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## Rising tide

### Does Stéphane Dion's victory at the Liberal leadership convention and the public's growing concern about the environment mean Canada is ready to take on a cleanup crusade?

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For the third time in the past 40 years, Canada appears to be awash in a green wave.

Once again, environment issues are a top concern in opinion polls. Politicians and business leaders can't afford to ignore them.

Climate change and pollution dominate the platforms of four of the five federal parties. And even the fifth, the Conservatives, talk about them a lot.

All the candidates at last weekend's Liberal leadership convention proclaimed themselves on the side of the environmental angels, and the greenest of the bunch, Stéphane Dion, won the contest.

Dion promised he'd make the issue the centrepiece of a stark choice between himself and Prime Minister Stephen Harper in the next election campaign.

But is Canada really that green? Are Canadians actually ready to embrace a cleanup crusade?

On the surface, the answer seems to be "Yes."

News of a melting Arctic, droughts and floods on the Prairies and a combination of sweltering summers and freakish storms everywhere — along with a deluge of books, movies and scary reports on what's to come — have sparked high anxiety about climate change.

An EKOS poll done for the *Star* and *La Presse* and published today shows how the environment has grown in importance for Canadians.

Asked what issue would be most important to them in an election campaign, 15 per cent said the environment. When asked the same question in January, prior to the last election, only 4 per cent said the environment. Another 23 per cent said social issues/health is most important today, while 18 per cent said the economy.

Green party leader Elizabeth May finished second in the recent London North Centre federal by-election, a contest dominated by environment issues.

Businesses are tripping over themselves to profess green values. It won't, however, be that simple for anyone who figures to woo voters by surfing a massive green breaker.



SHAUN BEST/REUTERS

Supporters of Stéphane Dion cheer their candidate during the Liberal leadership convention in Montreal last week. With Dion's victory and with environmental issues gaining in importance among Canadians, there's a feeling that a new green wave may be sweeping the country.

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- It's not certain how powerful the wave really is. Canadians have a tradition of expressing concern about the environment, but balking when it comes to real action. They get spooked when politicians and industry spokespeople warn jobs could vanish if companies are pushed too hard.

"Some opinion data says, 'Yeah, it's part of our identity. We see ourselves as a clean country,'" says Richard Nimijean, a political scientist at Ottawa's Carleton University. "But we seem to be less willing to do the tough measures."

- Dion's environment policies were not the only reason he won the leadership, and the environment has never decided the outcome of a Canadian vote, even at times when concern was high.
- Even if it is dominant — and Harper's Conservatives don't manage to alter their anti-environment image — green votes could be split among the four opposition parties. And Dion might suffer at the ballot box if he's tarred with the poor record of the previous Liberal government.
- The Conservatives could neutralize the issue with strong plans to combat climate change and air pollution.

Yesterday, the Harper government announced plans to spend \$300 million to curb the use of toxic chemicals. Soon to follow are revived subsidies for wind, solar and other renewable energy sources, and resurrection of the Liberals' EnerGuide program, which paid part of the cost of making houses more efficient. In January, the government is to announce the first regulations for emissions from industries and cars under its Clean Air Act.

If the Conservatives repeat past form, these measures will be mostly spin and little substance. As well, Conservative officials and supporters appear set to play the scare card, warning that environmental action would come at a high price.

But the party might pull off a surprise with some tough action. Environment Minister Rona Ambrose has certainly been talking as if that's possible. Rumours suggest Harper might even shuffle her out of the job to signal a new course.

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**'Climate change requires changes in household activity and in corporations'**

***Tima Bansal, University of Western Ontario***

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Much depends on whether the green movement is viewed as a real roller, or just a ripple.

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Angus McAllister has been tracking Canadian opinion on the environment for 20 years.

The green wave breaking now looks very similar to the one in the late 1980s and early '90s, says the Vancouver-based pollster, who runs a publication called *Environmental Monitor*.

Back then, people faced a series of environmental crises. In 1985, acid rain became a big worry here, and in Bhopal, India, a Union Carbide chemical plant blew up, eventually killing an estimated 20,000 people. The following year, the Chernobyl nuclear power plant spewed radiation across northern Europe. Then, we got our first pictures of the gaping hole in Earth's protective ozone layer. The sweltering summer of 1988 awakened awareness of global warming. A year later, the tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground and fouled Alaska's pristine coastline with heavy oil.

But these events didn't move environment to the top of opinion polls, McAllister says. It barely registered as a concern.

Still, a shift was taking place, a bit like the earthquake that sets off a tsunami.

"What really drives people's concerns about the environment is not the incidents themselves but the sense that governments and industry aren't doing anything about them," McAllister says. "As they perceive (those in power) are not acting, they got pissed off."

Up to the mid-'80s, poll respondents seemed satisfied. After a few years of bad news, though, that began to change: Views of politicians and business leaders got negative. Only then did environment shoot to first place when people were asked their major concern.

Governments and industry responded with various measures, including effective treaties on ozone and acid rain, and the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Companies produced a flood of green products. Although often of dubious value, they added to the sense change was afoot.

As an issue, the environment became a smooth, untroubled sea.

Ripples began to disturb that placid surface seven or eight years ago. Climate change, smog and other issues were becoming more obvious and complaints about inaction started to inch up again. The trend was briefly knocked aside by the terrorist attack of Sept. 11, 2001. Soon, though, people concluded that menace was under control and returned to their growing anger over the environment.

The tipping point came in 2004, when a majority of poll respondents said governments and industry were doing a bad job, McAllister says. As before, environment soon began to shoot up the ranks of "top of mind" issues — that is, when respondents are asked, without being prompted by any suggestions, what they're most concerned about.

"It's not Number One yet, but it has momentum," McAllister says.

Another important measure is the number who say they're very concerned when asked about a specific issue. On that score, in the past three years environment has jumped more than 25 percentage points, to about 55 per cent.

Other polls suggest 90 per cent of Canadians have some level of concern about climate change, and 71 per cent think Ottawa's approach is inadequate.

Frank Graves, at EKOS Research Associates, has also found a burgeoning interest in the environment. In his surveys, worry about climate change has been building since 1997, he says. "It's a top public concern."

The first green wave hit in the late 1960s. At the time, Graves says, it was a "back-to-the-Earth, Birkenstock (sandals)" sort of movement.

Now, it's far more mainstream, and fuelled by unease over direct threats to our health, economy and comfortable lifestyle.

"There's a new thing: The environment has an additional layer of significance" connected to security, Graves says. "It's not just socially virtuous any more. People are scared stiff about the implications for them and their grandchildren."

"Canadians are increasingly feeling our house is getting trashed, and we don't like it," McAllister adds.

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**'We see ourselves as a clean country. But we seem to be less willing to do the tough measures'**

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There is, Graves and others note, a gap between expressions of concern and willingness to act.

People drive their cars more than ever, and fill their homes with energy-gobbling gadgets. One example: Sales of plasma TVs are soaring, even though the bright screens consume five times more electricity than conventional

models. The ecological footprint of the average Canadian — the total amount of resources we consume — continues to grow.

"Climate change requires changes in household activity and in corporations," says Tima Bansal, of the Research Network for Business Sustainability at the University of Western Ontario. "At the household level, we're not changing as much as we could."

On the other hand, in areas such as recycling and public smoking, Canadians have shown they can alter their behaviour. And they appear to support big-scale measures.

"People tell us they're willing to have government spend a lot more on climate change, especially in relation to other issues like defence," Graves says. "Given a choice between tax relief or action on climate change, most would opt for climate change. Our evidence on that is clear."

Close to a majority now say that, if necessary, they'd pay higher taxes to deal with environmental crises. But "asking Canadians to talk about new taxes in a time of (federal) surpluses seems to be out of order."

McAllister notes an interesting quirk in public opinion that could be significant for party strategists: People tend to support innovative solutions until a problem impacts them directly; then they want tough regulations and punishment.

On climate change, emissions trading and other new schemes will be backed a while longer, but the window is closing, McAllister says.

"Once people get upset, all they want to do is regulate and fine ... They want the tried and true, even if it's less effective."

The Conservatives might be on to this. All fall, they've trumpeted plans to impose regulations, but how tough they'll be remains to be seen.

There are other messages, though, which Dion and May appear to understand.

"You can't keep scaring people," says Katherine Cinq-Mars, a PhD candidate in political science at McGill University in Montreal. "There has to be: `Yes, the threat is serious, but we can deal with it.'"

Fear-mongering about the economy, and painful adjustments, could backfire. People don't like the prospect of major sacrifices. "They want action on the cheap," Cinq-Mars says.

But Canada could do many things to combat climate change, including incentives, tax shifting, efficiency regulations and emissions trading that cause little or no pain.

"There's plenty of low-hanging fruit," Cinq-Mars says.

Dion agrees. So does May. Sacrifice would only be necessary if nothing is done for another 10 years, she says.

There's also strong support for solutions, and the optimistic idea that, as Dion insists, environmental improvements can go hand in hand with economic prosperity and making "megatonnes of dollars."

Environmentalists want their issue to become so universally accepted that it's simply part of the culture, and that any rules and regulations will be viewed as untouchable when a new party comes to power.

We're not at that point, observers say. But the wave seems real.

Bansal views change as a contagion — a few people act and it catches on.

With the environment, "I think we are on the cusp of the contagion," she says. "Climate change is a real issue, not something that's fabricated ... It's not going away."

"As long as public opinion stays as it is now, there will be political incentive to do something," Cinq-Mars says.

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