

Milan Prazak Ilnyckyj  
PhD Candidate  
University of Toronto Department of Political Science  
Sidney Smith Hall  
100 St. George Street  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5S 3G3  
milan.ilnyckyj@gmail.com

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Minister Jonathan Wilkinson  
Ministry of Environment and Climate Change of Canada  
Terrasses de la Chaudière  
15 Rue Eddy  
Gatineau, Québec  
J8X 4B3

Minister Wilkinson,

The premise of Canadian and global climate change policy is that there is still a budget for greenhouse gas (GHG) pollution. That's where all the targets and disagreements arise from: who needs to cut how quickly. All this is notionally connected to the temperature threshold which climate scientists deem to represent "dangerous anthropogenic interference", with ever-harsher warnings about what will happen to the Earth and to us if we warm it by more than 1.5 or 2.0 °C above the pre-industrial level which endured

for centuries before humans began to exploit fossil fuels at scale ( $\sim 1750$   $\sim 280$  parts per million). That premise has arisen for political reasons rather than scientific or environmental ones, as a means to reconcile the world's unwillingness to give up fossil fuels with concern about what sort of future we will have if we do not. Rather than persist with the framework that the world has an available budget and Canada has a share, I urge you to accept that dangerous anthropogenic interference is already here and that Canada's budget is exhausted. We can build no new fossil fuel production or export facilities, and we must apply ourselves with a new order of commitment and determination to the task of ending our fossil fuel dependency.

That will be a moral choice for a country that has emitted as much historically as Canada, and which continues to emit so much per person. It will also be a lesson and message to the world that we have accepted that our future prosperity cannot be based on fossil fuels, that we have the vision to foresee how a high quality of life is possible without them, and that we are determined to build that future with forms of energy which do not damage the climate and which can form a sustainable basis for providing food, water, warmth, cooling, transport, means of self-expression and exploration, and all the other bases of a prosperous life to everyone on Earth. We can go from a 250-year fossil binge that has always been fundamentally unsustainable to a new global energy system which will limit climate change, provide high quality lifestyles to everyone, and give a promise of stability which has never been possible with the unknowns geology, politics, and conflict introduce into

fossil fuel economies, production, distribution, and pricing.

I began to be acutely interested in the environment when I was a child in North Vancouver in the 1990s at Cleveland Elementary School. I joined a Granville Island-based environmental group, Leadership Initiative for Earth or LIFE, and eventually took part in two LIFEboat Flotillas in 1997 and 1998, where hundreds of young people voyaged among the Gulf Islands in tall ships meeting experts like Jane Goodall and Marc Garneau and building environmental understanding and a network of people determined to protect the Earth. Through my time at UBC I dedicated myself to environmental politics, reasoning that we are not lacking in scientific or engineering capability, but rather in the will to act and the ability to convince diverse groups of individuals, firms, and states do so despite their selfish incentives to exploit the Earth and one another. It was only during my M.Phil program at Oxford that I fully appreciated the potential seriousness of climate change and its degree of precedence as an environmental threat. Reading Spencer Weart's *The Discovery of Global Warming* and Richard Alley's *The Two Mile Time Machine*, I came to understand that the geological era in which human civilization has emerged — the Holocene — is unusual for its climatic stability and furthermore that paleoclimatic records extending hundreds of thousands of years show how CO<sub>2</sub> has a powerful effect on how the Earth absorbs and radiates energy, and thus what global temperature levels, sea levels, and many other conditions are like. As climatologist Wallace Broecker put it: “The climate system is an angry beast and we are poking it with sticks.”

When I had finished my M.Phil, my greatest hope was to apply myself to helping humanity avoid the worst impacts of unconstrained climate change. To that end, I accepted a job in the Strategic Policy Branch of Environment Canada. While there, I was asked to prepare a climate science briefing for an incoming Minister. This surprised me twofold, both because it was hard to believe that a Minister would need such an elementary briefing prepared in 2007<sup>1</sup> and because a policy analyst with a background in political science and international relations was being asked to write it in a department that employed thousands of world-class scientists. Eventually, I came to understand that what the civil service was doing was just an endless carousel of delay: a new round of briefings every time there was a new Minister or Deputy Minister, accompanied by rapid growth of the oil and gas sector and Canada reneging on the targets we had chosen, to say nothing of what our fair share in dealing with the problem would have been. Eventually I decided that it was impossible to make a difference on the problem within government. Our elected leaders lacked and continue to lack the understanding of what it would mean to push up the global temperature by 2 or 3 or 4 °C and lacked the ambition and courage to propose a course of action compatible with staying within any of those limits. A world where every country keeps developing new fossil fuel infrastructure as Canada proposes to is one that will burn past those limits and into the territory of a transformed globe,

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<sup>1</sup>The books that convinced me as an M.Phil student in 2006–07 were published in 2002–3 and Al Gore’s big slide show was in 2006.

shifted in its orbital tilt and inundated with the loss of the great ice sheets, with widening unliveable zones, and with our natural heritage — which is beyond price or replacement — destroyed. As a civil servant I was bound to implement plans that clearly ended in catastrophe, while also restricted from trying to change the political situation in which such complacency persists.

As I was leaving government to begin my PhD studies at the University of Toronto, I had several conversations with colleagues and superiors in which they lamented “gapology:” the process going back to the Chrétien era of setting a GHG reduction target for political reasons and then performing economic analyses to compare potential mitigation measures and the GHG reductions expected to accompany them against the political target, always finding a gap in which some further action would be required. They had been in stasis for decades, broadly aware of the policy tools available to cut our fossil fuel use and emissions, but never implementing the policy of a government willing to achieve its commitments. From within government there was no prospect for breaking that stasis, which must ultimately come from the will and wishes of Canadians as a whole and thus the leaders and parties who they are willing to elect to govern themselves.

As Minister of the Environment, you and the rest of cabinet have enormous power, in public and in private, to help shift the political development of the nation. Given the degree to which people have not internalized how climate change threatens Canada, the community of nations, and humanity,

it is necessary to not just blandly assert support for ‘the science’ but show determination to educate people on where our understanding of the climate comes from, the consequences which we project from continuing with fossil fuel business as usual, and the implications that choice would have for humanity and the rest of nature. In part because of the political influence and public relations efforts of the global fossil fuel industry, people and especially politicians often fail to grasp how avoiding catastrophic climate change fundamentally requires global fossil fuel abolition. It’s uncomfortable to tell people that their livelihoods will need to go away, but it’s frankly deceptive and unfair to do otherwise at this point. Making Canadians as a whole take part in the process of re-powering our society from climate-safe sources requires both explaining and demonstrating how there is more than enough energy available from the sun and fission to maintain our high standard of living and even allow those living around the world to share in it. At the same time, building further high carbon infrastructure will just increase the financial damage Canada ultimately experiences, as post-Paris Agreement fossil fuel production and export projects prove superfluous and untenable in a world collectively committed to keep warming below 2 °C.

When a person has made a commitment, the measure of their seriousness is what they do every day. We would all appropriately scoff at someone who says they plan to lose thirty pounds by 2050, understanding that it’s always easier to promise action at some future point than to begin acting now. Paraphrasing Augustine, our position has been to ask for decarbonization, but

not yet. Wherever you set your 2030 or 2050 target, it is an inescapable fact that those years are beyond the horizon of your accountability as a government; just as you are empowered through democratic election to change our previous targets, your successors will be equally free to revise or ignore them. I urge you therefore to focus on every decision you are making during your days in power.

Ask: Is every project the government is supporting something which we will be glad to have in a post-fossil fuel world?

Or will Canadians in the future feel disappointed by the politicians and voters who wastefully allocated their effort and the means and capabilities of the nation to developing energy sources which humanity and the community of nations have already agreed must be curtailed and terminated? The time for political bargains offering a few more projects while fossil fuel producers reconcile themselves to the consequences of atmospheric chemistry is past.

Ask yourself: Are you helping Canadians understand that the risks of a world pushed 4 °C or warmer are comparable in magnitude to general nuclear war — literally beyond our imagining, because they are so far outside the experience of all the human beings to date?

In considering how to argue on topics of energy and climate change in cabinet, you might take a lesson from this bound collection of letters which my father has assembled. From the LIFEboat Flotillas in elementary school

to my time working on fossil fuel divestment at U of T my father, Oleh, has always been informed and supportive, but I would not say personally active on environmental protection. Now in short order he has begun to organize his church around the issue, and to meet with Canada's most senior political leadership. This isn't by any means a matter for activists any more — word has gotten out that what we're doing is disastrous and the world which we're building is one which we will be ashamed to pass on to our children and grandchildren. It's possible now to be ambitious in a way that goes beyond what Canadian governments in the past have done — and I do recognize that your government's efforts have been greater than others, albeit still far from sufficient and sometimes counterproductive, as with commitments to new long-lived fossil fuel projects.

The fossil fuel industry wants to keep muddling everyone's understanding with abstract notions like carbon neutrality, net zero, and GHG-free fossil fuels. This is the perpetuation of their campaign of deception, designed to extend the period when they can exploit fossil fuel reserves for profit, not taking into account how many dollars and lives worth of harm they are imposing on others. Climate change mitigation is fossil fuel abolition, difficult as that will be in an economy that has been as dependent on the sector as Canada's. Nonetheless, it just increases our losses to pretend that the industry needs to be given yet more time to grow and yet more chance to make excuses about emissions intensity per dollar of output or dubious offset schemes. The mental shortcut of asking what infrastructure we would



want in a post-fossil world may help counter such deceptions and delusions, and the easy thinking that there's a way to keep the climate stable while still profiting from coal, oil, and gas in the ground.

Thank you for your attention,

Milan