

First, we must learn to say no

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The greatest challenge we face in the 21st century is to make the transition to a way of life that enables everyone on Earth to have a good quality of life, including of course good health, while living within the limits of the one small planet we call home. To do so, we Canadians have to dramatically reduce our ecological footprint, while maintaining a good quality of life.

Canada's ecological footprint in 2007 was the 11th largest in the world, at about 7 hectares per person. But the planet's biocapacity (its regenerative ability) was 1.8 hectares per person. So we are using about 4 planet's worth of ecosystem goods and services. That means less for other people, who then cannot get the resources and development they need to lift them out of poverty. It also means less for other species – which helps explain why the Earth's Living Planet Index has declined more than 50% since 1970.

More than half of both the global and the Canadian ecological footprint is due to the carbon emissions that are driving climate change, making the reduction of carbon emissions our number one priority. There is growing recognition that we have to keep up to 80 percent of our fossil fuel reserves in the ground, because if we burn all we know we have, we will be completely off the dial in terms of global warming.

At the same time, we have to accelerate the drive to a low-carbon energy system. Clearly, we can't make this transition overnight, it will take years. Which is why we have to learn to start saying say no now to decisions that promote rather than reduce fossil fuel extraction and use; this is now a basic test of credible public policy in the 21st century. A good place to start is to say no to pipelines, as well as the LNG business in BC that is so beloved by Premier Clark and her government.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau wants it both ways, saying recently that we need both pipelines and wind turbines to reach our climate goals. His remarks were rebutted this week by Harvard professor Naomi Oreskes in an interview in *The Tyee*. Part of her point is that when you put in infrastructure, it is there for decades, so you lock in that way of life and work. So let's not lock in more reliance on fossil fuels.

We need to say no to all new policies that make fossil fuel use easier and cheaper, and yes to policies that make it less easy and more expensive. In BC, that means increasing the carbon tax, not freezing it as Premier Clark has done. By making fossil fuels more expensive, we will create an economic climate that favours the development of energy conservation and clean, renewable energy systems.

Closer to home, here in the Capital Region, the McKenzie interchange provides an example of an important infrastructure decision to which we should say no. The whole point of this exercise is to make it easier for people to commute back and forth from the Western communities by car. But this decision locks in the wrong transport system and the wrong land use development pattern for decades, if not for centuries. Yet there are much better options, including improving public transit and – in this age of the internet – telecommuting.

Just imagine for a moment that people who currently commute to work along the Trans-Canada could, on average, work from home one day a week – or that one fifth of them could always work from home. You would reduce commuter traffic by around 20 percent; two days a week would reduce it 40 percent.

So why not take the money saved from not building the interchange and use it to support the creation of telecommute centres where people could go to work. Not only would it reduce traffic and emissions, but it would stimulate local community businesses. People using the centres would need food, day-care and other services, and they would find new friends and strengthen local community networks; co-locate it with a community recreation centre or library and the possible benefits grow.

Real leadership means learning to say no to old-paradigm solutions and yes to 21st century sustainable alternatives.

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