

BACKGROUND

Focus Group Results: Canadians' Views on the Clean Energy Transition

Prepared by Clean Energy Canada and Anderson Insight

HIGHLIGHTS

- Canadians believe the clean energy transition is happening—both in Canada and around the world—and they think Canada should be taking action to keep up (but not competing for the top spot).
- There is little skepticism about the growth of EVs and the shift to renewables—most people see themselves driving EVs in the near future, and support expanding renewable energy generation.
- People prefer the frame of "clean growth" over "climate action/leadership" as a reason to support specific policy measures that would advance Canada's transition to clean energy.

BACKGROUND

In October, 2016, Clean Energy Canada contracted Bruce Anderson/Abacus Data to conduct focus groups in Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto, to assess participants' views on climate action and the clean energy transition.

We held three one-hour focus group sessions in each city, and each session followed roughly the same script and structure. Participants were screened to select for those who self-identify as following the news and current affairs closely, and for varying levels of awareness and concern about climate change. We also asked people to self-identify as either pessimistic or optimistic about the likelihood of combatting climate change, to ensure a mix of perspectives would be represented in the groups.

We excluded individuals at the extreme ends of the spectrum (e.g. those who reject the science of climate change, people who don't follow the news and those who are already deeply concerned about climate change and vocal advocates for action). This approach allowed us to focus our discussions on "engaged Canadians" or what is sometimes referred to as the "mushy middle"—the audience we are most likely to target and motivate through our communications efforts and policy advocacy.

About Clean Energy Canada

Clean Energy Canada is an independent clean energy and communications think tank based at the Centre for Dialogue at Simon Fraser University. We work to accelerate Canada's transition to a clean and renewable energy system.

WHAT WE HEARD

The clean energy transition is underway, and Canadians don't want to fall behind.

There has clearly been a step change over recent years in the belief that the world is moving in the direction of cleaner energy. Although individuals may differ on how quickly this is occurring, almost no one doubts that a profound shift is underway, and will continue. **The vast majority of those interviewed said that this shift was important, and urgent.**

Factors driving the clean energy transition:

- People believe the energy transition is occurring largely due to concerns about climate change—but they also now sense that it is propelled by technology enabling change to accelerate.
- Almost everyone intuitively believes that the cost of wind and solar energy technologies were dropping, and that over time, this shift in the economics would produce a permanent shift in the direction of renewable energy.

Support for electric vehicles:

- Remarkably, the large majority of those we interviewed said they thought that (if they were driving at all) they would be driving an electric or a hybrid car at some point in their life, and probably sooner than they would have imagined.
- Most said they saw more of these vehicles on the road than ever before, and word of mouth from users indicated high levels of satisfaction. There was confidence that the cost of the vehicles would decline and quality of the vehicles would continue to improve.

Few people think Canada can be defined as a “clean energy country” today.

There is a feeling that we are cleaner than many others, but not as clean as we can and perhaps should be. According to most participants, making Canada's energy mix cleaner would require increasing the use of wind and solar energy, and reducing the use of coal and oil. Natural gas is seen as a transitional fuel—not exactly clean, but cleaner than other fossil fuels. Hydro is seen as clean, but not without environmental impacts and not necessarily a growth opportunity. Nuclear is a grey subject: people aren't sure if its low-carbon advantages outweigh concerns about waste management.

Most people favour a gradual transition over a dramatic shift.

When asked to choose from a series of words to describe the approach Canada should take (e.g. caution, prudence, ambition, transition, transformation, race to the front, middle of the pack) the broad tendency was to prefer transition and transformation. Words like "caution" also outranked words like "ambition" and "race to the front".

When asked to explain why they chose their top words, many participants indicated that they felt that a change of this dimension couldn't be accomplished overnight, without putting too much at risk, and that a transformation was required, so that the process of change affected everything in our economy and lives and need to be approached in a careful, well-thought-out way.

Regional context seems to shape expectations about the pace of the transition:

- People's expectations about how long the energy transition would take seemed to vary significantly by region. In Western Canada (Calgary and Vancouver), most respondents stated that the shift to clean energy would take at least 50 years. In Calgary, many people thought it would take as long as a century, while many respondents in Vancouver envisioned the transition happening within 50 years. In Toronto, people were more optimistic—many thought it could happen within the next 30-50 years, but noted that would be fairly ambitious.

Even if the transition has some economic downsides, most people think it will pay off.

When probed to discuss whether a clean energy shift was going to produce economic pain or economic opportunity, most felt that there would be some dislocation and economic downsides at first but that over the long term, Canada would be in a better economic position if we embrace renewable energy and the technological change that it is driven by and enables.

Most were vague on how exactly the downside would manifest itself or where the upside is, but when asked if there was any doubt about whether Canada would be economically weaker if in 50 years we had not embraced this shift, **respondents were unanimous: Canada would be weaker if we missed this trend.**

This view was equally evident in Calgary as in Vancouver and Toronto, although people in Calgary are more nervous/less certain about what might replace a declining petroleum sector.

The rationale for action based on jobs and economic benefits is more compelling than environmental or climate-based narratives.

Most people in these focus groups didn't need to be convinced of the virtues of Canada becoming a cleaner energy economy. When asked how they would convince an elevator full of strangers on the need for action they were asked whether they would stress the climate catastrophe that lies ahead or the economic opportunity that could be seized.

Most said that while they were perhaps personally motivated by climate concerns, they might focus with others on the jobs and economics. The reasoning, roughly: if climate fear were enough to create a groundswell of action, we would be further along than we are today. Most people said that their typical neighbor would care more about the jobs and economic risks of falling behind/opportunities of a clean technology shift.

Understanding where Canada stands in the global clean energy transition helped make the case for taking action:

- A critical part of this finding was watching how people reacted to the data about the investments in clean energy technology in other parts of the world. When people were given time to review Clean Energy Canada's "Tracking the Energy Revolution" reports, which highlight trends in the growth of renewable energy around the globe and in Canada, they often zeroed in on graphics illustrating how much renewable energy investment is happening in China, India, the U.S. compared to Canada. Participants commented that Canada seemed to be at risk of falling behind, and of becoming a country that was going to find itself at a competitive disadvantage at some point in the future.

- Still, people were clear that they did not think that Canada needed to be or should be at “the front of the pack”. Instead, they sensed that **our best approach would be to be squarely among the leaders, towards the front of the front pacing group**. Any further forward and there was a risk of costly error, or too great disruption. Many said that to accomplish such change in a democracy also meant understanding that you can’t “just wave a wand and cause everyone to change at once.”

International opportunities are more compelling than international obligations:

- People said change was important and urgent from the standpoint of the climate, but they had little understanding or interest in the details of international agreements or targets. While they want Canada to be well regarded, our record against international undertakings is not likely to be central to how they feel about whether we are doing enough of the right things, in a timely enough fashion.
- Over time, these international climate agreements have become more like symbols of futility than progress, and remote from the everyday experience of people.
- From a communications standpoint, people are mostly disinterested in targets and timetables, and far more interested in hearing and seeing evidence of change already under way, and the evidence that carbon can be reduced and an economy refreshed and growing at the same time.

People recognize that policy is needed to drive the transition, and they want governments to step up with a plan.

People think public policy is necessary to creating the shift that they want to occur, even though they may struggle to articulate the details of what those policies should entail. They tend to think the Prime Minister is intent on creating this shift, more determined than any predecessor, and is probably going to make the right kind of choices.

However, people are tired of and disinterested in conflict. They don't want the federal government to be passive but neither do they want it to be willfully aggressive—it must stress a desire to be open, supportive and flexible, without losing the sense of a plan and some determination behind it.

People want to see how individual policies fit into an overall plan:

- People were less skeptical about individual policies, as well as the federal government's ability to follow through on its climate action promises, when they were presented with **individual policies framed as part of a comprehensive plan**—one that incorporates the nudge of carbon pricing, but includes much more than that, and plenty of incentives to shift behavior.
- Ideally, the debate about policy would revolve less about carbon taxation and more about other measures and incentives, including those to promote cleaner transportation and zero energy buildings. In both cases people believe that much can and will be accomplished with measures in these areas, and hearing more about these measures will assure them that a carbon tax will not just end up producing more money for governments and little change in climate outcomes.

Support for carbon pricing depends on how it's presented:

We found that most participants—including those who said they care a lot about climate change and support government action to cut carbon pollution and switch to clean energy—don't really understand carbon pricing and how it works. Based on the nature of the conversation in the groups, we found it is helpful to shift the language used to discuss carbon pricing, to make a few key points:

- The idea is to make it **costly to pollute and rewarding not to**
- Success for this tax is unlike other taxes: **it works when it raises as little money as possible** because the goal is to give people a nudge to make different choices, rather than raise \$
- Ottawa will direct money raised by a price on carbon back to the provinces it comes from
- Pricing carbon pollution is just one element of a detailed plan for clean growth

People see fossil fuels as having a role in the energy transition—gradually losing ground, as opposed to dropping off suddenly.

Part of what people expect when they say they want a “transition” is that they want a coherent and ambitious approach—but not a radical or immediate departure from how things are done today.

- When asked how they felt about the continued use of fossil fuels, there was widespread expectation that oil would continue to be used for some time to come, but that over the longer term, it would be replaced by renewables. People generally saw the shift off coal and onto renewable energy as a positive move, and something that could happen sooner than the shift away from oil.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATIONS

- Framing related to "clean growth" and setting Canada up for success as our competitors shift to clean energy is more compelling than arguing for "climate leadership" or framing related to meeting our climate targets or living up to international commitments.
- The concept of aspiring to a “clean growth century for Canada” met with nods around the table, in part because it speaks to the idea of transition, of a blend of environmental and economic goals, and it can be linked to a sense of the future of the country—a topic that will likely feel more topical in 2017 as the country celebrates 150 years. It's also a reassuring frame for those who are worried about moving too fast, or the downsides of the transition.
- When advocating for policy change, the ideal communications approach would stress several elements (e.g. a Five-Point Plan for Clean Growth) that build on pricing carbon, including incentives for cleaner transportation, promotion of renewables, and zero energy/more energy efficient buildings. Framing incentives/regulations as rewarding positive behaviour and choices is also motivating.
- To help build confidence and enthusiasm for the shift to clean energy, it is important to show people how the rest of the world is moving in this direction. This reinforces the message that Canada will only become more competitive, not less competitive by staying in touch with this trend, and being among the leaders.

- Most people already recognize that change is going on, without causing harm, because they see smaller pieces of evidence of a shift in their everyday lives. Illustrating these smaller, tangible shifts for them is an excellent way of bringing the subject matter from high level, international, political talk down to a level where people can relate more easily. Personal experience (e.g. having travelled to European countries where there's a lot of renewable energy infrastructure, knowing someone who has an EV) also contributed powerfully to individuals' confidence that the transition is underway, inevitable and overall positive.
- Simple, accessible graphics are a powerful tool to convey where Canada stands in relation to its peers. Conventional "climate" images such as smokestacks and natural disasters were not popular or seen as motivating, when presented with messages about support for climate action or the kinds of policies needed. Instead, images that clearly conveyed the transition underway and what it means for people (i.e. very conventional pictures of wind turbines, solar panels, EVs, recognizable urban scenes) were seen to be more motivating.
- Images and quotes from "influencers" and politicians did not seem to resonate well with the groups represented, possibly because they were not familiar enough to be relevant to these audiences. Overall, with the exception of Justin Trudeau, politicians were not seen as credible messengers on the need to take action, or the benefits. Images of clean energy development in recognizable developing regions (e.g. solar installations in India) were far more compelling than images from business or domestic development sites.
- Traditional media seem to have little to do with shaping opinion on these subjects. Increasing emphasis should be put on using social media to reach more people, with information and argument that they can value and judge for themselves.