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Good Paris goal, bad Canadian target

By Ann Raney

The Minister of the Environment and Climate Change, the Honourable Catherine McKenna announced for the first time that the climate greenhouse gas emissions target of the new government is the same as the former government's ? 30% below 2005 levels by 2030. Details as to how the target will be achieved are not yet known but they plan to find out. In other words, this government is announcing that it plans to make a plan to meet the last government's targets, one of the weakest in the industrialized world.

In part because of the hard work of Minister McKenna in Paris, Canada was an early supporter of the climate treaty goal of no more than a 1.5-degree increase in global average temperature compared to pre-industrial times. That is why the announcement of a target that will not contribute to meeting that goal is surprising as well as disappointing.

Two degrees was really a political compromise at Copenhagen 2009, so a provision was added to revisit 1.5 degrees as a goal. And in Paris 2015, to reflect more recent information from scientists and economists, and to be fair to island nations that would disappear at a 2.0 degree warming because of sea level rise, 192 countries agreed that a maximum of 1.5 degrees global average temperature compared to pre-industrial times would ?significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change? (Paris COP 21 Treaty).

However, it may be that we are forced to aim for 2.0 since there is already enough warming gases in the atmosphere to increase the planet's temperature by 1.5 degrees. It takes time for the heat to bounce around eventually warming our oceans and land masses, just as it takes time to warm up by a fire when you come in from the cold.

We only have .5 degrees to work with because the amount of greenhouse gas emissions, mostly carbon dioxide, in the atmosphere has already committed the planet to a 1-degree rise.

?Climate change is happening now and much faster than anticipated,? said Dr. R. Watson, former chair of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and one of seven climate science experts to author report released September 29th. (Universal Ecological Fund). The report states: ?The 1.5°C target has almost certainly already been missed. Global average temperature has already reached 1°C above pre-industrial times in 2015. There is still time to slow down the current path towards reaching the 2ºC target within the next few decades. While the Paris Agreement on Climate Change is an important step in the right direction, what is needed is a doubling or tripling of efforts.?

Global average temperature is not the same as local temperature. Local temperatures can vary greatly, global averages cannot. During the last ice age, which ended about 11,700 years ago, most of the western countries including Canada were under tons of ice and the global average temperature was only about 5 degrees colder than it is now. A few degrees change in global average temperature can affect everything upon which our civilization depends.

Fairness cannot be based on the output of greenhouse gases from countries in recent years, but as the portions dumped and still accumulating in our atmosphere for over two centuries. Western nations that went through their industrial revolution over a century ago are responsible for a great deal of the atmospheric CO2 that has accumulated over the decades. Mostly agrarian nations did not burn fossil fuels nearly as much.

These are facts and why the world gathers to discuss climate change and agree to a binding treaty as in Paris and Kyoto, but ?agreement should never be confused with solving the problem.? (Fiona Wolf, former Mayor of London, UK.). The Paris agreement allows for countries to increase their individual targets in order to meet the treaty goals.

Last November the aggregated targets (called Intended Nationally Determined Contributions, INDCs) were calculated by the UN Climate Secretariat and the result was that the targets, (which included our current Canadian target), would cause a global average temperature change relative to pre-industrial times of 2.7 to 3.5 degrees. Canada's target was ?only ahead of Kazakhstan, Australia, and Saudi Arabia which is a sad place to be as one of the top 10 emitters in the world? (Dr. Karen Farbridge, former Mayor of Guelph).

Canada is not part of the solution, and we are part of the problem.

Work toward reducing the degree of damage and adapting our civilization to climate changes is too slow.

The devastating and very real consequences have seemed too far off to consider for business leaders and governments that are primarily concerned with shorter timelines like business cycles and political cycles.

Mark Carney, Governor of the Bank of England and former Governor of the Bank of Canada, defines the challenges of climate change as ?a tragedy of the horizon? (September 2015, speech at Lloyd's of London, UK). ?Once climate change becomes a defining issue for financial stability, it may already be too late. This paradox is deeper, as Lord Stern and others have amply demonstrated. As risks are a function of cumulative emissions, earlier action will mean less costly adjustment.?

Since 1990, severe weather events caused by climate change have doubled in number. An increase to 2ºC above pre-industrial levels

could lead to another doubling in their frequency. Science cannot say that any one event, a flood, a storm, or a drought, has been caused by climate change alone, but the increase in frequency and severity of these events can be directly linked to our burning of fossil fuels and emission of other greenhouse gases. Frustratingly these often tragic events are still reported in the mainstream media over and over wherever they occur as ?the flood of the century, the driest it has ever been? and ?record? floods or droughts but without mention of climate change. They have observed that there is ?yet another major flood? but do not make the connection to climate change. The science, the root cause, the story behind the story is left untold.

I am reminded of Mark Twain who said:??Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.?

But climate change events are real and not fiction.

?To get the Liberals to act to meet the Paris goal, to ensure we urgently replace the weak climate target left behind by the previous prime minister will take public pressure from an informed electorate. That informed electorate may want to start by educating our media,? said Elizabeth May, posted Sept. 3.

This is the first in a series of reports from Ann Raney, P.Eng, CEO of the King-Vaughan Greens.