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THE POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

John Godfrey[†]

ABSTRACT: This is the after-dinner speech given by John Godfrey on March 21, 2019 as part of the Canada-United States Law Institute's 43rd Annual Conference. The speech addresses bilateral and international issues faced by nations in addressing the challenges posed by climate change.

So here we are in Cleveland.

Because I've never been in Cleveland before, I decided to do my research. I thought I would Google jokes about Cleveland. Don't bother. They're all terrible. And old. The most recent one I could find was from *Rowan and Martin's Laugh In* from March 1968, a mere fifty-one years ago. (For students in the room, ask someone with hair like mine to tell you about Rowan and Martin). Okay, here's the joke, ready for it: "In Cleveland, Velveeta cheese can be found in the gourmet section of the supermarket." That's it; that's their best shot.

Thank you for inviting me to this year's conference of the Canada – United States Law Institute. Now about the topic: "Can the United States and Canada cooperate on Climate Change? Should they?" Gee, I don't know . . . What do all of you think?

Actually, I do have one or two ideas about this. Spoiler alert: yes, I think they should! And here's why.

When Steve [Petras] asked me to give this talk, he proposed that I talk about the "political management of Climate Change" in Canada and the USA. I like the term "political management," because that is what politics at its best is all about: managing difficult, important issues at the local, state or provincial, national, and global level. My theme this evening is that Climate Change is a unique problem which requires unique political solutions, that the structure of the problem of climate change dictates the structure of the political management of climate change. I should also say that I was, by profession, a historian of modern Europe, so I come at this both as a former politician and a historian, but not a lawyer.

Actually, climate change poses three distinct, if inter-related, problems for politicians and policy makers. The first is mitigation: how can we reduce the emission of greenhouse gases fast enough to save the planet from catastrophe? The second is adaptation and resilience: how can we defend ourselves from the extreme weather events which are already occurring as a result of climate change and which are going to get worse before they get better? The third is technological, industrial, and economic transformation: how do we preserve our material quality of life without consuming energy and materials in the same manner that got us into this mess in the first place? And how do we make it fair, or at least fairer, for everyone

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else on the planet who aspires to our way of life, all 7.7 billion of our fellow humans?

So, the first characteristic of the politics of climate change is that the problem to be managed is vast, complex, multidimensional, and not easily susceptible to resolution. Each of these three challenges can rightly be described as “wicked” problems. Wikipedia defines a wicked problem as “a problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize.” That’s the politics of climate change.

A second characteristic of climate change politics is that the stakes are uniquely high, nothing less than the survival of the planet and humankind. We are literally facing an existential crisis: *our* existence. The only other way humans can destroy themselves so thoroughly and completely is through all-out nuclear war. To rewrite T.S. Eliot slightly, “this is the way the world ends, either with a bang or with a whimper”. Pick your poison.

Which leads to a third distinction of climate change politics, one which makes it very different from the politics of nuclear weapons negotiations: traditional Great Power politics and negotiations won’t cut it. This is not like the Great Power conferences before World War One, or Chamberlain and Hitler in 1938, or the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, or Donald Trump meeting Kim Jong-un. Each of those events involved a limited number of states and a limited number of political actors and decision makers, negotiating to clear deadlines and responding to immediate perceived emergencies.

Climate change is a problem for every nation on earth. But unlike the threat of nuclear war, every country has a measure of direct responsibility for carbon emissions, every country is a potential victim of a warming climate; hence, every country has to be involved in the discussion and in the global politics of climate negotiations.

What does that look like? The Paris climate negotiations, COP 21, in December 2015, which brought together 195 nations and the European Union, with 146 of them presenting “Intended Nationally Determined Contributions”.

One of the interesting features of the Paris conference was the prominent place given in the negotiations to the current and near-future victim nations, those who are the most at risk from a changing climate. In fact, in 2009 they formed a group, the V20 (not to be confused with the G20), the Climate Vulnerable Twenty, now made up of 11 founding countries such as low-lying island states like the Marshall Islands and the Maldives, but also the Philippines, Ethiopia, Costa Rica, and Bangladesh, with 32 additional members. These countries are paying the price of climate change now, they remind us of the pressing urgency of the problem, and they demand to be at the table.

I would argue that the United Nations is the indispensable organization for dealing with the global politics of climate change, and that in our discussions tomorrow about the Canada-USA bilateral relationship, we not lose sight of this global framework in thinking about this global problem. North America can’t go it alone.

Since we're talking about the Paris Climate Conference of 2015, right about now I can hear some of you say: "But look what happened after Paris. Donald Trump got elected and America pulled out of the agreement. President Bolsonaro just got elected in Brazil and seems determined to pave over the Amazon rain forest, and so on." Which is a nice segue to a fourth unique characteristic of climate change politics: time.

Time is the secret sauce of history. Unlike the crises of traditional Great Power politics, where political actors have to solve problems and make decisions in days – I am thinking here, for example, of John Lukacs' splendid book *Five Days in London, May 1940*, describing the debates of the British War Cabinet whether to negotiate with Hitler or continue the war – when it comes to climate change, there are no hard deadlines, no time-sensitive immediate crises. We have both too little time and too much. There is no end-game to climate change, no definitive decision, no victory march, no sprint to the finish, only a marathon which never ends.

What climate change politics requires is no less than a global inter-generational commitment of the sort that it took to build a medieval cathedral for one hundred years. With our four-year election cycles, our quarterly earnings statements, and our distracted Twittiverse, who has time for that? And yet that is what the political management of climate change will take. I told you it was a wicked problem.

Time erodes political alignments and commitments. When Canada's newly elected Prime Minister Justin Trudeau went to the Paris climate talks in December 2015, he was accompanied by nine of our thirteen provincial and territorial leaders. But today, several of his closest provincial allies have been defeated in elections and replaced by people hostile to the climate project.

Time marches on. How do you keep the faith and maintain the commitment not just over four years but over 40 years, or 100 years, in the battle against climate change?

Mark Carney, the Canadian-born Governor of the Bank of England (who, by the way, must be having one miserable month during this Brexit chaos), describes the challenge of time and climate change as "the tragedy of the horizon." Because we respond better to short-term crises, by the time we fully realize the danger of climate change, it may be too late to take effective diversionary action. The eleventh hour may not come soon enough.

Which brings us to a fifth characteristic of climate change politics: no one is clear on who is supposed to be in charge of managing the file politically and administratively. This is partly, of course, because as I have noted, there is not one file, there are three: mitigation, adaptation, and economic transformation, each with its own characteristics and political challenges.

One easy rhetorical response is to take the old Department of the Environment, add the words "and Climate Change", and Bob's your uncle. This was the route taken by the current Liberal Government of Canada in creating the ministry now called Environment and Climate Change Canada, or the previous Liberal Government of Ontario, with which I worked until last June, which created the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change. (By the way, the new guys in Ontario have rebranded it the Ministry of Environment, Conservation, and Parks.

Climate change? What climate change? Which simply reinforces my point about the corrosive effects of the passage of time in climate politics.)

When it comes to mitigation and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, you can certainly argue that carbon dioxide is a pollutant, like SO₂ which Canada and the U.S. regulated a while ago to clean up acid rain, as we did as well with ozone-depleting substances. (Indeed, in North America, I would remind you that we used a cap-and-trade system to do these things, but that is another story.) Ministries or departments of the Environment have experience and precedent in this kind of regulation. They know how to regulate bad and dangerous things. But if you are trying to reduce emissions from energy and transportation systems, from buildings, heavy industries, agriculture, and natural resources, this is way beyond the capability and authority of a Ministry of the Environment (and Climate Change). This is a whole-of-government file which requires careful coordination from some central authority. Again, traditional politics has assigned authority to a single ministry, but to me, this is more like wartime mobilization requiring centralized coordinating control.

The same is even more true of adaptation and resilience. In Canada, it gets a little weird. Adaptation is assigned nationally not to Environment and Climate Change Canada, but Natural Resources Canada, the very people who support the oil and gas sector which is causing a lot of our greenhouse gas emissions in the first place. When I was in federal politics, I called this the Ministry of Sucking and Blowing. Pick your lane, folks.

In Ontario, the poor old Ministry of Environment, past and present, has been traditionally saddled with managing adaptation, which makes absolutely no sense, since this is all about the environment striking back. There is a long list of Ministries far more affected by extreme weather events than the Ministry of the Environment: Energy, Transportation, Health, Emergency Services, Agriculture, Housing, Social Services, Finance, Natural Resources, to name but the most obvious. Again, logic would dictate that, as in wartime, some kind of central agency such as the Ministry of Finance, should take charge, since it is the economic well-being of the Province which is ultimately at risk.

Let me say a word about central agencies, at least in my own country. In Canada, both federally and provincially, there are two kinds of ministries: line departments, such as environment, transportation, and energy, with specific responsibilities within their silo; and central agencies, which have the mandate to intervene in all ministries across government. There are three central agencies: the Prime Minister or Premier's Office, which directs the overall program of the government; Treasury Board, which monitors all government spending; and the Department of Finance, which decides on the current and future spending of the government in accordance with the long-term economic health of the country or province.

While it is tempting to assign the prime coordinating function for the three big elements of climate change to the Premier, Prime Minister, or in the case of the United States, to the Governor or President, there are problems. The most obvious is: what if you get the wrong Premier, Prime Minister, Governor, or even President (not that any of us would know anything about that -- but just saying

hypothetically.) But even, if you get a leader committed to fighting climate change in either country at either level, they won't last more than four or eight years, and they may be succeeded by someone determined to reverse the policy, as was the case recently in Ontario and, most famously, in Washington, D.C.. Which brings us back to the tyranny of the time-scale of the problem of climate change and the tragedy of the horizon: short-termism at its worst.

Because so much of our future economic and social well-being depends on getting climate policy and politics right, in Canada both nationally and provincially, I would give that central coordinating function to the Ministry of Finance and embed it in the machinery of government. In Canada, Ministries of Finance have the largest policy capacity in government, they reach into every other ministry, they regulate the financial services sector, and, most importantly, they see their central purpose in life as being "stewards for the long term." What could be more long term than climate change?

As an aside, you may recall I spoke to you earlier about the V20, the "Vulnerable Twenty," the Climate Vulnerable Forum who were so prominent in Paris in 2015. Interestingly, it is their finance ministers who attend the Forum as delegates, because they have understood plainly, because they are on the front line of extreme weather events, well before we are, the huge economic and social impact of climate change.

A further aside: Germany has just created a "Climate Cabinet" with Chancellor Angela Merkel and the Ministers of Finance, Transportation, Environment, Agriculture, and the Economy: a bit like Churchill's War Cabinet.

I will not have the presumption to suggest to our American friends how they should solve this problem of climate policy coordination at the national and state level. It may be, for example, that states like California are dealing with the issue effectively, at least when it comes to emission reductions, through the creation of unique agencies like the California Air Resources Board. You have a different constitution and a different political tradition. Let me simply raise the question and ask you to reflect on it.

Let me add one more obvious layer of complexity to the story: cities. Much of the action of emission reductions, and adaptation and resilience take place at the city level, because that is where most people live and where most economic activity occurs.

The global C40 cities movement, for example, connects 94 of the world's greatest cities with a total of over 700 million citizens, representing one quarter of the world economy with a mandate to take decisive climate action within their sphere, with a specific focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It has been chaired at various times by Mayor Ken Livingstone of London, Mayor David Miller of Toronto, and Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York. In Canada, Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver are members. In the United States, Austin, Boston, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, Portland, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.

The Rockefeller 100 Resilient Cities movement "help[s] cities around the world become more resilient to the physical, social, and economic challenges that are a growing part of the 21st century;" so their mandate has more to do with

extreme weather events and adaptation. Rockefeller pays for the creation of the office of a Chief Resilience Officer for two years, with the assumption that the post will become permanent, and in Canada and the United States: Atlanta, Berkeley, Boston, Boulder, Calgary, Chicago, Dallas, El Paso, Greater Miami, Honolulu, Houston (you can see why they would be interested), Los Angeles, Louisville, Minneapolis, Montreal, Nashville, New Orleans, New York City, Norfolk, Oakland, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Seattle, St. Louis, Toronto, Tulsa, Vancouver, and Washington, D.C. have signed on.

All this activity at the city level both focussed through the C40 group on climate mitigation, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and, through the Rockefeller Resilient Cities on extreme weather events, adaptation, and resilience reminds us of another element of the new politics of climate change: leadership can – indeed, must – given the structure of the problem, come from all levels of government since they all have a role to play in reducing emissions and creating more resilience against future worsening climate disasters.

Governors, premiers, and mayors don't require permission from their national leaders to fight climate change in their own space, and the fact that so many are already doing so and banding together with others across national boundaries and oceans to do the same may be one of the most encouraging aspects of the new politics of climate change. Think of the Western Climate Initiative which brought California, Quebec, and for a while, Ontario together to form a continental cap-and-trade greenhouse gas emissions trading regime. And despite Ontario's withdrawal from the WCI, it looks as if Oregon and Washington state may now sign on. Our cross-border sessions tomorrow perfectly reflect the spirit of this new reality.

This evening I have described five characteristics of climate change which make it a uniquely difficult challenge to manage politically: first, scale and complexity; second, the supremely high stakes involved in getting it right, no less than the survival of our species; third, the need to involve all nations on earth, not just the great powers; fourth, and perhaps the greatest challenge, time; and fifth, the need to mobilize both the whole of government and the whole of governments, municipal, state or provincial, and national, all within an international framework.

In the end, we are left with the ultimate existential question: can humanity survive climate change? What will it take to get all of us, political actors and citizens, to do the right thing, and, more importantly, to do it while there is still time to avoid the worst consequences of what we have already unleashed on our poor suffering planet? The best answer, I think, comes from former British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan: "events, dear boy, events." It is only when we can no longer resist the evidence of the senses, when extreme temperatures and extreme weather events can no longer be denied, that we will wake up and get serious. We are like Britain in the 1930s: desperately denying the reality of Hitler. We are waiting for our Churchill moment. We can only hope it won't come too late.