

What signing the climate change targets will mean for you

A heart-to-heart conversation with Canadians

By Robert Lyman
Contributor
Troy Media

OTTAWA, ON/ June 22, 2015 /Troy Media/ - I think someone should have a heart-to-heart conversation with Canadians about what the recently announced climate change emissions reduction goals would really mean to their everyday lives.

The G7 Industrialized countries committed themselves in principle to eliminate fossil fuel use by 2100 and to aim at reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by up to 70 per cent from 2010 levels by 2050. The intention of the Paris climate change talks in December is to establish legally binding obligations to drastically cut emissions.

When I talk to my friends and children about this topic, they usually say that they want to be good citizens of the world and to do what is right for the next generation. In their view such targets mean they might have to turn down their thermostats in winter, reduce the air conditioning in summer, buy a more fuel-efficient car or take public transit more often, and pay slightly higher electricity bills. They think that the worst a carbon tax would do is add 10 cents per liter to the cost of gasoline.

They can't understand when I explain it would be worse – far worse.

Energy is intertwined in every aspect of our daily lives. It's not just 'Big Oil' that would suffer – it would be all of us.



Welcome to your future

Canada's GHG emissions were 707 megatons (Mt) of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) in 2010. This is up from 597 Mt in 1990. According to Environment Canada, emissions rose again to 726 Mt in 2013.

Reducing GHG emissions by 70 per cent from 2010 levels would mean cutting emissions by at least 495 Mt to no more than 212 Mt in 2050.

To reach a 495 Mt reduction, one would need to eliminate all oil and

gas and electricity production. That's right – not just stop all new investment in oilsands plants, but also shut down every single oil and gas well, pipeline and refinery in every part of Canada.

If that were possible, it would leave Canadians completely dependent on oil, gas and coal imports from other countries.

Ending emissions from energy production would also mean shutting down all coal mines and coal-fired power plants, the lowest cost sources of electricity supply. Replacing them with nuclear or renewable energy sources would be far more expensive.

The oil and gas and coal industries represent major sources of investment, income, productivity and export earnings for Canada. Eliminating them would devastate the economies of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland. Closing the coal-fired power plants would significantly raise electricity prices for consumers in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia.

Taking these extraordinary steps would only reduce emissions by 264 Mt! That's not anywhere close to the target.

Policy makers would undoubtedly then focus on transportation, one of the largest and fastest growing sources of emissions. Oil is the source of gasoline, diesel and jet fuel. Oil is the only energy source that is technically able to power about 95 per cent of transportation demands.

Electric vehicles won't do it – their market penetration is small and . . . they need a conventional power plant to 'fill 'er up.'

If we completely eliminated oil use in transportation it would mean going back to horses, bicycles and walking, and taking freight movement back to the era of the 1890's.

Governments would have to severely restrict or tax the discretionary use of aircraft for personal travel.

Those restrictions would turn Canada's 500,000 or so "Snowbirds" into "Nobirds" because air travel would be either prohibited or reserved for essential uses only. The travel and hospitality industry would shrink. Those friendly WestJet stewards might be left asking for donations instead of telling jokes.

"Energy-intensive industry" would have to be cut back. That means fewer jobs in vehicle manufacturing, mining and metals, industrial chemicals, cement, and pulp and paper. We would be faced with an ever-more jobless economy, with spiraling costs . . . for everything. How would organized labour react to policies that shut down most or all of Canada's manufacturing and resource companies?

Activists dream that between "now and then," several miraculous new energy technologies will emerge. But that's unlikely.

Never in Canada's history, even in wartime, have we faced such a dilemma. As long as average Canadians – including many policy-makers – are blissfully unaware of the implications of these drastic climate change emissions reductions, we risk making absolutely disastrous commitments.

Robert Lyman, a retired economist and federal public servant who spent much of his career working on energy, transportation and environment issues, is the author of [Climate Change Targets for Canada – Examining the Implications](#), published by Friends of Science Society.