

Lack of leadership on environmental issues

By Skid Crease

Well, at least he said it in French. Our current Prime Minister, on the morning of August 2, appeared on national television to announce the dissolution of Parliament (already on summer vacation) and the beginning of one of the longest and certainly the most expensive federal election campaigns in Canadian history.

In that speech, en Français, Stephen Harper announced the three planks of the Conservative platform: economy, security and environment. And then, without those teleprompter grey eyes blinking, he announced in English that the Conservative platform would focus on the economy and security. Period.

And that Canada, is all you need to know. Sending this current Prime Minister and Minister of the Environment to the Climate Summit in Paris would be as embarrassing on the world stage as if Rob Ford had been the Mayor of Toronto when the PanAm and ParaPanAm Games graced the GTA with their excellence.

This is a Prime Minister for whom the craft of double-speak has been refined to an art. When asked a direct question, as in the case of the current Duffy-Wright-PMO trial, he simply refuses to accept the premise of the question and sticks to his talking points. Talking points crafted by the Prime Minister's Office. The same PMO that crafted this very expensive court case is the same PMO that will craft very expensive spin at the Climate Summit in Paris.

And that, fellow Earthlings, is simply something that we cannot afford. Flashback to the days when a young Party flipping Stephen Harper (from Liberal to Reform to Alliance to Reform to Conservative Reform Alliance Party to Conservative) called climate change a "socialist plot."

Flash forward to the days when Stephen Harper crushed Kyoto, and changed the baseline for greenhouse gas reductions from 1990 levels of CO₂ to the 2005 levels just before he took office. Very convenient, very, to paraphrase, "I do not accept the premise of these levels."

I had a personal relationship with Stephen Harper during this period. At the time in 2005, I had accompanied the Students on Ice expedition to the Arctic on a 14-day trip from Iceland to Greenland to Nunavut to study the impacts of accelerating climate change. The two teachers on the trip were Skid Crease and Justin Trudeau. And we, along with 25 accredited scientists, helped the 75 international youth on that expedition to craft their Youth Declaration to the CoP11 Conference in Montreal for December of 2005. A young Minister of the Environment named Stephane Dion, also the Chair for that conference, took the students under his wing after Jack Layton abandoned them, and brought them to the world stage. Their youth voice was included in that 180 nation consensus UN document - one of the first international agreements that Harper rejected when he became minority Prime Minister in 2006, along with the One Tonne Challenge and the shut down of the Environment Canada website.

Due to my environmental credentials, I became a federal Liberal candidate for Dufferin-Caledon in 2006, withdrawing when the Party turned on Stephane Dion, but not before I encountered the wrath of Stephen Harper. I was still doing paid speaking engagements as a private citizen in those days, usually on the theme of ecology, economy and climate change.

A staffer from the Downsview Park/Canada Lands Project contacted me to come to speak to their staff about climate change issues. I agreed, honorarium set, we picked a date, and all was good to go. Then, a few weeks before my engagement, I received a phone call from a PM's representative, very apologetic, letting me know that they were canceling my speaking engagement.

When I asked why, and I directly quote, "Well, Mr. Crease, if the Prime Minister knew that you were giving a talk on climate change to our staff, he would have a heart attack."

To which I replied, "Well, that wouldn't be exactly a bad thing, would it?" To which he laughed in response. Nervous laughter. I then asked for an email confirmation of the conversation and the cancellation of my speaking engagement, and was told in no uncertain terms that nothing in writing would be forthcoming.

I suddenly had shivers of the kind of censorship that Germany and Russia had experienced.

I contacted the person at Canada Lands who had booked me to speak. I was informed that she was no longer on staff. Very upset, I called my contacts at Environment Canada to ask what the heck was going on. They all said the same thing: "It's already happened to some of our scientists. All you get is the phone call, no written record. That's how they do things now."

Interestingly, the Conservative Party candidate and MP in my riding, David Tilson, spoke at the Downsview Park/Canada Lands shortly after that incident. That's how they did things then; that's how they do things now.

Well, Canada, if that's how you want them to continue to do things like that for the next four years, you know exactly for whom to vote. For me, the Emperor has no clothes and certainly no policies to deal with accelerating climate change.

When you refuse to be accountable, you end up being held to account. When you refuse to accept the premise of the question, you

get questioned. Simple as ABC.

Skid Crease is an accredited member of the Association of Canadian Journalists. He is an award-winning outdoor and environmental educator, a keynote speaker, a storyteller, an author, and a community volunteer. He taught with the North York and Toronto District School boards for 35 years, and officially "retired" from the Faculty of Education, York University, where he was a Course Director and Environmental Science Advisor. Skid has worked with scientists from Environment Canada (pre-2005), NASA, and the Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research in a quest to put an understandable story behind the wealth of their scientific data.