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The Climate Summit of the Americas

By Skid Crease

Last week, I had the privilege and honour of being a witness to a historic event. For three days in July, over 500 international government and business leaders gathered at the Fairmont Royal York Hotel to take part in The Climate Summit of the Americas concurrently with the International Economic Forum.

The Mississaugas of the New Credit welcomed the international community to their lands, now known as Toronto. They reminded all of the delegates that their lands are not a commodity, but a gift from God. Pope Francis would agree.

Thanks to the far-sightedness of our Editor, Mark Pavilons, I was one of the accredited media reporters at the event, standing shoulder to shoulder with CBC, CTV, and Al Jazeera International through media scrums and presentations, including the historic signing of The Climate Action Statement by 21 provinces, states, cities and regions across the Americas.

Sadly, ?Our Government?? was missing in action. Environment Minister Leona Aglukkaq was too busy partying in Nunavut, and Prime Minister Stephen Harper was doing campaign photo-ops with Earth Rangers-shirted child props in Rouge Park.

This federal impotence prompted California Governor Jerry Brown's thundering demand to both the American and Canadian governments to ?Get with it!? Brown has taken the unprecedented steps of demanding a 2050 target of zero emissions for California and an entire clean economy by 2100.

Federal inaction is also the reason why, as Governor Jay Inslee from Washington State reminded the delegates, that they were the leadership of the future: ?This is no sub-national group; this is the Uber-National team.? With no leadership coming from a deadlocked American Congress, and no leadership coming from a denier Canadian government, the path forward was left to the states, provinces, regions and cities to legislate change.

California was the prime example of a jurisdiction that went from major deficit to major economic surplus as it made the transition to a low-carbon economy. Governor Brown didn't pull any punches in his address: ?We are not going to get there (a renewables future) driving the same old car, using the same old fuel, living the same old consumptive lifestyle. We have to become more efficient, more elegant, in the way we use and dispose of the limited resources on Spaceship Earth.?

Governor Peter Shumlin of Vermont enthusiastically echoed the same support for State initiatives in renewables investment: ?We are all on the Titanic, we have seen the iceberg, and we have turned the ship.?

Those states that have turned their ships all endorsed the initiative by Ontario and Quebec to join with California in establishing their carbon pricing strategy. Along with British Columbia, that means that over 70% of Canada's citizens are already living with a carbon tax. BC's economy, contrary to federal doomsday predictions, is thriving quite nicely with its carbon tax.

However, the most enthusiastic team there consisted of our Premier Kathleen Wynne, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Glen Murray, former president of Mexico Felipe Calederon, and every climate change denier's nemesis, former Vice-President of the United States, Al Gore.

Those four, along with three accomplished and outspoken American Governors, Jerry Brown from California, Peter Shumlin from Vermont, and Jay Inslee from Washington State, all emphasized key points in the transition to a renewable energy economy:

1. We have to put a substantial price on carbon.
2. We have to set ambitious targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase renewable energy production.
3. We have to have a ?Smart Plan? for achieving those targets.
4. We have to invest in Research & Development for renewable energy creation/storage, innovation, and entrepreneurism.
5. We have to elect a federal government that will deliver science-based climate change policy, set long term achievable goals, and invest in both social justice programs and renewable energy production.

However, it was our First Nations who really brought the issue into focus. The Chiefs and delegates all spoke passionately about the impact of accelerating climate change on First Nations peoples, the most marginalized among us who will be hit extra hard by climate change extremes. Larry Sault referred to his people as stewardship warriors who want to move, who must move, from poverty management to wealth creation.

But as Order of Canada elder Sheila Watt-Cloutier noted, it is about much more than wealth creation. Speaking for the Inuit of the Arctic she implored, ?Economic gain must not override the existence of a whole people. What is needed is a debate on human rights ? it is a moral and ethical imperative.?

Al Gore echoed that moral imperative in a powerful address on the last day of the Climate Summit. We answered his questions

?Must we change? and ?Can we change? with a resounding, ?Yes!?
But he left the question ?Will we change?? as one that all the delegates would have to answer within the context of their own communities. If our united answer is YES to change, then we can lift both the global economy and the quality of existence on Earth for all living things.
We will never know everything there is to know about climate change, but we know enough now to act wisely and act well. As Teddy Roosevelt once said, ?Knowing what's right doesn't mean much unless you do what's right.? Time to do what is right.
Skid Crease 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.