

House of Commons Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development

Statement by John Drexhage

An IISD Commentary

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Mr. Chairman,

Allow me to thank you and the other members of this committee for the opportunity to speak with you regarding Bill C-311, an Act to ensure Canada assumes its responsibilities in preventing dangerous climate change.

First of all, I would like to provide some specific comments on the bill itself and its implications for domestic implementation. I will then conclude with a brief foray into the current status of the international negotiations and the potential role a bill such as this could play in addressing Canada's current profile in the negotiations while also helping to provide a much needed boost to the overall tone of the international talks.

Regarding the specifics of the bill itself, I would say that the long-term target of 80 per cent reduction in greenhouse gases (GHG) from 1990 levels by 2050 is an entirely reasonable one—it is in line with the long-term target espoused both by President Obama and consistent with virtually all projections as to what might be required to avoid anything more than a 2° Celsius temperature change globally, which the Prime Minister agreed to at this year's G-8 summit. I would also note that this is the current status of the scientific information on climate change. In the past few years, we have seen the peer reviewed science conclude that the temperature changes are actually occurring at a more rapid pace and that the related impacts of that temperature change are more pronounced, particularly for the Arctic, than previously assumed. Hence, we would also strongly support the review provisions in this Bill, starting in 2015, to ensure that Canada continues to do its fair share in addressing climate change.

On the shorter-term target of a 25 per cent reduction in GHGs below 1990 levels by 2020, I would make the following observations. First of all, it is commonly assumed that this is the target recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the IPCC) to avoid a 2°C rise in temperatures. In fact, what the IPCC does is only review literature on the issue, and in that respect, there was a relatively limited amount written on this topic by the time of the IPCC report. There are, in fact, a range of options available, which would see the global community reach the overall target of an 80 per cent reduction in GHGs by 2050. You can, for example, start at a more moderate target for 2020 and then ramp up reduction goals for 2030 and thereafter. This is what the U.S. appears to be calling for—given that in North America we are only beginning to break the link between economic and GHG emissions growth, many here in Canada argue that it would be reasonable to start with a more moderate target. Fair enough, but that would *only* have credibility if we would also lay out what reductions would be achieved by 2025 and thereafter. And also keep this in mind: the longer we take in reducing our emissions, the more disruptive and sudden the transition that will be required for all involved at a later date.

So not only are we asking our children to face the impacts of climate change, we are also asking them to face increasing impacts as far as the transition required to address climate change if we don't take on aggressive targets now.

On the regulations, I would also support those elements promoting performance standards and GHG trading. With respect to the latter, the terms of reference need to be broadened to cover participation in the international carbon market as well; it is an absolutely critical mechanism for Canada to meet its targets and in positively engaging developing countries in mitigation activities. In a word, it is simply unrealistic to expect Canada to be able to reach even the current government's own targets through domestic measures alone. The Canadian private sector must become an active player in the global carbon market and the government of Canada needs to provide much clearer signals and incentives for Canadian industry to do so. I would also strongly support any efforts to link to the U.S. cap-and-trade system, which would mean an absolute cap and trade, with a broad sector of the economy covered by 2016 and an increasing percentage of auctioned permits playing in the market place.

One other note, this relating to the penalties for non-compliance provisions in the bill. We would favour a system by which those who have exceeded their reduction targets would face a prohibitive charge that would provide the government with the opportunity to use at least some of those funds to purchase credits to offset any surplus emissions and remaining revenues to provide support for the transition to a clean energy future.

To conclude, I believe supporting Bill C-311, or some amended form, which does not compromise on the 2050 target, would be very timely. I have had the privilege of following the climate change negotiations the past few years, and will also be going to Barcelona next week for the last set of negotiations before Copenhagen. I can bring in at least two clear observations on that process: First of all, the negotiations are in deep trouble and we may not find our way to an effective, comprehensive agreement by December. I could get into the details, but it comes down to the serious lack of trust that exists between developed and developing economies. Secondly, Canada's profile in the negotiations continues to be compromised by its status as a Party to the Kyoto Protocol that has made it clear it will not take actions to meet its target under that agreement. Bill C-311, particularly if it managed to receive universal assent in the Parliament, would send out a strong signal to the international community that Canada is ready to be a positive player in these negotiations. In addition, Canada needs to be ready to come up with a healthy and significant contribution towards helping developing countries adjust to the current and future threat of climate change.

Doing so is particularly critical given Canada's role as host and leader of the next G-8 and G-20

summits to be held next year. If we are to have any credibility in those discussions, Canada must develop a strong domestic plan for reducing our emissions that also addresses all aspects of society, which includes targeting our incredibly wasteful consumption practices in North America. It also needs to reflect the strong messages we have heard from our Prime Minister the last few years: that we must develop strong, sustainable and clean national energy systems. As a first step, I would recommend that we implement a clean, integrated electricity national grid as part of the government's stimulus and infrastructure packages.

I cannot stress the extent to which we suffer a “credibility gap” in the multilateral world as a result of 15 years, and counting, of inaction. In closing, I do not regard this as a right-left issue, and I believe that with good intent unanimous consent on a bill, such as C-311, should be possible. Effectively addressing climate change is simply too critical and complex an issue to hold hostage to political posturing. Ultimately, successfully addressing this real and present threat means an evolution in understanding what “national interests” truly signify—acting responsibly for the sake of the global environment and our children. I believe Canadians are ready and impatient to face the challenge; it is time for its politicians to demonstrate the same resolve.