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Election and the Environment: Grading the Party Platforms

Back in the 1970's and early 1980's we could choose from only four or five television stations to watch. Millions of people watched Happy Days, Dallas and sports on the weekend. We now have hundreds of stations to watch, and a multitude of other entertainment choices as well. Since the days of Happy Days, the world has become a much more complex place with so many choices and opportunities. This is good and bad, of course - with more choices we are also creating the need for an infinite number of solutions for the environmental, health, social and economic problems that we face.

In this brave new world it is imperative that our political system keep pace in order to address these complex issues. And in some cases, 'keeping pace' means a complete overhaul of status quo. The political system still acts like it is the 1970's – when we only had three or four choices. Each party tells us what they want to do based on their ideologies, not necessarily what is best holistically for the environment, society, health care, education, etc. Why should I, as a voter, be limited to three or four options (like TV in 1975), when we need a broad range of solutions today (like TV in 2010)?

On this note, I reviewed the energy and environmental platforms of each of the political parties in the hope that perhaps one would stand out for me as the clear choice. I hoped I would see clarity of vision for an environmentally sustainable province, with policies that support reduced energy use, coupled with reduced reliance on fossil fuel-based energy sources.

If I had a choice, I would pick and choose concepts from each party and add some myself. Unfortunately I do not have that choice (yet). So instead I thought I would grade each party on their election promises related to environment and energy issues (assuming they are able to deliver their promises – which is an entirely different issue!).

Green Party of New Brunswick: B+

The Green Party's platform is quite forward thinking. It focuses on implementing levies on fossil fuel production and imports that would raise about \$500 million per year. These funds would then be used to finance the transition towards improving the sustainability of sectors like energy production, forestry, fisheries, aquaculture and agriculture, as well as supporting local green business start-ups.

Big picture, I think this is certainly the most ambitious plan offered, but also likely the most difficult to achieve.

Liberals: B+

I have to applaud the Liberals for having the most comprehensive environment and energy related platform, with a focus on renewable energy, energy efficiency and local environmental improvements. To their credit, Efficiency New Brunswick is certainly a success story and large wind farms have been installed in our province recently.

However, on the downside, I would still like them to execute on helping small community-based renewable energy projects materialize, something they have not done well to date. Also, on the downside, the failed NB Power deal proves that we now live in a very transparent world where everything we do ends up on Facebook and YouTube. The Liberals (and all parties for that matter) need to understand that back room deals are a thing of the past and transparency is mandatory going forward.

NDP: B-

The NDP are proposing an interesting concept of having municipalities raise bonds to help finance energy efficient and renewable energy projects. I have to be honest, it looks like a good idea, but I don't quite understand the details.

They have committed some space to energy issues in their platform, but seem to focus more on the structures of existing entities, such as NB Power, versus putting forward concrete and achievable environmental solutions.

Conservatives: C

The Conservative state that they will continue to focus on energy efficiency and renewable energy, freeze electricity rates and establish a commission to look at the energy future of the province. This is good. On the downside, they offer no more information, period. And everyone knows that freezing electricity rates just distorts the true cost of power and flies in the face of actually supporting New Brunswickers to reduce their electricity consumption.

Bottom line, it appears to me that every party is promising more money on health care and other public needs but also cutting taxes. We all know that if we spend more than we make we start digging a deep hole, financially and environmentally, which ends up having deep social ramifications as well. And this is not sustainable in any way.

We need a broad range of solutions and the only way parties will listen is if we tell them what we need, so please go and vote next week. As a colleague recently said to me, "bad governments are elected by good people that don't vote".

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