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Canada, Copenhagen and Democracy: A Precarious Mix

I chose to enter the Copenhagen negotiations with neither optimistic nor pessimistic expectations. Instead, I focused on the political realities of the summit. In my experience, being realistic is better suited to consensus-based negotiations involving 194 countries.

Choosing optimism can be a difficult task. As a young person I have heard the “you’ll understand that these issues are more complex when you’re older” rhetoric many times. Sometimes, however, when faced with a threat of epic proportions such as climate change, it is necessary to momentarily forget the economic and political, and consider the problem from a moral perspective. For instance, is it just and right to leave the planet uninhabitable for future generations? Is it fair that those who contributed the least to the problem are the most vulnerable to its effects? The answers to these questions highlight the immorality of neglecting these issues. Once Canadians decide climate change should be tackled, whether for moral or other reasons, we will be well on our way to seeing a greener, less carbon intensive Canada.

Wait a second... the majority of Canadians already consider climate change a major threat. Polling information released before the Copenhagen summit suggests that 77% of Canadians feel our government should be pursuing more ambitious climate policies. Furthermore, our elected officials have spoken decisively - on November 18th, a motion was passed in the House with unanimous Liberal, Bloc and NDP support on the issue. It read: *That, in the opinion of the House, Canada should commit to propose at the Copenhagen conference on climate change:*

1. *Reducing absolute greenhouse gas emission targets in the industrialized countries to 25% lower than 1990 levels, by 2020;*
2. *The necessity of limiting the rise in global temperatures to less than 2 degrees Celsius higher than in the pre-industrial era; and*
3. *Supporting the developing countries in their efforts to reduce greenhouse gases and adapt to climate change.*

These proposals are in line with the science (number one and two mirror the recommendations of the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)), and the belief that countries have ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ (a phrase that was agreed upon in past negotiations and reflects the idea that countries who have historically contributed the most to climate change have more responsibility than developing countries, who face a myriad of their own issues.)

So, on the first day of the conference I was shocked to hear Canada's chief negotiator, Michael Martin, tell a room full of Canadians that our government would only propose a 3% reduction target for Canada's domestic emissions and that it was unwilling to negotiate this target under any circumstances. Essentially, the Conservative government's position in Copenhagen was neither representative of the wishes of the majority of Canadians, nor the voice of the House, violating the basic principle of democracy.

What is to be done when our elected government chooses to forgo a most basic principle, namely democracy? There are two options: change the way the current government operates; or elect a new one. For those who support the Conservative Party, then you must try to change it. Conservatism and protecting the planet are by no means conflicting ideologies. Choosing inaction on climate change is not a Conservative belief; it's a reflection of Stephen Harper's personal beliefs. Since Parliament has been prorogued, our Conservative MP, Keith Ashfield, should have ample time to hear from concerned Frederictonians about this critical issue.

Conversely, in the next election we can head to the polls and choose a government that offers ambitious and progressive climate policies. Either way, Canada must change. On the international stage our reputation is being tarnished, our democracy is being undermined, and our moral sanctity is being called into question.

The Green Matters team welcomes guest writer Taryn-McKenzie Mohr, a Frederictonian who is currently studying Political Science at the University of Toronto. In December, as part of the Canadian Youth Delegation, she attended the United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Copenhagen, Denmark.