

Letter to National Post, October 2018

Rex Murphy has written a vigorous and persuasive critique of the government's carbon pricing initiative (27 October 2018, "Planning in an age of climate ague"). I was left, nevertheless, unsatisfied by his analysis.

I accept that human activity very likely influences natural climate processes. The result will probably be rapid and large-scale dislocations in many people's lives as time goes on. I agree that Canada cannot play a significant part in curtailing this phenomenon because we don't play a large role in causing it, and we can't influence those who do.

Manmade climate change is a uniquely intractable problem. It arises from activities that otherwise sustain the quality of people's lives throughout the world. Its harmful effects are widely dispersed and are not immediately obvious. To try to combat climate change requires societies with differing, and sometimes competing, interests to coordinate their actions. No one said this would be easy.

As Mr. Murphy points out, in the face of this reality the government responded with carbon pricing symbolism, an approach that is a feature or, more appropriately, a "bug" of democracy. It would take a politician of unusual courage and candour to willingly alienate voters in the interests of solving a real world problem. Often, solutions to environmental or social problems are not within the power of any government. And when they are, the solution sets can contain only bad and less bad choices. The decision to simply give the appearance of doing something becomes very attractive in those circumstances.

I hear you Mr. Murphy and I agree with you. But, is doing nothing an option for any government - not led by Donald Trump? The self-righteousness of climate change true believers has always grated on me. Their challenge to deniers is, quite rightly, that the science around climate change demands that we respond. But they rarely draw any further conclusions from "the science." For example, what does the science say about how much should be spent on climate change prevention, how much on mitigation, and - let's be honest - how much on adaptation. Rex Murphy points out that posturing politicians whose best response to the challenge appears to be virtue signalling to their supporters are not harmless; they risk making Canadians worse off. But when we've finished pointing fingers, where do we go from here?

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