

Politicians and climate change

EDITORIAL

ONE OF THE MANY current differences between Canada and the United States is the essential unanimity among Canadian politicians as to the existence of man-made climate change and the need to reduce production of carbon dioxide. South of the border, an ignorant political leader has pulled the U.S. out of the Paris climate accord and is even encouraging increased coal production and use.

However, while all our politicians subscribe to a need to do something about it, there are sharp differences as to the appropriate tools.

In Ontario, the previous Liberal governments headed by Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne took the matter seriously, accomplished much and in the process saw their support evaporate to the point where the party failed to elect the eight MPPs needed to maintain official party status.

Our expectation is that historians will conclude that when it came to combatting climate change the Liberals grossly over-estimated the public's willingness to contribute to the high costs involved.

There's no doubt that replacing coal-fired power plants with new gas-fired plants, wind farms and solar projects caused electricity prices to soar. As we see it, the main mistakes were to build the controversial gas plants rather than simply convert coal-fired units to natural gas, and to limit property taxes on wind turbines to the point where no rural municipality welcomed them.

As for solar projects, the Liberals' mistake was to move too quickly, before prices fell to the point where the electricity they produced would be relatively cost-competitive.

Today, Ontario has a populist premier who is emulating Donald Trump's reversal of all policies developed by his predecessor. Just two months into his four-year term, Doug Ford has killed all the energy-saving programs financed by the Liberals' cap and trade program, which saw billions of dollars collected from CO2 producers going to fund such things as subsidies for electric car purchases and household retrofits.

Beyond that, the new Progressive Conservative government is launching its own court challenge of the federal Liberals' plan to impose carbon taxes on any province that refuses to have its own viable carbon-reduction plan.

Not surprisingly, The Globe and Mail's editorial board senses a real need for the federal government to promote the carbon tax as a revenue-neutral means of trying to meet the modest objective of reducing emissions target levels set by the Harper government. Conservative critics contend the carbon tax will accomplish nothing and drive businesses out of Canada, seemingly ignoring the fact that nothing of the sort has happened thus far in either Ontario or British Columbia, where a carbon tax has been in place since 2008. There's not a shadow of doubt that no one likes taxes, but equally none that they are a necessary evil, without which we would lack such vital public services as universal health care and education and such useful facilities as airports, roads and bridges.

In the circumstances, the Conservatives are alone in attacking carbon-reduction initiatives and this fact bothers some supporters, one being a former editor of the Toronto Sun, Lorrie Goldstein.

In a column last Saturday he wrote, "Just because the Trudeau Liberals aren't being honest with the public on the issue of man-made climate change doesn't mean Andrew Scheer and the Conservatives should get a pass on it."

A valid criticism was that Scheer and the Conservatives have no plan. That wouldn't be an issue if Scheer, and for that matter Premier Doug Ford and the Progressive Conservatives in Ontario, would come out and say what their lack of any coherent policy suggests.

The column concluded: "If their real plan, as I suspect, is not to do much of anything, they should be honest with the public, say so, and explain why."