What might the future of Canada's environmental laws and policies hold? A look at the federal Liberal environmental platform

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This post provides an overview of the Liberal environmental platform which can be read in its entirety in the document entitled Real Change: A New Plan for Canada's Environment and Economy.

According to its platform on environmental matters, the new federal Liberal government will be focused on "creating clean jobs to grow the economy" and "protecting the environment while growing the economy". The Liberal environmental platform centers on six issues:

- climate change,
- investment in clean technologies,
- creation of clean jobs and investment,
- restoration of credibility to environmental assessments,
- preservation and promotion of national parks, and
- protection of freshwater and oceans.

The Liberal environmental platform places most of its emphasis on climate change and environmental assessment issues. In fact, the priority of climate change issues on the new government's agenda is reflected by the appointment of a Minister of Environment and **Climate Change**.

Climate Change

The Liberal environmental platform contains a commitment by the Prime Minister to attend the upcoming Paris Climate Change Conference in December, along with an invitation to all Canadian Premiers. After the Climate Conference, the new government promises to hold a First Ministers meeting within 90 days to create a framework to combat climate change. Central to the national framework will be the creation of national emissions-reduction targets.

The new government has indicated its intention to lead, create conditions and provide support needed to meet Canada's climate targets. This includes ensuring that provinces and territories have adequate tools to design their own policies to meet these commitments (including their own carbon pricing policies) supported by targeted federal funding. On this note, the ELC would also like to see the federal government offer its leadership and support to municipal GHG reduction programs implemented on a local scale.

The new government will also work on a North American clean energy and environment agreement with the United States and Mexico. This agreement will include continental coordination of climate mitigation and resilience policies, and alignment of international negotiation positions.

Restoring Credibility to Environmental Assessments

The Liberal environmental platform emphasizes the need for a comprehensive, timely and fair environmental assessment process. The Liberal government indicates that it will replace the previous government's changes to the federal environmental assessment process. The new federal environmental assessment process will provide:

- robust oversight of areas under federal jurisdiction without duplication,
- science based decisions,
- meaningful public participation,
- require proponents to use best available technology to reduce environmental impacts, and
- include analysis of upstream impacts and GHG emissions.

With regard to reform of the federal environmental assessment process, see the ELC's A Model Environmental and Sustainability Assessment Law. An effective planning tool seeks not only to reduce potential negative environmental impacts of proposed projects but rather to determine the alternative that will make a positive contribution to sustainability. Further, environmental and sustainability assessment must be expanded beyond traditional project-based assessment to encompass regional and strategic assessment. While we agree that duplication should be avoided, the ELC endorses multi-jurisdictional environmental and sustainability assessment (i.e. where appropriate federal, provincial and aboriginal governments must be involved in the process).

In addition to review and reform of the federal environmental assessment process, the Liberal environmental platform promises to undertake a full review of regulatory laws, policies and operational practices, in full partnership with First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples. This includes a review of recent changes to the Fisheries Act and the Navigable Waters Protection Act, and improved protection of endangered species.

Given the significant changes made to federal environmental laws in recent years (see our past posts: here, here, here, here and here) the ELC would definitely welcome a review of regulatory laws, policies and operational practices. It is imperative that such a review occur in a transparent, participatory manner allowing input from all concerned stakeholders.

Freshwater, Oceans and National Parks

The Liberal environmental platform promises to increase the level of protected freshwater, oceans and lands in Canada. In particular, there is a promise to development of a road map to meet Canada's international commitment to protect 17% of our land and inland waters by 2020. This is

accompanied by promise to increase science spending and restrict development in Canada's national parks. Similarly, the amount of protected marine and coastal is promised to be increased to 5% by 2017 and 10% by 2020. As well, funding to government freshwater and ocean science (including new investments in the Experimental Lakes Area) will be restored.

Investment in Clean Technology and Creation of Clean Jobs

In its environmental platform, the Liberal government promises investment in several natural resource sectors to support sector-specific strategies for innovation and clean technologies. The sectors identified are forestry, fisheries, mining, energy and agriculture. In addition, there is promised investment in clean technology producers.

The Liberal government promises establishment of a Canada Green Investment Bond to support renewable energy projects. There also will be consultation to determine ways to enhance scientific research and experimental development tax credits, along with other tax measures, to generate more clean technology investment.

A Glimpse into the Future

An interesting "to-do list" has been developed by Elizabeth May (Fixing what Harper broke: A to-do list for the incoming government) and includes several items relating to the environment. These include restoration of several institutions that support science and environmental decision-making (including the National Round-Table on Environment and Economy); restoration of federal environmental laws (such as Fisheries Act, Species at Risk Act and the Navigable Waters Protection Act); strong commitments to climate action; and attention to the ecological integrity of national parks.

The Liberal environmental platform offers promise for stronger federal environmental laws and a commitment to climate change action. The challenge lies in transitioning from an electoral platform to operational policy. The ELC looks forward to participating in this process while championing strong environmental laws and rights so all Albertans can enjoy clean air, clean water and a healthy environment.

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