generally preferred stricter climate action. Observing this mood, Trudeau’s Liberals sought to re-establish Canada as a leader in climate negotiations. A few months after the 2015 Federal election, at the Conference of the Parties (COP 21), the newly elected Prime Minister proclaimed, “Canada is back, my friends, and we’re here to help“ (Boyd 2024, 146). COP 21 produced the Paris Agreement, through which Canada pledged to lower “its GHG emissions by 30 percent below 2005 levels by 2030“ (Maciunas and Saint-Geniès 2018, 10). To achieve this, the Federal government coordinated efforts with the Provinces. In March 2016, the Federal, Provincial and Territorial governments “adopted the Vancouver Declaration on Clean Growth and Climate Change“ (10). From this, the Pan-Canadian Framework for Clean Growth and Climate Change (PCF) emerged, outlining tools for Ottawa, the Provinces and Territories to meet climate targets. One instrument was the Federal carbon pricing benchmark, requiring “all Provinces and Territories have carbon pricing by 2018“ (11). Jurisdictions could choose a price-based system (carbon tax) or a cap-and-trade system, provided it met PCF criteria. Failure meant applying the Federal

carbon pricing backstop: a Federal carbon levy on fossil fuels and an “output-based pricing system for industrial facilities that emit above a certain threshold“ (11).

Initially, all jurisdictions except Saskatchewan agreed (Boyd 2024, 147). However, the framework faced opposition from Ontario, Alberta, and New Brunswick after Conservative governments were elected in those Provinces. These governments challenged the Federal policies in court. With the Liberals’ re-election in 2019, the Federal government passed more environmental policies. The Net-Zero Accountability Act mandated Canada to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. The Liberals’ plan included raising “the carbon pricing benchmark by $15 every year between 2023 and 2030. This meant that by 2030, every Province and Territory would have a carbon price of $170“ (148). For the automotive industry, Ottawa required “that sales of zero-emission vehicles reach 10 percent by 2025, 30 percent by 2030 and 100 percent by 2040“ (148). The Supreme Court of Canada ultimately upheld the Federal carbon pricing scheme, siding with the Trudeau government against the Provincial challenges.

This legal victory coincided with a Liberal electoral victory in fall 2021. Energized, Trudeau’s government pursued its climate agenda vigorously. They announced at a climate summit that “Canada would increase its 2030 target to a 40–45 percent reduction from 2005 levels“ (149). Ottawa also amended its automotive policy, “requiring that 100 percent of vehicle sales be zero emission by 2035“ (150). Recently, the Federal government revealed plans to phase out coal, achieve a net-zero electricity grid by 2035, and mandate the oil and gas sector “to reduce its emissions by 42 percent from 2019 levels, including a 75 percent reduction in methane emissions, by 2030“ (150). Following the Supreme Court decision, Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan softened their positions on the carbon pricing benchmark, while Alberta remained vehemently opposed.

Charting the Course for Policy and Progress

While Justin Trudeau implemented enforcement mechanisms distinguishing his approach from previous Prime Ministers, his tenure faced controversy, notably the “approval of new pipelines and the granting of subsidies to the oil and gas industry,“ drawing criticism (Maciunas and Saint-Geniès 2018, 10). Yet, reconciling climate goals with oil and gas development is a recurring theme in Canadian politics. Canada’s Federal system and reliance on natural resources create a complex environment. Provincial interests, shaped by regional resources and needs, often clash with Federal climate ambitions. For a Province like Alberta, heavily reliant on oil and gas revenue and employment, accepting drastic

economic changes without substantial support is challenging. Trudeau's 2015 promise to complete the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion in exchange for Alberta's support in PCF negotiations exemplifies this tension. Instead of environmentally harmful incentives, Ottawa should align with just transition principles: invest heavily in Alberta's renewable energy sector, subsidize worker retraining, and ensure competitive wages in green jobs compared to fossil fuel counterparts. This approach directly addresses the economic security dimension of the human security framework.

Trudeau's national climate policy has endured, largely due to its flexibility regarding Provinces. Until Pierre Poilievre's election as Conservative leader, the Liberals' environmental agenda had cross-party support (Boyd 2024, 150–54). With a Federal election anticipated, Poilievre uses populist slogans like "Axe the [Carbon] Tax" to gain traction. Research indicates public support for environmental policies wanes during economic hardship (Miljan 2022, 356–64). Global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical conflicts have strained the Canadian economy, increasing living costs. Sustained public backing is crucial for effective climate policy. Canadians need sufficient, accurate information about climate change impacts. Currently, disinformation is widespread, and education systems are ill-equipped. Federal, Provincial, and Territorial governments must collaboratively develop curricula promoting factual climate knowledge.

Given the US-Canada interdependencies previously discussed, meeting climate targets requires significant coordination with the US. Canada should prioritize enhancing bilateral climate agreements, possibly establishing a North American Climate Council. Integrating electric vehicle markets and aligning critical mineral supply chains with US needs supports a smoother transition. Addressing the trade imbalance and leveraging economic ties can aid Canada's climate goals. A comprehensive 2030–2050 Green Transition Roadmap with clear targets, fostering cross-border green tech investments, is vital. Engaging diverse stakeholders ensures effective, inclusive strategies (McWhinney and VanNijnatten 2024). Linking policy solutions back to the thesis, overcoming the identified obstacles of Federal structure and US relations through cooperation and targeted investment is essential for achieving climate goals and enhancing human security.

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