

# **The Environment, Climate Change and Market Populist Politics<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Highlights**

- **First Ford government was marked by an unprecedented period of retrenchment in environmental and climate change policy in Ontario.**
- **The Ford government's behaviour to environmental matters is best understood as an expression of its wider 'market populist' approach to governance and policy. The government has tended to react to problems only once they manifest themselves in obvious ways, rather than anticipating potential problems and taking action to prevent them from occurring. Issues like the environment and climate change are fundamentally about preventative action, and are likely to do poorly under such a policy model.**
- **Public and civil society voices have been aggressively marginalized in policy-making under the Ford government. The voices of incumbent actors, particularly from the land development, energy, and resource extraction industries have dominated.**
- **The environment and especially the climate change issue appear to poll differently in Ontario when viewed through a federal vs. provincial lens. This may provide scope for greater federal assertiveness in response to provincial inaction.**
- **The province continues to face significant environmental challenges, including the impacts of a changing climate. The province is on track to see significant increases in greenhouse gas emissions, particularly from the electricity sector. Long-standing issues related to air and water pollution, and losses of biological diversity, and of natural heritage and prime agricultural lands to resource extraction and urban development continue to worsen.**

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## Introduction

The election of a Progressive Conservative (PC) government led by Premier Doug Ford in June 2018, was followed by an unprecedented break from the trajectories that had defined, with the exception of the 1995-2000 ‘common sense revolution’ period of the Harris government, the province’s approach to environmental issues throughout the post-Second World War era.

The 1945-2018 period had been characterized by the development of an increasingly sophisticated legal and institutional framework for managing the environmental challenges facing the province. That process, although at times painfully incremental, had demonstrated a capacity to respond to major new issues like the pollution of the Great Lakes, acid rain, smog, and most recently, a changing climate. These developments were accompanied by a gradual strengthening of mechanisms for public participation, transparency, and accountability in governmental decision-making, including the adoption of an *Environmental Assessment Act* in 1975, an *Environmental Bill of Rights* in 1994, major reforms to the land-use planning process in 1995 and again in 2006, and legislation to curb ‘strategic lawsuits against public participation’ (SLAPPs) in 2015.<sup>1</sup> There were also efforts to link responses on the environment and climate change to the wider economic transitions taking place in the province, notably under the NDP government led by Bob Rae (1990-1995) and the Liberal McGuinty and Wynne governments (2003-2018).<sup>2</sup>

By comparison the first (2018-2022) Ford government was a period of extraordinary retrenchment, affecting virtually every dimension of the province’s approach to environmental issues, and turning the institutional and legislative clock back, in some cases, to the immediate post-war era. The prospects for progress on the environment and climate change under a re-elected Ford government are at best unclear.

The chapter gives an overview of the developments around environmental policy during the first Ford government. Included with this is a contextual discussion of the approaches of the preceding administrations, with a focus on the latter stages of the

Liberal government led by Premier Kathleen Wynne. The chapter positions the Ford government's behaviour around environmental issues in the wider context of its overall approaches to governance. It also places the Ford government within the broader historical patterns seen in environmental policy in the province. Earlier work has highlighted the importance of intersections of public salience of environmental issues, and the ideational and discursive orientations of successive governments in understanding their environmental policy choices.<sup>3</sup> The chapter asks whether Ford's "market populism"<sup>4</sup> constitutes a new dimension of political discourse in Ontario, and examines its potential implications for the future of environmental policy in the province.

For the purposes of the chapter environmental policy is defined broadly. It encompasses not only the traditional dimensions of air and water pollution, and water resource and waste management, but also includes more systemic issues like smog, and climate change that require wider linkages to land-use, transportation, resource development and energy policies. In the context of the more expansive concepts of sustainable development and sustainability,<sup>5</sup> growing attention is being given to the distributional justice aspects of environmental policies, particularly the impacts of pollution and climate change on marginalized communities.<sup>6</sup> Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is an increasingly central question in Canada and Ontario, particularly around natural resources development,<sup>7</sup> although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore these issues fully.

## **Background and context**

As noted in the introduction, overall direction of environmental policy in Ontario in the post-Second World War period had been one of a (at times painfully) gradual upwards trajectory, beginning with the creation of Conservation Authorities and the Ontario Water Resources Commission in the 1940s and 50s, through the creation of a provincial Ministry of the Environment in 1971, and the adoption of an *Environmental Assessment Act* in 1975.<sup>8</sup> The pace of change accelerated significantly during the 1985-1987 Peterson/Rae Liberal/NDP minority government period, with major strengthenings of the province's approach to environmental law enforcement, environmental assessments of

major projects, acid rain, municipal waste management and industrial water pollution.<sup>9</sup> The 1990-1995 NDP Rae government saw the adoption of extensive reforms to the land-use planning process, enactment of an *Environmental Bill of Rights*, completion of the Municipal-Industrial Strategy for Abatement (MISA) industrial water pollution regulation program, and major changes to the regulation of mine closure and forest management. The period also witnessed the first formal steps towards a strategy to respond to the emerging issue of climate change.<sup>10</sup>

The first Harris government (1995-1999) operating under the auspices of the PC's avowedly neo-liberal 'common sense revolution' platform was defined, in contrast, by an unprecedented period of retrenchment. This applied both in terms of the institutional capacity (i.e. budgets) of environmental and natural resource management agencies, and regulatory regimes, especially around land-use planning, mining and natural resources. Efforts to restructure the electricity sector coincided with major failures within Ontario Hydro's nuclear fleet, leading to a large run-up of coal-fired generation with an accompanying increase in air pollution and smog related incidents in southern Ontario.<sup>11</sup> The combination of large-scale budget cuts to environmental agencies and government's anti-'red tape' orientation culminated in the May 2000 Walkerton drinking water disaster in which 7 died and nearly 3,000 became seriously ill.<sup>12</sup>

The Walkerton disaster and resulting judicial inquiry, along with continuing challenges with the electricity sector, marked the beginning of the end for the Harris government, with Harris himself resigning as Premier in 2002. Dalton McGuinty arrived as leader of a new majority Liberal government in 2003, in part on the basis of a very strong environmental platform.<sup>13</sup> This included commitments to phase-out of coal-fired electricity by 2007 (ultimately completed in 2013), and major reforms to the land-use planning process. The planning reforms were largely implemented by the end of 2006, including the creation of the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) Greenbelt and Growth Plans, the latter emphasizing 'smart' growth and 'complete' communities.<sup>14</sup>

The 2008 global financial crisis would prompt the most significant effort seen so far to integrate environmental and economic strategy in the form of the 2009 *Green Economy and Green Energy Act* (GEA). The act provided for the subsidization, through

a Feed-in-Tariff (FIT) program, and accelerated approval of renewable energy projects. The legislation and a number of other initiatives were successful in prompting a major wave of renewable energy development in the province. Approximately 5400MW of wind and 2600MW of solar PV capacity were installed from a starting point of near zero between 2006 and 2018,<sup>15</sup> amounting to more than four times the electricity generating capacity of the Sir Adam Beck facilities at Niagara Falls. At the same time, these developments became the focus of growing and ultimately politically fatal controversies over rising electricity costs.<sup>16</sup>

Kathleen Wynne succeeded Dalton McGuinty as Liberal party leader and premier in February 2013. Wynne arrived with a limited environmental platform beyond the completion of the phase-out of coal-fired electricity. In response to the growing controversies over electricity costs, the acquisition of new renewable energy projects began to be run down under the GEA. High-cost commitments to refurbish the Bruce and Darlington nuclear facilities, and 'life-extend' the Pickering facility continued, along with an implicit reliance on natural gas-fired generation to make up the required electricity supplies during the nuclear refurbishment period.<sup>17</sup>

Climate change would emerge as the central environmental focus of the Wynne government following its unexpected majority government victory in the 2014 election. The province would adopt of a fairly comprehensive Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP) in 2017.<sup>18</sup> This included participation in a greenhouse gas (GHG) emission cap and trade system with Quebec and California. The system required both industrial emitters of GHGs and the distributors of consumer transportation and heating fuels (e.g. gasoline and natural gas) to purchase emission allowances to cover their emissions. The charges on heating and transportation fuels were passed on to consumers, functioning as a de facto carbon price on these products.

Following the model being adopted in Quebec and by the NDP Notley government in Alberta, revenues from the auction of emission permits under the cap-and-trade system were to be invested, among other things, in energy efficiency retrofits for buildings and the electrification of transportation. There was a strong focus on the adoption of electric vehicles and their associated charging infrastructure, and public transit.

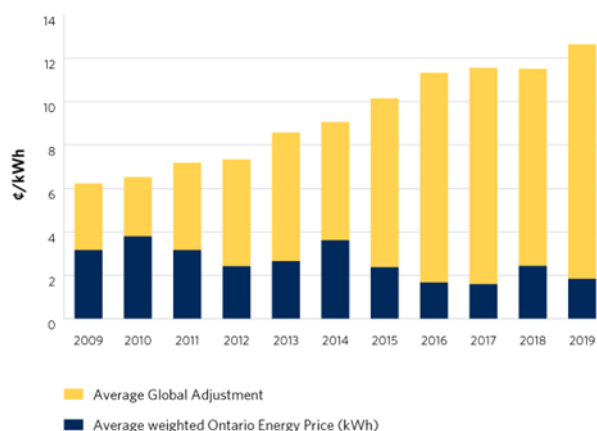
In an Ontario context, where industrial emissions had already fallen substantially, largely as a result of economic restructuring, and with the phase-out of coal-fired electricity, this overall approach made a great deal of sense. Buildings and transportation were projected to be the largest sources of growth in greenhouse gas emissions in the province. Both sectors involve long-lived investments and infrastructures and are relatively insensitive in the short-term to price signals. They are therefore likely to require substantial public investment, to achieve emissions reductions within the timescales envisioned in the CCAP, and through Canada's commitments under the 2015 United Nations Paris Climate Change Agreement.<sup>19</sup>

The province's actions on climate change had national significance as well. Ontario is Canada's second largest source GHG emissions after Alberta.<sup>20</sup> The province's agreement to move forward with Quebec on a carbon pricing system, along with the existing carbon tax system in British Columbia and arrival of the Notley government in Alberta in 2015, played central roles in ability of the new federal government, led by Justin Trudeau, to develop the 2016 Pan-Canadian Framework (PCF) for Climate Change and Green Growth. The PCF had buy-in from all provinces except Saskatchewan. The framework laid the groundwork for a 'backstop' federal carbon pricing regime to be applied in provinces that did not develop carbon pricing systems of their own.<sup>21</sup> Ontario would have been exempted from the federal carbon price at the point of its planned introduction on April 1, 2019 by virtue of the existence of its cap and trade regime.

The emerging challenge for the Wynne government was that the climate change issue seemed to play differently with the public at the national and provincial levels. While climate change polled strongly at the national level,<sup>22</sup> reflecting the issue's international profile and the poor performance of the 2006-2015 Conservative Harper federal government on the question, it registered weakly with Ontario voters as a provincial issue. By the fall of 2016 only 4 per cent of respondents identified it as the most important provincial concern. What was registering with Ontario voters was the question of rising hydro rates.<sup>23</sup> That development, perhaps more than any other, would prove fatal for the Liberal government.

Electricity costs had begun to rise in the aftermath of the 2003 election. The situation reflected a realization that after a period of relative neglect during the Harris government's experiments with marketizing the province's hydro system, nearly 80 percent of the system's generating assets would need to be replaced or refurbished over the following 20 years. As shown in Figure XX-1, electricity prices nearly doubled between 2009 and 2017. Although often blamed on the impact of the Green Energy Act FIT program, the increased costs actually reflected the impact of a series of major capital investments in the system. These included the partial refurbishments of the Bruce and Pickering nuclear facilities, the construction of new gas-fired generating facilities to help with the phase-out of coal-fired generation, and the upgrading of electricity transmission and distribution grids, as well as new renewable energy projects under the GEA and other initiatives. The rate increases were particularly acute in rural areas served by the Hydro One transmission and distribution utility.<sup>24</sup>

Figure XX-1. Average Global Adjustment vs. Average Market Electricity Price (2009-2019)<sup>25</sup>



In response the Wynne government introduced a 'Fair Hydro Plan,' in March 2017. The plan was intended to deliver an immediate 25 per cent cut in hydro rates. This was achieved by a combination of removing the provincial portion of the HST from Hydro bills and refinancing long-term investments.<sup>26</sup> The estimated cost of the plan to future consumers and taxpayers in lost revenues and financing costs was placed at \$45 billion.<sup>27</sup>

Taken as a whole, Liberal period defined by some major initiatives on the environment, notably the 2006 GGH Greenbelt Plan and planning reforms, the 2013 phase-out of coal-fired electricity, major developments around renewable energy and energy efficiency, and the 2017 Climate Change Action Plan and GHG cap and trade system. At the same time, these initiatives were ‘balanced’ by strong moves in conventionally managerial and facilitative directions. The post-2008 period in particular was defined by a strongly deregulatory ‘Open for Business’ theme, picking up in part on elements left over from the Common Sense Revolution’ period. Despite the initiatives around renewable energy and energy efficiency, the place of nuclear energy as the dominant component of the province’s electricity system was emphatically re-affirmed and major investments made in new natural gas-fired generation. The ‘Ring of Fire’ mineral deposit emerged as the centrepiece of the province’s development plans for the north, despite its implications for the environment and the interests of Indigenous peoples. Fiscal restraint remained a central theme, prompting in part the partial sale of the Hydro One electricity transmission and distribution utility.<sup>28</sup>

### **The 2018 election and the Ford ‘revolution’**

Despite its enormous cost, the Fair Hydro Plan made no difference in the outcome of the June 2018 provincial election, which saw the Liberals go down to an historic defeat, replaced by a majority PC government led by Doug Ford. The Ford government arrived on the basis of a relatively thin platform focussed on cutting taxes, particularly the carbon ‘tax,’ and hydro rates.<sup>29</sup>

What followed was the most significant period of retrenchment in environmental and climate policy of the post-war period. Although in contrast to the ‘Common Sense Revolution’ period major budget cuts to provincial agencies were avoided, virtually every other dimension of the province’s legislative, regulatory and institutional framework for managing environmental issues was affected.

The government moved to dismantle the previous government’s climate change strategy almost immediately upon taking office.<sup>30</sup> The GHG emission cap and trade



system was terminated, along with initiatives related to electric vehicles, building retrofits, industry, and climate change adaptation that would have been funded through the estimated \$3 billion in revenues the system would have generated over the first three years of its existence.<sup>31</sup> The province then joined with Alberta and Saskatchewan in challenging the constitutional basis of the federal government's 'backstop' carbon pricing system. Without a provincial cap and trade regime, that system now applied to Ontario. The provincial challenges ultimately ended in a decisive loss before the Supreme Court of Canada.<sup>32</sup> An attempt to require that gas stations apply stickers to their pumps indicating the impact of the federal carbon price on gasoline prices ended in an embarrassing fiasco. The initiative was ruled to be unconstitutional, and the stickers failed to stay attached to the pumps.<sup>33</sup>

With respect to electricity, the government moved to cancel the final tranche of renewable energy projects under development. This amounted to more than 700 projects, most of them small scale and community-based. The total cost of the cancellations ultimately exceeded \$230 million.<sup>34</sup> The province's largely successful strategy on energy efficiency was terminated the following year,<sup>35</sup> and the requirement that the province develop any long-term energy plans at all quietly ended.<sup>36</sup>

One of the Ford government's most significant areas of activity was with respect to land-use planning. Although the government had to retreat repeatedly in the face of municipal and public opposition to efforts to open the GGH Greenbelt to development, provincial planning rules were extensively re-written in favour of development interests.<sup>37</sup> The use of Ministerial Zoning Orders (MZOs) and similar instruments to override local planning decisions and rules became commonplace, again almost exclusively in response to industry demands for higher-intensity development.<sup>38</sup> The authority of Conservation Authorities within the planning process was significantly constrained, even in relation to areas subject to flooding or other hazards.<sup>39</sup>

The province's moves with respect to land-use planning were accompanied by an aggressive push for the expansion of the provincial highway network, particularly within the GTA. Many of these projects, like the Vaughan to Milton 413 Highway and Highway 404 to 400 Bradford Bypass, revived concepts originally proposed under the Harris

government, and subsequently rejected as unnecessary and likely to induce additional automobile-dependent urban sprawl.<sup>40</sup> New transit projects were also pushed forward aggressively, although many, like the Ontario line in Toronto, seemed poorly conceived and politically motivated.<sup>41</sup> Protections for endangered species were significantly weakened, particularly with respect to resource development.<sup>42</sup>

On pollution related issues, the province's toxics use reduction legislation was repealed.<sup>43</sup> The MISA regulatory framework for controlling industrial water pollution, initiated under the Peterson government and completed by Bob Rae's administration, was dismantled. The regime was effectively returned to the 1960s and 70's approach of negotiating discharge limits on a facility-by-facility basis. Rules around agricultural pollution of drinking water sources, particularly nutrients (e.g. fertilizer and manure), which had been a key factor in the Walkerton disaster, were weakened.<sup>44</sup> As a final touch the province's previously independent Environmental Commissioner's office, created through the 1994 *Environmental Bill of Rights*, was folded into that of the Auditor General.<sup>45</sup>

The government's agenda continued, and in many ways accelerated, under the cover of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent recovery efforts. One of the government's first moves in response to the pandemic was to suspend the application of the *Environmental Bill of Rights* notice and comment requirements regarding changes to environmental laws, regulations, policies and approvals.<sup>46</sup> The application of the province's environmental assessment process, mandatory for public sector projects since its establishment by the Davis government in 1975, was made discretionary, and the content of the assessment process significantly weakened.<sup>47</sup> Broad powers were given to provincial agencies, most notably the provincial transit agency Metrolinx,<sup>48</sup> allowing them to override any potential objections to their projects and effectively giving them the authority to approve their own undertakings. Legislation adopted in the run-up to the 2022 election sought to further marginalize the roles of local governments in planning matters, and to eliminate public consultation requirements in the planning process as 'red tape.'<sup>49</sup>

A “Made in Ontario” Environment Plan<sup>50</sup> was released at the end of 2018. The plan was motivated in large part by the government’s desire to stave off the application of the ‘backstop’ federal carbon price to Ontario. Although relying on an ill-defined incentive system in place of a carbon pricing system, the plan did include a number of interesting elements. These related to climate change adaptation, linkages between land-use planning, transportation and climate change, distributed energy resources (e.g. renewables and energy storage), and community energy and climate change planning. However, virtually nothing was done to implement the plan.<sup>51</sup>

The federal backstop carbon pricing regime was implemented in the province in April 2019. A distribution-level carbon levy applied to heating and transportation fuels, and an output-based pricing system (OBPS) applied to industrial emissions.<sup>52</sup> Ontario was granted an “equivalency” exemption from the OBPS for industrial emissions at the beginning of 2022 on the basis of its own emission standards, although these were widely regarded as substantially weaker than the federal backstop requirements.<sup>53</sup>

In the final months prior to the 2022 election the government did begin to take a interest in the ‘greening’ of the steel sector,<sup>54</sup> and in the electric vehicle (EV) and battery supply chains.<sup>55</sup> These developments, likely the products of international developments within the steel and auto industries themselves, seemed to indicate some recognition that a wider global economic shift in the direction of decarbonization is taking place, and that Ontario was at risk of losing what remained of its manufacturing sector if it didn’t respond in some way.

These types of developments however, remained sporadic and reactive. In sectors like mining<sup>56</sup> and hydrogen,<sup>57</sup> the government’s initiatives relied heavily on the input of industry lobbyists, with little evidence of external thought or critical analysis. The Critical Minerals Strategy, for example, released in the spring of 2022, was criticized for largely ignoring its implications for Indigenous Peoples and their rights.<sup>58</sup> The potential consequences for climate change of a major industrial development in the province’s boreal region, part of one of the world’s most significant carbon sinks and storage sites, were also overlooked.<sup>59</sup> There remained no movement in key areas like renewable

energy, and certainly no wider vision for Ontario's role in a low-carbon economic transition.

### **Understanding the Ford government's approach to the environment**

The Ford government's record on environmental issues is best understood as an extension of its wider approach to governance. It was observed that the government's agendas seemed driven by "instinct more than ideology."<sup>60</sup> The government came to power with little vision for what a provincial government should do other than cut taxes, 'red tape' and hydro rates. It struggled when confronted with more complex problems that required the province to play a more active role. The resulting governance model was fundamentally reactive, and grounded in relatively short-term perspectives.<sup>61</sup> The government tended to act once situations reached a crisis stage, rather than identifying potential problems and taking action to prevent them. The pattern was especially evident in the government's hesitant responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>62</sup> There, it tended to react to the waves of COVID-19 infections rather than anticipating them and taking measures to minimize their impacts,<sup>63</sup> even when given clear and consistent scientific advice<sup>64</sup> to do so.

Issues like the environment and climate change are destined to do poorly under such a governance model. The reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change<sup>65</sup> and federal<sup>66</sup> and provincial environmental commissioners,<sup>67</sup> are constant reminders that these issues require taking action now to avoid more serious problems in the future.

This fundamentally reactive model of governance was combined with a tendency to accept uncritically whatever business lobbyists with the necessary access asked the government to do. This was evident in the province's approaches to COVID-19,<sup>68</sup> housing and infrastructure,<sup>69</sup> mining,<sup>70</sup> gravel pits and quarries,<sup>71</sup> energy<sup>72</sup> and long-term care.<sup>73</sup> The overall decision-making model that emerged seemed based on connections<sup>74</sup> and political whim.<sup>75</sup> The voices of the public, civil society organizations, and even those of local governments and the provincial public service were aggressively marginalized.

All of this was in sharp contrast to the rules, evidence, and public input-based approaches that the structures that emerged throughout the post-war period, like the *Planning Act*, *Environmental Assessment Act* and *Environmental Bill of Rights*, were intended to establish. It in part explains the government's behaviour towards these frameworks, which has, at times bordered on the authoritarian in its approaches to dealing with local governments, particularly around governance<sup>76</sup> and planning and infrastructure issues.

### **The Ford government and the dynamics of environmental policy**

In previous work around understanding the behaviour of provincial governments in relation to environmental issues the author found it helpful to employ a modified version of the institutional-ideological policy model used by Bruce Doern and Glenn Toner in their landmark 1982 study on the National Energy Program.<sup>77</sup> The approach is based on an analytical framework of four basic categories of variables: the institutional context within which policy is being made; the underlying normative assumptions about both the role of the state in general and the specific policy issues in question; the underlying physical and economic landscape conditions defining the context in which policy debates occur; and the roles of non-state actors and forces, such as interest groups, public opinion, and the media.<sup>78</sup>

Although the institutional framework and economic circumstances within which successive Ontario governments have operated have provided key contextual elements to the narrative, the key drivers in terms of understanding government behaviour in Ontario regarding the environment have generally been found within the other two categories of variables. The first relates to societal factors and forces—specifically, the public salience of environmental issues as apparent in public opinion polling and the level of media and legislative opposition attention given to environmental issues. It has been long recognized that governments increase their levels of activity in the environmental field when public concern is high, and that policy activity is likely to stall or even reverse when concern is low. Levels of public concern for environmental issues have historically tended to be cyclical, characterized by relatively short periods of very high concern, and longer periods of relatively low concern. More recent national polling,

from the mid-2010s onwards, has tended to show more consistently high levels of concern, with a particularly strong focus on climate change.<sup>79</sup> However, concern for the environment in Ontario as a provincial issue has consistently polled lower than as seen in national-level polls.<sup>80</sup>

The second key variable relates to the government of the day's normative assumptions about the role of the provincial state. Historically, in Ontario's case, these assumptions could be broadly organized into three categories. Managerial and facilitative governments have tended to focus on measures that they perceive as being necessary to facilitate economic growth and development (understood in conventional terms of industrialization, resource extraction and processing and urbanization), but have not sought to expand the role of the state beyond these roles unless politically or practically necessary. The managerial/facilitative governance model was exemplified by the long PC 'dynasty' and, to a considerable degree, during the McGuinty and Wynne periods as well. Alternatively, activist/progressive governments have envisioned a more directive role for the state in shaping the province's economy and society. Such an approach was evident during the Peterson minority period and the first half of the NDP Rae government. Finally neo-liberal governments have sought to minimize state interference with the market, as epitomized by the Harris 'revolution.'

Earlier analyses<sup>81</sup> had concluded that the combination of public salience of environmental issues and the normative orientation of the government of the day provides the strongest predictor of a government's likely behaviour toward environmental issues. As shown in Figure XX-2, all six potential combinations of public concern and government orientation had been seen in the post-war era in Ontario. At one end of the spectrum the combination of low public salience and a neo-liberal government produced the major environmental policy retrenchments of the 'common sense revolution.' At the other end, the combination of high levels of public attention and relatively activist governments resulted in periods of high policy activity and innovation, exemplified by the minority Peterson government and the first half of the Rae administration.

Historically the dominant combination in Ontario has been one of relatively low public salience of environmental issues and facilitative and managerially oriented governments. The result has tended to be patterns of incremental policy progress, with an emphasis on achieving a “balance” between progressive and conventional themes. Such an approach became particularly pronounced under the McGuinty and Wynne governments, with the pursuit of, at times, deeply contradictory directions of transitional strategies around the environment and climate change on one hand, and highly conventional, if not almost neo-liberal, pathways on the other.

The arrival and apparent political success of the Ford government seems to have introduced a new dimension on ideational/discursive spectrum of Ontario politics, one that might be termed “market populism.”<sup>82</sup> In practice this seems to combine a relatively neo-liberal policy approach, with a populist focus on reducing costs to consumers (e.g. taxes, hydro rates) in the short term. The approach reframes in populist terms traditionally neo-liberal economic goals such as a reduction in the size of the state and deregulation of the economy. These are then branded as what “real Ontarians” want. Slogans such as “open for business” and “respecting taxpayers” suggest a direct connection between policies that favour minimal government interference and personal economic prosperity. They imply that anything beyond minimal government action is incompatible with respect for voters – something the Liberal governments failed to show.

In the run-up to the 2022 provincial election the Ford government added a new form of post-pandemic activism to its “market populism.” This has focused on further cutting red tape and increased spending to ‘Get it done’<sup>83</sup> in terms of housing, highway and transit construction. Whether the projects being “done,” such as the 413 Highway,<sup>84</sup> actually made sense was a secondary question. At the same time, a populist focus on short-term affordability through moves such as a promised gas-tax cut<sup>85</sup> and the removal of road tolls<sup>86</sup> and vehicle licencing fees,<sup>87</sup> responded well to public concerns<sup>88</sup> over rising living costs.

In the context of the analytical frame outlined above and shown in Figure XX-2, the Ford period would be defined by a combination of low to middling public salience of

environmental issues, and a “market populist” approach to governance. The policy results are similar to those seen with the neo-liberal/low salience combination, although in some ways more extreme - significant retrenchment, and a near total reliance on established economic interests for policy input. Where the government has felt the need to act on environmental issues, this has largely been in response to pressures from the affected industries themselves (e.g. steel and EVs), or in the case of the 2018 Made-in Ontario Environment Plan, the federal initiatives around carbon pricing.

Figure XX-2: Discursive Orientation and Public Salience of Environmental Issues

Discursive orientation	Activist/progressive	Managerial/facilitative	Neo-liberal	Market/Authoritarian Populist
Public Salience of Issue:  High	<u>Policy outputs</u>  High policy activity.  Exploration of environment-economy relationship.  Disruption of traditionally dominant policy relationships.   <u>Examples</u>  Peterson (accord period)  Rae (Part I)	<u>Policy outputs</u>  Bipolar -- high-profile environmental initiatives matched with major countervailing moves in conventional directions.   Policy driven by political management as opposed to reflection on conventional economic model.   <u>Examples</u>  Peterson (majority)  McGuinty (1st mandate)	<u>Policy outputs</u>  Reactive.  High profile but one-off initiatives.  Maintenance of core policy path.          <u>Examples</u>  Harris post-Walkerton  Eves	<u>Policy Outputs</u>  Reactive.  High profile but symbolic one-off initiatives.  Responsiveness to some industry pressures for transitions.  Maintenance of core policy path.   <u>Examples</u>  None to date. Likely similar to neo-Liberal responses
Public Salience of Issue:	Policy outputs	<u>Policy outputs</u>	<u>Policy outputs</u>	<u>Policy outputs</u>



Low	<p>Follow-through on existing initiatives.</p> <p>Few new initiatives.</p> <p>Examples</p> <p>Rae (Part II)</p> <p>Wynne – Climate Change</p>	<p>Incremental responses to crises (physical or political).</p> <p>Mitigation of impacts of conventional economic development models.</p> <p><u>Examples</u></p> <p>The “dynasty”</p> <p>Davis (1975-84)</p> <p>McGuinty (2<sup>nd</sup> /3<sup>rd</sup> mandate)</p> <p>Wynne (except climate change)</p>	<p>Retrenchment</p> <p>Environment unimportant.</p> <p>Reinforcement of traditionally dominant policy relationships.</p> <p><u>Examples</u></p> <p>Miller</p> <p>Harris ‘Common Sense Revolution’ period (1995-2000)</p>	<p>Extreme Retrenchment.</p> <p>Environment unimportant.</p> <p>Near total reliance on established economic interests for policy input. Exclusion of civil society, local governments and public service</p> <p><u>Examples</u></p> <p>Ford (1<sup>st</sup> mandate)</p>
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The behaviour of a “market populist” government in response to higher levels of public concern, potentially prompted by climate change-related extreme weather events or another form of environmental or Walkerton-like public health disaster is difficult to predict. High-profile but symbolic gestures are likely, but substantive changes in direction seem unlikely except where there is pressure from the affected industries themselves. The government’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, may be instructive in this sense. There, despite the extremely poor performance of for-profit long-term care facilities in the pandemic, such facilities have emerged the primary beneficiaries of the government’s investments in the sector.<sup>89</sup>

### Conclusions and paths forward

The 2022 provincial election ended with a strengthened PC majority, although on the basis of an historically low voter turnout. All three major opposition parties (NDP, Liberal and Green) had presented platforms including detailed provisions around the environment and climate change.<sup>90</sup> There was substantial and sustained coverage in the mainstream media of environmental issues through the campaign, particularly the

implications of the 413 Highway project<sup>91</sup> and climate change<sup>92</sup> more generally as well. The environment was consistently identified in media commentary as an area of vulnerability for the PC government.<sup>93</sup> The government, in response, presented nothing new on environmental issues, and retained its steadfast commitments to infrastructure, particularly, highway construction.

The election outcome, in this context, was deeply distressing to those concerned about the environment and climate change, particularly the apparent failure of these issues to connect with the provincial electorate.<sup>94</sup> Whether the outcome signals a true re-alignment of the norms in Ontario politics, or is a product of COVID-induced political exhaustion on the part of an electorate presented with underwhelming alternatives remains an open question.

That said, one of the defining features of the environment as a public policy issue is its fundamental grounding in biophysical reality. Environmental issues do not go away just because a government chooses to ignore them. In Ontario's case, the province is now on track to see major increases in greenhouse gas emissions, particularly from the electricity sector.<sup>95</sup> The impacts of a changing climate are likely to become more and more apparent in the form of extreme weather events, flooding, forest fires, extended ranges of disease vectors, and cyanobacteria blooms.<sup>96</sup> Long-standing issues related to air and water pollution, and losses of biological diversity, natural heritage and prime agricultural lands to resource extraction and urban development continue to worsen,<sup>97</sup> and in many cases seem likely accelerate, as a result of the decisions made by the first Ford government.

The responses of a re-elected Ford government to these kinds of developments remains an unknown. As noted earlier, the government's past behaviour does not inspire confidence about its ability to change direction substantively even the face of obvious policy failures, particularly in dealing with relatively complex issues like the environment and climate change. It has not been a government that sees its role as leading societal transformations in directions like sustainability and decarbonization.

An important variable in the post-2022-election environment may be the behaviour of the federal Liberal government towards its Ontario counterpart. As noted

earlier, environmental issues, particularly climate change, appear to poll differently in Ontario when seen by voters from a federal<sup>98</sup> as opposed to provincial perspective.<sup>99</sup> This dynamic was reflected in the relative success of parties favouring climate action in Ontario in the September 2021 federal election, where the Liberals, NDP, and Greens obtained 78, 6, and 1 seat(s) respectively, versus 37 for the Conservatives.

So far, the legal battle of carbon pricing notwithstanding, the federal government has been relatively accommodating of the Ford government's behaviour around environmental issues. It has allowed the province an exemption from the federal OBPS for industrial GHG emissions on the basis of a weaker provincial system. It was reluctantly drawn into conducting a federal environmental impact assessment of 413 Highway project, and declined to conduct a similar review of the Bradford Bypass project.<sup>100</sup> It has been silent so far on the implications of the province's current increasingly carbon intense trajectory in the electricity sector despite a federal commitment to a net-zero national electricity grid by 2035.<sup>101</sup> If the federal government has any serious hope of achieving its GHG emission reduction targets, it is likely to have to take a more assertive approach to dealing with Ontario. How it responds to the Ford government's renewed mandate remains an unknown.

A renewed Ford government may yet surprise on climate change and the environment. There were glimmers of hope in its late-stage interest in 'greening' the steel industry, electric vehicle manufacturing, and decarbonizing<sup>102</sup> the electricity sector. But without a wider vision than has been seen so far, perhaps aided by some constructive pressure from Ottawa, the province faces another four lost years for the environment, climate change and the health and safety of its residents.

### Discussion Questions

- What do you see as the most important environmental problem facing Ontario?
- How can advocates of action on the environment and climate change advance these issues with a 'market populist' government like that led by Doug Ford?

- What role should the federal government play in environmental and climate change policy in Ontario?
- How can the voices of marginalized communities, including Indigenous peoples, be strengthened in the environmental policy-making process.

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<sup>8</sup> Winfield, *Blue-Green*, Chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> Winfield, *Blue-Green*, Chapter 3.

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