

Solving the economic and environmental crises

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In a speech to the Confederation of British Industry two weeks ago, the CEO of Royal Dutch Shell, Jeroen van der Veer, predicted that the current financial crisis would be a problem for a couple of years, "but the energy challenge will be a problem for at least 50 years."

He cited three reasons for the worsening energy crisis: an increase in global population from six billion to nine billion people by 2050 who will demand greater electricity and transportation; insufficient oil and gas resources to fuel this demand; and increasing greenhouse gases.

Even the CEO of Shell sees that the financial crisis will be exacerbated by energy insecurity and climate change. That is why we must tackle these challenges simultaneously. However, the fiscal statement released last week by the federal government did not even mention the words energy or climate change. The federal economic stimulus plan as well does not help industry and society become more energy efficient and reduce greenhouse gases.

British economist Sir Nicolas Stern in his 2007 report "The Economics of Climate Change" clearly showed the link between the economy and the environment. He explained, "the overall costs and risk of climate change will be equivalent to losing at least five per cent of global GDP each year, now and forever. If a wider range of risks and impacts is taken into account, the estimates of damage could rise to 20 per cent of GDP or more."

The risks of climate change for Canada are well documented in two key reports released this year: Natural Resources Canada's "From Impacts to Adaptation: Canada in a Changing Climate" and Health Canada's "Human Health in Changing Climate: A Canadian Assessment of Vulnerabilities and Adaptive Capacity." These reports describe how we will see more precipitation, higher temperatures, worsening air quality, more food- and water-borne diseases, and adverse impacts on our forests, agriculture, water and coastlines and how these risks will strain government budgets.

This past October, over 230 Canadian economists signed an open letter urging the federal government to take action on climate change. They wrote, "active and effective climate change policy should be seen as an investment that will yield pay-offs for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren. Given the need to act, the question then becomes which policies would obtain the carbon reduction goals we need with the lowest cost and greatest level of fairness."

Right now in Poznan, Poland, officials from 185 countries are negotiating a climate change deal to follow the first phase of the Kyoto Protocol that is set to expire in 2012. Canadians will be following closely what our government delegation does.

We are also urging the federal government to agree to the KyotoPlus target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Canada by 25 per cent below 1990 levels at a minimum by 2020, which is what the science says we must do.

The government of Nova Scotia has set a target to reduce greenhouse gases by 10 per cent below 1990 levels in the Environmental Goals and Sustainable Prosperity Act. However, it still does not have a climate change and energy strategy to help us move forward.

We recommend that the province reduce our heavy reliance on coal by increasing Nova Scotia's renewable energy development in such a way that maximizes community benefits through a standardized planning process and guaranteed, competitive pricing. The province must also implement the Green Mobility Strategy for sustainable transportation and create a sole purpose independent administrator for energy efficiency.

As well, we urge both levels of government to invest more in public outreach and education on climate change, in scientific research and monitoring, in the development of new renewable energy technologies, and in infrastructure to help us mitigate the catastrophic effects of climate change.

Our provincial and federal governments cannot miss this opportunity to both reduce greenhouse gases and stimulate a new green economy. The loss of jobs in the forestry sector, fisheries, manufacturing and automobile industry has been devastating for Canadian workers. The Worldwatch Institute published a report in September entitled Green Jobs: Towards decent work in a sustainable, low carbon world that is a blueprint for a job creation strategy that our governments should follow.

With government leadership and funding, we could put people to work in green collar jobs, kick start our economy and ensure Canada meets its international climate change commitments.

On Sunday, Dec. 7, together with people in 83 other countries including Australia, Finland and Venezuela, Canadians are organizing events under the Global Climate Campaign. In Canada, there will be events taking place in 17 cities from coast to coast. In Halifax, we invite the public to Black Rock Beach at Point Pleasant Park at 1 p.m. for our "Stop the Climate Chaos" event. Find out more at: www.globalclimatecampaign.org

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