Driving Dialogue and Debate

Policy Paper

By Don Lenihan, Rhonda Moore and Brad Graham

Institute on
Governance
LEADING EXPERTISE

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Executive summary

Social cohesion is declining in most democracies and, with it, the capacity for reasoned discussion and debate and the ability to find common ground and consensus. There are different reasons for this, including the rise of social media, segmented media, an us-versus-them mentality and declining trust in institutions, including government. Polarization is a key sign of this trend. Plummeting levels of trust in government are another sign, as evidenced by the following table:

Figure 5: Tracking trust in government

Q. How much do you trust the government in Ottawa/Washington to do what is right?

% who say MOST/ALL THE TIME

—— Canadians 🇨🇦   —— Americans 🇺🇸
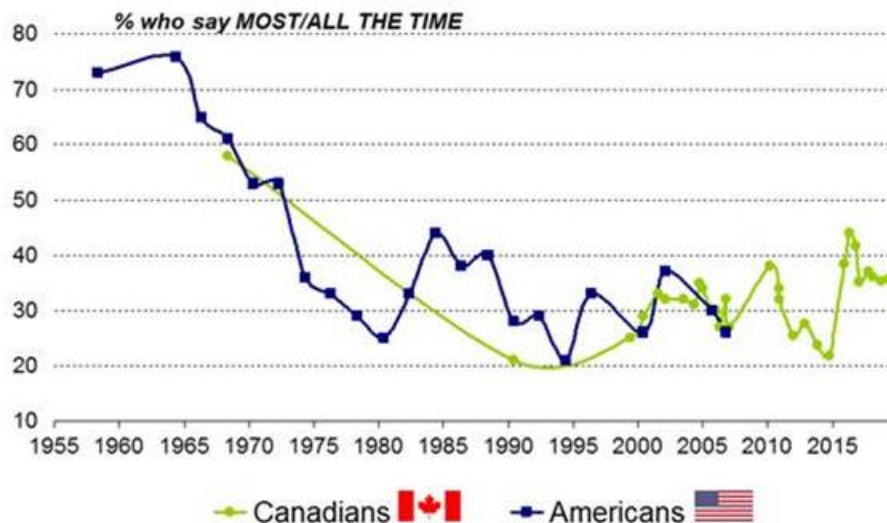
BASE: Canadians; April 26-30, 2019, n=1,484, MOE +/- 2.5%, 19 times out of 20   Copyright 2020. No reproduction without permission.

According to a multi-year study by Ipsos Canada, our own Canadian political culture is not just polarized, it is splintered. In 2016, 47% of Canadians indicated they believed they shared values with others in their local communities. By 2018 only 37% of Canadians believed they shared the same values as others in their community. In addition, our views of the world are divided on several fronts: where we live in the country, what generation we belong to, whether we live in big or small cities, even whether we have a pension or not.

This fragmented state is undermining public debate, which is increasingly defined by positions that seem irreconcilable. Rather than constructive conversations, there is an uncompromising winner-take-all style that leaves opponents talking past one another. Meanwhile, Canadians who are open to compromise find little discussion that helps them arrive at one. We saw this, for example, in the recent debates over oil and gas pipelines.

Polarization and fragmentation among Canadians – citizens and appointed and elected officials – is a serious challenge to overcome. Where Canadians are polarized on issues of municipal, provincial and national significance, all three levels of government are challenged to find solutions that unite rather than divide Canadians. Often, we see appointed or elected officials promoting divisive narratives that allow them to gain just enough support for their ideas to win a seat or advance a bill. But at what cost? Divisive narratives typically provide short-term wins at the expense of social cohesion and the ability of governments to serve Canadians.

The Driving Dialogue and Debate series was launched to examine the issue of polarization in public policy in Canada. This paper discusses the process undertaken in the project, and describes our findings. On policy topics where polarization prevents or limits the ability of government to act, this paper proposes a method for resolving tensions, a method in which people are challenged to examine the different narratives underlying their policy positions. The process offers a means to resolve certain policy tensions by getting people to listen to one another, identify things that connect their various stories, then work together to build a single, shared narrative out of those differing stories.

We present strategies that can make a significant contribution to government's efforts to manage and reduce polarization in three key areas: consultation, policy analysis and development, and communications.

- ***Consultation***

    Creating a shared narrative requires that traditional consultation be replaced or supplemented by a *deliberative*[1] process that gives all participants a meaningful voice in the discussion. This process can work with both the public and stakeholders. However, there is a price to pay: each participant must commit to the following rules of engagement:

    - Listen to everyone's views on the topic and consider their merits fairly;

    - Be willing to acknowledge, review, and reconsider their own preconceived ideas;

    - Seek commonalities among the different perspectives offered by participants; and

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[1] A deliberative process involves the careful exploration of all sides of an issue, with an emphasis on logic and reason. A deliberative process defuses power struggles and identifies common ground (and may even lead to consensus).

- Work to fairly accommodate other perspectives.

When the process succeeds, all parties have a stake in, and a sense of ownership of, the shared narrative they have built together. The process not only creates a shared understanding, it rebuilds trust and establishes a path forward.

- ***Policy Analysis and Development***

A shared narrative is an important tool for policy analysis and development. Specifically, it may generate new understanding, helping policy analysts frame issues and develop options for consideration. For example, policy analysts might:

- Frame an issue in a new way, one that accommodates a range of perspectives;

- Identify key policy inputs, such as values and objectives that are central to the shared narrative; Work to fairly accommodate other perspectives.

- Incorporate a "consensus scan." A consensus scan is an analytical tool that could be used to map narratives and reframe public policy challenges. It would outline key issues, highlighting points of commonality and competing views held by stakeholders. It would also identify values and motivations underlying the views presented.

- ***Communications***

Perhaps the most challenging of all steps is communication. In the last 20 years, the rise of social media platforms and the 24-hour news cycle has created a world where the news never stops and where the media cycle rewards short, pithy, sensationalized messages. Yet complex policy challenges require consultation, collaboration, deliberation, analysis and, most importantly, time.

To communicate policies, programs and services based on shared narratives, it is recommended that communications officers and official spokespersons frame key messages not as perfect solutions but as trade-offs resulting from an open, inclusive, fair and evidence-based process.

In practical terms, this change in communication style may inspire (or require) a culture shift in media communications – a shift toward greater nuance in key messages, greater transparency regarding the policy process (and the time required to develop good policy) and a tone that is more collaborative and constructive than the defensive tone commonly found in the current political media landscape.
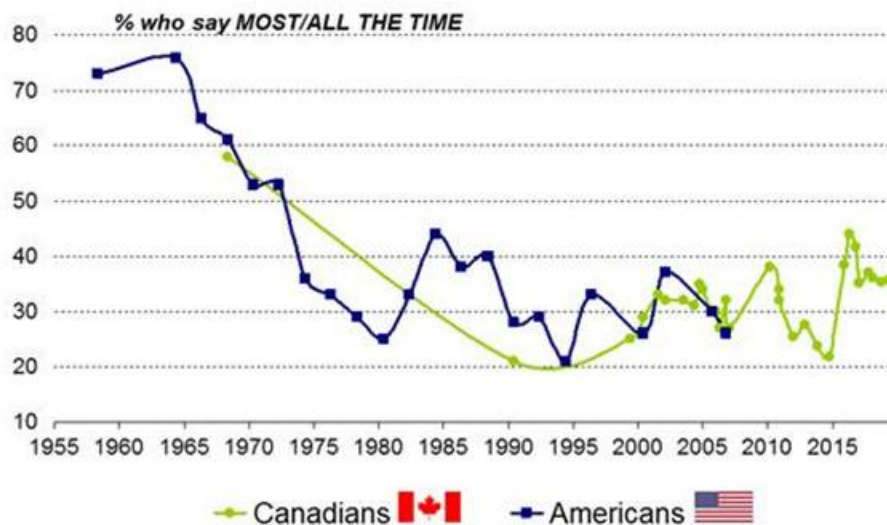
Introduction

Social cohesion is declining in most contemporary democracies, and with it, the capacity for reasoned discussion and debate and the ability to find common ground and consensus. Reasons for this include the rise of social media, the existence of segmented media, an us-versus-them mentality and declining trust in institutions, including government. Polarization is a key sign of this trend. Plummeting levels of trust in government are another sign, as evidenced by the following table:

Figure 5: Tracking trust in government

Q. How much do you trust the government in Ottawa/Washington to do what is right?

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According to a multi-year study by Ipsos Canada, Canadian political culture is not just polarized, it is splintered. In 2016, 47% of Canadians indicated they believed they shared values with others in their local communities. By 2018 only 37% of Canadians believed they shared the same values as others in their community. In addition, our views of the world are divided on several fronts: where we live in the country, what generation we belong to, whether we live in big or small cities, even whether we have a pension or not.

Disagreement in politics is normal, even healthy. Some disagreement promotes the kind of constructive discussion that keeps a democracy open and responsive to change. But polarization takes disagreement to a new level – one that threatens to paralyze government progress. Rather than constructive conversations, polarization fosters an uncompromising winner-take-all style of

discourse that usually leaves opponents in a standoff. Meanwhile, Canadians who are open to compromise find little discussion to help them arrive at one. (We saw this, for example, in the recent debates over oil and gas pipelines.)

The current trend presents a serious challenge for governments and all three levels of the public service. Polarization in public discourse makes it extremely difficult for governments to find policy solutions that unite rather than divide Canadians, and that allow the various levels of government to act.

Can we rebuild trust in our public institutions and find common ground again? There is reason for optimism. For example, in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, all federal, provincial and territorial political parties came together under the #TeamCanada banner to support Canadians who fell ill, lost jobs and were struggling to juggle work, childcare and elder care. Although this spirit of cooperation did not last long, it shows that political leaders from different political stripes, regions and cultures can still work together and achieve results.

The Institute on Governance (IOG) launched the Driving Dialogue and Debate series to test a method for responding effectively and specifically to polarization/fragmentation. In addition to examining the nature of polarization in Canada, we selected three public policy issues on which Canadians are already polarized. We then examined how these issues are currently debated in the public arena and looked for ways to bridge the gaps between the competing narratives underlying these debates. Specifically, the goals of IOG's Driving Dialogue and Debate series were to

- examine how elected officials, public servants and others create division while discussing these topics

- deconstruct the narratives at play to identify common ground

- determine how we can reduce divisions by changing our approach to such topics, and,

- identify how we can develop shared narratives that present win-win solutions.

The dialogue and debate process

Beginning on May 19, 2020, and then continuing every three weeks until July 21, 2020, the IOG hosted four two-part, web-based events. Each event examined a contemporary, divisive policy topic:

- Session 1: Immigration

- Session 2: Energy and the environment

- Session 3: Western alienation

- Session 4: A polarized electorate

In advance of each event, registrants received a discussion paper that analyzed how the issue is discussed in the policy arena. Each paper demonstrated the role that different narratives play in defining different positions and, ultimately, in polarizing a public policy debate.

The first part of each event (Part A) featured a debate or discussion on the polarizing aspects of the topic at hand. A subject matter expert acted as moderator, while the discussants explored and dissected the issue.

On the second day of each event (Part B), participants worked through a series of learning exercises based on the debate, with the goal of arriving at a shared narrative. Each of the four events built on the learning from previous events. Together, participants undertook to

- identify a narrative,

- deconstruct a narrative

- discuss ways to find common ground in two narratives,

- foster trust and empathy, in order to bring people with differing viewpoints together to find common ground, and

- create a shared narrative.

The project engaged 100 individuals, among them, employees from eight departments and agencies of the federal government, employees from provincial and municipal governments in Canada, academics, students, and individuals from other NGOs and the private sector.

Debate summaries

Immigration

The first debate in this series took place on May 19. The debate was moderated by Andrew Griffith, author, blogger and former Director General for Citizenship and Multiculturalism. The discussants were Tasha Kheiriddin, political analyst for Radio-Canada, CBC and Global News, and columnist for La Presse and GlobalNews.ca, and IOG Associate Don Lenihan.

The discussants determined that the debate around immigration is driven by a sense of unfairness, exacerbated by a lack of clarity.

On the pro-immigration side, many sectors of the Canadian labour market rely on the free flow of immigrants to meet demand for employees. At the time of the debate, for example, there was much discussion about unmet labour market demands in the agricultural sector and whether the federal government would permit an exception to the travel ban announced as a measure to fight the pandemic, in order to support farmers who were heading into their growing season.

Yet immigration policy is widely confused with refugee policy, with polarizing results.

Refugees apply to come to Canada because it is safer than the country in which they currently live. Most refugees come to Canada legally after of applying and being granted refugee status. But in recent years, a growing number have been arriving in Canada illegally. According to the discussants, a lack of government action to stem the flow of illegal immigrants (including a lack of political will to close the loophole in the Safe Third Country Agreement) has fuelled a sense of unfairness among Canadians. The rise in the number of illegal refugees has fed a "jumping the queue" narrative, reinforcing the idea that refugees are taking resources from people of equal or greater need who are adhering to the law.

The confusion arising from immigration policy and refugee policy has now resulted in an oversimplified narrative that paints all newcomers to Canada with the same brush – as individuals taking advantage of Canadian goodwill at the expense of those who really deserve it.

Resolving this tension is possible, first by addressing the loophole in the Safe Third Country Agreement; second, by having a more nuanced conversation about immigrants and refugees; and third, by creating a narrative that reinforces the language of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The charter reinforces ideals upheld by all liberal, democratic countries around the world.

When enforced, these ideals create a "set of rules" by which all citizens can live in harmony, while still preserving aspects of their individual cultures.

A copy of the discussion paper that provided context for this debate is found in Appendix A.

Environment and the economy

The second debate took place on June 9, moderated by Shawn McCarthy, Senior Counsel at Sussex Strategy Group. The discussants were Monica Gattinger, Director of the Institute for Science Society and Policy, Professor at the School of Political Studies, and Chair of Positive Energy at the University of Ottawa, and Don Lenihan, IOG Associate.

The tension between the environment and the economy is, at heart, a question of priorities. One party prioritizes preservation of the natural world, while the other prioritizes jobs and economic growth.

The Environmentalists' Narrative on Climate Change may be summarized as follows: "The world is hurtling toward global catastrophe. Urgent action – a massive and rapid transition to renewable energy, and the immediate and decisive reduction of GHG emissions – is the only way to mitigate the consequences."

Conversely, the Industry Narrative on Climate Change goes like this: "Canada requires a climate change agenda, just not the one that environmentalists are calling for. There will be no immediate transition to a renewables-based economy, however much proponents of the Green Economy might desire it. The only realistic path forward is to recognize that Canadian-produced oil and gas will remain a major part of the climate change planning process, while also recognizing that the oil-and-gas sector is not an opponent of the search for an effective transition to a more sustainable economy." (See Appendix B)

Research released by the Institute for Science, Society and Policy (ISSP) in May 2020 demonstrated that the stakeholder landscape of this debate is complex. Many Canadians fall into a neutral middle on this issue, believing that middle ground – preservation of the environment and economic growth – is possible. And, indeed, some of the larger firms in the oil and gas sector agree. By contrast, some of the pro-oil-and-gas messaging is driven by smaller, more vulnerable firms in the oil and gas sector, or by employees who fear for their jobs.

ISSP research demonstrates that the two narratives in this debate have much in common. Both environmentalists and oil and gas proponents agree that a transition to a greener economy is necessary. They disagree on the pace at

which the transition should take place, and on the level of government intervention required.

A copy of the discussion paper that provided context for this debate is found in Appendix B.

Western alienation

The third debate took place on June 29. IOG Vice President Brad Graham moderated the discussion. The discussants were Lisa Young, Professor of Political Science at the University of Calgary, and Director of Graduate Programs at the School of Public Policy, and IOG Associate, Don Lenihan.

Western alienation has been around since the days of Sir John A. Macdonald. Yet the level of discontent among Canadians in Alberta and Saskatchewan has reached a new high. An Ipsos poll conducted in November 2019 reports that six in ten Canadians (59%), including a majority in all regions, felt the country was more divided than ever. One-third (33%) of Albertans and slightly more than one-quarter (27%) of Saskatchewan residents said that their province would be better off separating from Canada.

The latest chapter in this story is the Fair Deal Panel, which tabled its report to the provincial government in May 2020 after consulting with thousands of Albertans, experts and interest groups.

Our discussants determined that the narrative of the latest chapter in western alienation is not about achieving a fair deal. It is designed to promote a message of grievance, and the belief that Western Canadians are being treated unfairly. One discussant suggested the Fair Deal process was never designed to get Albertans listening to one another – let alone other Canadians – or deliberating over new ideas.

Any process that is seeking to restore fairness should examine the issue from both sides and encourage people to work together.

A copy of the discussion paper that provided context for this debate is found in Appendix C.

A polarized electorate

The fourth and final debate in this series took place on July 21. The discussion was moderated by Lydia Miljan, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Windsor. It featured Mike Colledge, President, Canadian Public Affairs, Ipsos and Don Lenihan, IOG Associate as discussants.

This conversation focused on the growing concern that social cohesion is declining in Canada and that Canadians are becoming increasingly polarized.

Before continuing, it is important to acknowledge that Canada does have a shared narrative and, for the most part, citizens adhere to it. It can be seen in the orderly ways in which they go to school, vote, get jobs and obey the laws of the land.

Yet the concern that social cohesion in Canada is declining is not unfounded. Data provided by Ipsos Canada demonstrates the fragmentation of Canadian communities along several lines, including (but not limited to) region, age, income and access to benefits.

This fragmentation, the discussants agreed, arises from protests against parts of Canada's shared narrative. These protests have taken various forms: protests against racism directed at black people and Indigenous communities, and also the protests discussed in previous sessions in this debate series. As mentioned above, a growing sense of unfairness fuels the debate on immigration and refugees. Competing priorities also drive the debate on climate and the economy (really, a debate on climate change and the oil and gas sector). Western alienation articulates grievances felt very strongly in a particular region of Canada. When combined, these protests contribute to an overall decline in social cohesion across Canada.

Reversing these trends will require acknowledgement that they are legitimate, and a collaborative effort to address the concerns fuelling these tensions.

A copy of the discussion paper that provided context for the fourth debate is found in Appendix D.

Where do we go from here?

As John C. Geer notes in *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns,* "[i]t may be more civil and even understandable to downplay the core disagreement we all have. The problem with this approach, however, is that we often fail to appreciate the important role negativity can play in democratic government" because it drives us to be and do better. Given that negativity may sometimes be useful, the question is not whether we should suppress it, but rather, what we can learn from it. The next question is, who will take responsibility for rebuilding social cohesion in Canada? Who will take the first step?

In the sections that follow, readers are presented with a possible solution to the challenge of one-sided, overly simplistic answers to complex problems. Yet that solution – building shared narratives – is a time-intensive process that requires all parties to give up some control of their position in the interest of finding a new path forward. This is a risk, but the richness that emerges from the process offers us the chance to unite fragmented views, rebuild trust, forge new relationships and repair declining levels of social cohesion in Canada.

We can investigate this process by posing four questions:

1. *How do policy debates result in polarization?* This section examines the role and power of a narrative.

2. *How do we deconstruct a narrative?* This section illustrates why and how to dissect a narrative and analyze its component parts.

3. *What do we learn by deconstructing a narrative?* This section demonstrates how mediation and dialogue can get Canadians talking to each other to find common ground.

4. *Why shift from a top-down to a bottom-up approach?* This section demonstrates when it's appropriate to work to build a shared narrative, and reveals the power of this process to bring people together.

In the concluding section, *Findings and Observations,* we offer strategies for adjusting public engagement, carrying out policy analysis and development, and encouraging communications that incorporate the process of building a shared narrative.

How do policy debates result in polarization?

Our approach to analyzing current policy debates revolves around the role of narrative.

A narrative is a story that contains facts, values, and emotions. A strong narrative has the power to divide or unite us; it plays to our emotions and our values; it can help us understand the unknown and adjust to the unfamiliar. Narrative uses metaphors, images, mood and dramatic tension to make sense of complex situations and help people navigate through them.

Let's consider the narratives around immigration. We chose immigration as the theme for Event 1 of Driving Dialogue and Debate because debates on this topic in the months immediately prior to the pandemic illustrate well how polarization occurs and the challenges it poses.

Immigration is both a process and a policy area. It involves individuals coming to Canada through a variety of channels, whether as irregular asylum-seekers, refugees, or immigrants. While historically Canadians have been open to immigration and welcoming of newcomers, public discourse on this subject has shifted noticeably in recent years – and even in the 12 months leading up to March 2020.

Prior to COVID-19, political spokespersons on the right recognized that many Canadians were concerned about immigration, so they developed narratives that pushed the issue to the forefront of the policy arena. They accused the left of advancing dangerous policies that rejected core Canadian values and that threatened to dismantle Canadian identity in favour of a "post-national state." Irregular immigrants, though only a very small portion of all immigrants who come to Canada, became an example of the fall-out of this "postmodern attitude," which, right-wing voices claimed, blinds Trudeau to the damage he and they are doing to Canada's immigration system:

> Canadians are intrinsically open to immigration and welcoming to newcomers, so long as they are willing to work hard, play by the rules and embrace our Canadian values. Trudeau's immigration and integration policies are testing the limits of Canadian openness and generosity.

Calling these migrants "queue jumpers" or "cheaters" creates an emotionally charged narrative in which the migrants, who are mainly visible minorities, threaten to overwhelm Canada's immigration system. Progressives reply that conservatives like these are using the border-crossers to incite populist anger.

We see here how these two competing narratives on the border-crossers pushes political debate to the extremes. Canadians are being called upon to choose between them. We can also see how the "cheater" narrative oversimplifies the situation. The harsh language blurs the distinctions between irregular asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants and casts visible minorities as a threat, no matter which category they are in. This stance misrepresents the complexity of the immigration system and the issues and leaves little room for discussion and middle ground between the two narratives.

How do we deconstruct a narrative?

One of the learning exercises in Driving Dialogue and Debate provided participants with some basic tools for identifying a narrative. The exercise started with a review and an assessment of the narrative's component parts. For the purpose of this paper, we define each part as follows:

- Facts are evidence that has been proven to be true, often including statistically significant data relevant to the issue being examined.

- Values are important or lasting beliefs we hold about the way we live or work (or ought to); and,

- Emotions are an instinctive state of mind derived from a set of circumstances. Emotions are highly subjective and not a reliable indicator of what a situation is really like.

Individuals can separate the components of a narrative by posing four questions:

1. ***What is the key message of the story?*** What overarching lessons or instructions does the story offer? For example, does the situation pose a threat to our values or does it help us realize them? Are we being warned or encouraged?

2. ***Can we distinguish our emotions from the values that the story highlights?*** Immigration is a hot-button issue and stories about it can trigger powerful emotions ranging from fear to elation. However, emotions are a subjective response. They can greatly influence our behaviour, but they should be distinguished from the values contained in the story. Note that powerful emotions may be *triggered* by values, but the emotions and values are distinct.

3. ***What is the factual context around the message and values?*** Facts matter. Does the narrative accurately describe key circumstances and situations being described?

4. ***How well do these key factors (message, values, context) align?*** A narrative describes a situation in a way that highlights certain values. Typically, the story conveys an overarching message about those values. Do the context and the values come together in a way that supports the overarching message? Does the message truthfully reflect facts and unmanipulated data? Is the message one that deserves to be heard?

What do we learn by deconstructing a narrative?

Consider the image of the iceberg (below). Only 10% of the iceberg appears above the surface, while the rest is below the water. Mediation scholar Andrew Ackland describes a person's position as being like the image of the iceberg. What someone says about a topic – the presentation of evidence, and any values and emotions they may express during their individual narrative – is like the portion of the iceberg that rests above the surface. The hidden factors that support and inform their position – the person's values, interests, needs, fears and motivations – rest below the surface.

Think of a position as the tip of an iceberg....
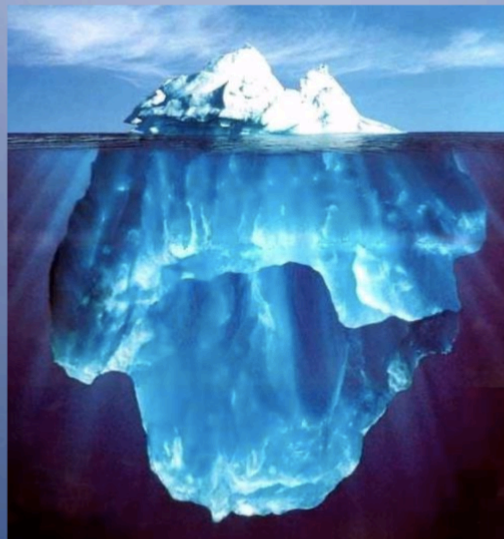
.... it's what's beneath the surface that really counts

Slide courtesy Andrew Acland

To fully understand an individual's position on a topic – their individual narrative – we need to employ dialogue and mediation to "dig below the surface" and identify the values, interests, fears, and needs supporting the position the individual has taken. It is in this deeper layer that we can find common ground amongst a group of individuals.

An individual's interests and values tell us why the position they have taken is important from their perspective. A person's needs and fears tell us what motivates them. Understanding these factors is key to identifying common ground amongst different positions, because if we are unaware of them, we risk making incorrect assumptions about why people hold the convictions they do.

Narratives are not exclusively a tool for expressing personal experience. Narratives can also be used to explain, justify and guide the views of a group, organization, government or nation. In recent decades, narratives have taken on a new significance in public debate.

Consider the environment (the second theme in the *Driving Dialogue and Debate* project). As a policy area, it rests on key values such as stewardship and sustainability. Economic policy, on the other hand, rests on different values, such as growth and development, risk, and reward.

In Canada, traditional policy-making has distinguished between these two policy areas – to the point of placing them in separate government departments. Over time, these "silos" have drawn on their stakeholders' "lived experience" (e.g., their activities, experiences, needs and values) to evolve a story that explains, guides and justifies the department's business and its relationship to its stakeholders.

The narratives around the environment and the economy differ because they are grounded in different sets of experiences. They involve different stakeholders who are doing different things, and they articulate those stakeholders' different priorities, values, and interests.

Today, we recognize that these policy areas are interdependent. A phenomenon like climate change brings the environment and the economy into contact and into conflict. Values such as stewardship clash with values such as risk and reward.

Officials who long ago organized these policy areas into their traditional silos in Canada did not foresee that these issues were interdependent and would one day conflict. They believed that conflicts only occurred *within* a policy area, inside a single department. Trade-offs were historically made by officials within those departments – usually behind closed doors – then announced to stakeholders.

The rise of complex policy challenges – defined as involving elaborate interdependencies and requiring trade-offs among competing values – has required new narratives. Because these new narratives – whether on social,

economic, health or environmental issues – seek to change or reframe how we have traditionally conceptualized individual public policy areas, the stakes are much higher now. In essence, these new narratives are challenging narratives that have evolved from the "traditional" policy areas and that may be deeply entrenched within the mandate of an individual department.

Making big changes to the traditional narrative of a department presents consequences for the stakeholders of that department. The stakeholders may see changes to the narrative they support as unwelcome or as illegitimate. As a result, they may challenge and/or resist any attempt to create a new narrative. To proceed, then, in crafting new narratives for complex issues, a policy process must be put in place that gives stakeholders a meaningful say in the trade-offs they will have to make.

Building a shared narrative engages stakeholders and/or citizens in a collaborative process that redefines how their needs, interests, values and fears might be fairly addressed by public policy. The challenge is to merge competing narratives from different areas in ways that strike a better balance.

Why shift from a top-down to a bottom-up approach?

Traditional consultations have promoted a narrative from the top-down. Typically, a narrative is developed internally by government that promotes a certain approach or which tends to be homogenous in its construction, or both. The resulting narrative is embedded with the values, emotions, and facts that align with the approach and the organization that has devised it. Those who devised the narrative then seek buy-in from stakeholders through a process of socializing the narrative they created. In socializing the narrative, some tweaking may occur at the edges, but there is typically no capacity for a significant re-write of the narrative.

So why shift from a top-down to a bottom-up approach? To examine this problem, we may consider the third event in the Driving Dialogue and Debate series, which addressed western alienation – specifically, Alberta premier Jason Kenney's Fair Deal Panel. The Panel tabled its report to the provincial government in May 2020, after consulting thousands of Albertans, experts and interest groups.

Though "fairness" was included in the panel's title, the process was not designed to get Albertans listening to one another – let alone to other Canadians – or deliberating over new ideas to diffuse the tension between western Canada and other parts of the country. Our discussants suggested it was designed to

strengthen Alberta's bargaining position with the federal government by reinforcing the western alienation narrative.

The process by which the Fair Deal Panel operated was a missed opportunity to build a bottom-up narrative.

A process that is genuinely concerned about the fairness of a relationship would examine that relationship from both sides: it would look for shared understandings, as well as grievances. If Alberta and the rest of Canada are to find common ground, each side must be willing to fairly consider the other's concerns. This requires openness, honesty, and empathy.

What if the Fair Deal consultations had been designed to achieve this? What if groups of citizens from other parts of the country had joined Albertans for a facilitated discussion exploring how their views do or do not align?

We don't know how such a process would have concluded. But we can say that western alienation is a complex challenge with complex interdependencies that will require trade-offs among competing values.

A bottom-up approach would succeed in bringing people of different backgrounds together to begin a dialogue. It would succeed in identifying competing values and interests, and in reframing the challenge around needs that all parties share. A bottom-up approach is not prescriptive, but it would succeed in identifying a way forward, to allow the minister or department to pick up the ball and successfully gain a few yards.

Building a shared narrative for western alienation must start with the premise that different views based on different "lived experiences" always deserve to be heard and fairly considered. Every person has a story to tell. This level of fairness, in turn, would promote agency and create ownership amongst all participants, because everyone would play a role in building the shared narrative.

Observations and Findings: When is a bottom-up approach necessary?

While polarization is growing in Canada, not all policy areas suffer from polarized discourse. For those policy areas where polarization occurs, IOG's Driving Dialogue and Debate series highlighted some valuable lessons that can help government officials – elected and appointed – understand and respond to the increasingly divisive nature of public discussion and debate by employing a bottom-up approach to building a shared narrative.

A shared narrative is a useful tool to build buy-in on a controversial topic when there is no clear way forward, when excessively polarized discourse prevents the public service from making progress in a given area, and when governments are willing to invest time in developing a direction that will resonate with Canadians. To use a sports analogy, when a minister or department is unable to get the ball out of their own end zone, a bottom-up approach can help them gain some yards.

The observations and findings of this paper are not stand-alone strategies. They are considerations to be used when developing strategies for policies and programs, and campaigns on highly divisive issues, at any level of government. These observations and findings can make a significant contribution to government's efforts to manage and reduce polarization/fragmentation at three key levels: during consultation, during policy analysis and development, and in communications.

- *Consultation*

  Creating a shared narrative requires that traditional consultation be replaced or supplemented by a *deliberative*[2] process that gives all participants a meaningful voice in the discussion. This can work with both the public and key stakeholders. However, there is a price to pay: each participant must commit to the following rules of engagement:

  - Listen to everyone's views on the topic and fairly consider their merits;

  - Be willing to acknowledge, review and reconsider their own preconceived ideas;

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[2] A deliberative process involves the careful exploration of all sides of an issue, with an emphasis on logic and reason. A deliberative process defuses power struggles and identifies common ground (and, in some cases, can even lead to consensus) among those involved.

- Seek to find commonalities among the different perspectives offered by participants; and,

- Work to fairly accommodate other perspectives.

   When the process succeeds, all parties have a stake in, and sense of ownership of, the shared narrative they have built together. The process not only builds a shared understanding, it simultaneously rebuilds trust and establishes a path forward.

- ***Policy analysis and development***

   A shared narrative is an important tool for policy analysis and development. Specifically, it may generate new understanding that would help policy analysts frame issues and develop options for consideration. For example, policy analysts might:

   - Frame an issue in a new way, one that accommodates the different perspectives;

   - Identify key policy inputs, such as values and objectives that are central to a given narrative;

   - Indicate how important trade-offs should be made between conflicting values, interests, and priorities;

   - Incorporate a "consensus scan." A Consensus Scan is an analytical tool to map narratives and reframe public policy challenges. It would outline key issues, and reveal not only competing views but points of commonality among stakeholders. The consensus scan would also identify the values and motivations underlying each narrative presented.

- ***Communications***

   Perhaps the most challenging of all steps is communications. In the last 20 years, the rise of social media platforms and the 24-hour news cycle has created a world where the news never stops and where the media cycle rewards short, pithy, sensationalized messages. Yet complex policy challenges require consultation, collaboration, deliberation, and analysis and, most importantly, time.

   To communicate policies, programs and services based on shared narratives, it is recommended that communications officers and official spokespersons avoid defending "perfect" solutions, and instead frame key messages as trade-offs **resulting from an open, inclusive, fair and evidence-informed process.**

In practical terms, this observation may inspire (or require) a culture shift in media communications towards greater nuance in key messages, greater transparency of the policy process (including the time required to get work done) and a tone that is more collaborative and constructive than the defensive tone that is commonplace in the current political media landscape.

In conclusion, to help counter increasingly polarized public debate, we must build a new path by fostering careful, fair and empathic dialogue, rooted in fair rules of engagement. If extreme narratives are replaced by fairer ones that respect all perspectives, including underlying needs and motivations, then that shared narrative may well lead to shared solutions.

Appendix A: Asylum Seekers: Legal Loophole or Social Tipping Point?

Discussion Paper

By Don Lenihan | April 2020

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Introduction

Rules for refugees are among the most politically contentious issues of our day. Debates over when to admit refugees or how many to accept are raging across Europe and the US. "Irregular" asylum-seekers are a distinctively Canadian version of this problem.

These are people whose claim would be immediately rejected at any of our official border crossings, so they enter Canada at a location with no customs office, turn themselves over to the police, and then request asylum. Once in the country, their claims must be adjudicated.

Many Canadians see these migrants as "queue-jumpers" who are going around the system, rather than through it. [Spokespersons on the political right](#) accuse the migrants of stretching Canadians' goodwill to the limits. Conservative MP Michelle Rempel has warned that if the flow isn't stopped, "the dialogue in Canada is going to switch from 'how we do immigration' to '[if we do immigration](#).'

Are we at a tipping point? If so, is it driven by xenophobia or realism? And how will the current crisis affect things? Thanks to COVID-19, Canadians are now part of a global exercise in social distancing. We have closed our borders and shut down international travel. When the crisis is over, will the country be having a very different conversation about how immigration fits into our future?

Let's start by recapping the issue.

The STCA "Loophole"

Regular refugee claimants are usually permitted to remain in Canada while their claim is being processed, but border-crossers are an exception. Canada's Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) with the US requires that refugees make their claim in the first safe country they enter. If they pass through the US on their way to Canada, as do many migrants from Mexico or South America, their claim must be made in the US, not Canada.

However, the wording of the Agreement creates what some see as a technical "loophole." If these migrants make their claim from *inside* the country, it must be adjudicated, even if they have arrived via the US. Over the last few years, thousands of migrants have entered the country at "informal" points – locations with no customs office – such as the [Roxham Road crossing between New York and Quebec](#). Once they are inside the country, they make their claim.

In 2019, there were 16,503 such claims, down slightly from the preceding two years. Through the winter of 2019-20, things had been relatively quiet, politically

speaking, until the pandemic. As the crisis deepened, first, the government set rules for self-isolation, then moved to ban international travel, and finally shut down the borders. However, it also said that the irregular refugees would be allowed to continue entering the country, but that they would have to self-isolate for 14 days.

A political firestorm broke out on social media, castigating the government for this decision, and within days Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that border-crossers would be turned away, after all. He described the measures as part of a "reciprocal arrangement" with the United States but insisted they were "temporary" and required by the pandemic.

The Public Response

For most Canadians, a temporary ban on irregular refugee claims is not enough. They want this "loophole" in the STCA closed. Even before the pandemic, an Angus Reid survey found that 67 per cent of respondents see the situation as a "crisis," and 65 per cent think the system is taking in more people than it can handle. These were not just conservatives speaking. More than half those who agreed said they had voted Liberal or New Democrat in 2015.

The federal government says it too wants an end to these "irregular" claims. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has promised to revise the STCA and his Immigration Minister has been explicitly instructed to "work with the United States to modernize the Safe Third Country Agreement."

Unfortunately, US President Donald Trump has shown little interest in getting this done. Having these migrants apply for refugee status in Canada rather than the US seems to serve his political interest, especially as Americans head into an election year.

Other options are not promising. The current ban, as we've seen, is tied to the pandemic and not a permanent solution. Canada could walk away from the Agreement, but that would be to abandon the very idea of a safe first country. Some Conservatives have proposed making the entire border a formal point of entry, but the government says that would greatly increase the problems and dangers, both for Canadians and asylum seekers. So far, the Trudeau government seems to see no real alternative but to keep pressing the Americans to come to the table – and wait.

The public is not convinced. A DART poll found that 68 per cent of respondents believe the government has handled the issue poorly. A poll by Public Square Research reports that 64 per cent think illegal immigration is a serious problem.

But if results like these cast doubt on the government's management of the issue, they also contain some encouraging news. Sixty-five per cent of respondents to the DART poll said the government was doing a good job managing the regular immigration system. In the Public Square Research poll, 76 per cent wanted Ottawa to do more to encourage skilled labourers to immigrate to Canada.

This suggests that, while Canadians may be angry and want the government to close the STCA "loophole," the issue has not affected their confidence in the immigration system, as Rempel claims. Rather, they appear to have "compartmentalized" their views on asylum-seekers and separated them from their overall views on immigration and the immigration system.

So, who is right? Do Canadians understand the government's legal dilemma, as these polls suggest, or are they "mad as hell" and ready to snap, as Rempel and others claim? A third view may be emerging, which helps us see the issue in a different light.

Are Canadians Polarizing on Immigration?

A poll on immigration conducted by Ekos Research in April 2019 contained an interesting result. The data show striking increases in the numbers of Conservatives who feel that too many visible minorities are being admitted to Canada and of Liberals who feel that number is about right:

Attitudes to minorities by party support

Q. *Forgetting about the overall number of immigrants coming to Canada, OF THOSE WHO COME would you say there are too few, too many or the right amount who are MEMBERS OF VISIBLE MINORITIES?*

National

Year	DK/NR	Too many	About right	Too few
2019	6	40	43	12
2015	8	41	37	14
2013	9	38	42	11

Liberal supporters

Year	DK/NR	Too many	About right	Too few
2019	4	15	68	13
2015	2	36	42	20
2013	6	34	48	13
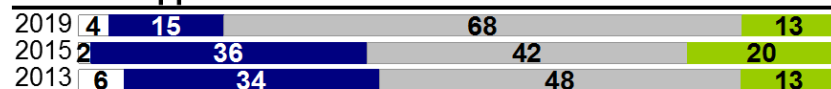
Conservative supporters

Year	DK/NR	Too many	About right	Too few
2019	7	69	23	2
2015	3	53	33	10
2013	3	47	41	8
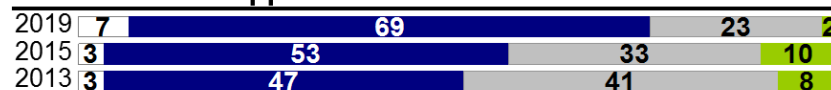
☐ DK/NR   ■ Too many   ■ About right   ■ Too few

BASE: *Canadians (half-sample); April 3-11, 2019, n=507, MOE +/- 4.4%, 19 times out of 20*

The poll suggests that a realignment on immigration is underway. Canadians appear to be polarizing over their views on visible minorities – and they are doing so along partisan lines. Why? What is causing this now?

Ekos President Frank Graves offers an explanation. He sees the split as part of a wider trend toward a special brand of populism that is current in western societies and has its roots in the free trade and globalization movements of the 1980s and '90s. The movement includes Donald Trump's MAGA initiative in the US and Brexit in the United Kingdom.

Advocates promised that globalization would bring greater prosperity for all Canadians, but this is not what has happened. Instead, the high-paying jobs in manufacturing have all but disappeared, while earnings in financial and other professional services have soared. Many working people feel angry and betrayed. They believe that their industries were sacrificed for greater growth in the service sectors.

Graves' list of the key drivers behind the new populism reflects this view. The list includes "economic stagnation and the burgeoning acceleration of inequality at the top of the economic pyramid, a sense of loss of privilege and identity status and a magnified sense that the external world is newly threatening."

As the Ekos poll shows, immigration is at the forefront of these "newly threatening" forces. Populists believe that "too much" or "the wrong kind" of immigration will undermine Canadian values and redefine our society. Muslims and other visible minorities figure prominently in these discussions. And that is where the politics enters.

Political spokespersons on the right, from Michelle Rempel to Maxime Bernier, have put immigration at the centre of current political debates. They accuse progressives such as Prime Minister Trudeau of advancing dangerous policies. Thus, Conservative commentator Candice Malcolm claims that when Trudeau has talked in the past of Canada as a "post-national state," he was rejecting our core values and dismantling our identity. The border-crossers are a product of this "postmodern attitude," which blinds Trudeau to the damage he and they are doing to Canada's immigration system:

Canadians are intrinsically open to immigration and welcoming to newcomers, so long as they are willing to work hard, play by the rules and embrace our Canadian values. Trudeau's immigration and integration policies are testing the limits of Canadian openness and generosity."

Progressives, of course, reject these views. They reply that Conservatives like Malcolm and Rempel are using the border-crossers to incite populist anger.

Calling these migrants "queue-jumpers" or "cheaters" creates an emotionally charged narrative in which the migrants, who are mainly visible minorities, threaten to overwhelm Canada's immigration system. The harsh language blurs the distinctions between irregular asylum-seekers, refugees, and immigrants and casts visible minorities as a threat, no matter which category they are in.

The Resolution for Debate

Whereas the Canadian population is aging;

Whereas the current birthrate is too low to sustain even the existing population level;

Whereas Canada has long-standing international commitments regarding refugees, and

Whereas most immigrants who are visible minorities are adapting well to Canadian society:

Be it resolved **that Canadians should continue to support the government's overall approach to immigration.**

Evaluating Competing Narratives – A Framework for Analysis

So, are asylum-seekers a legal problem that can be solved by closing a loophole in the STCA, or are they a symptom of a deep disagreement on Canadian values and society? Are progressives naïve about the threat that other cultures pose to Canadian society or is the political right just fueling anger among populists?

Canadians are being offered two competing stories or "narratives" on the border-crossers and, more generally, immigration. This already-polarized debate is further complicated by the global pandemic and the new reality of *social distancing*, physical and cultural, that it has imposed on the nation. How do we choose between these narratives?

Some of the claims in these competing narratives can be tested and validated. Consider the claim that immigrants take scarce jobs, making it more difficult for Canadians to find work. Claims like these generalize about complex situations, so it would be misleading to say, simply, that they are true or false.

Nevertheless, they contain many facts that can be tested, and most experts agree that, *overall*, the facts show that the impact of immigrants on the workforce and the economy is positive. Counterexamples can always be found but they are outweighed by the many benefits.

But the debate over irregular asylum-seekers is not just a disagreement over facts. It is also about values, and values are harder to isolate and validate. Talk of undermining "Canadian values" or of "weakening Canadian society" can be very subjective: Whose values? How and where are they being weakened?

This is where narrative comes into the picture. Unlike evidence-based analysis, narrative involves more than data and facts; it also includes more subjective factors, such as values, and serves as a tool for aligning them with the facts. A strong narrative is like a textured picture – a map – that explains how facts and values fit together.

However, a good fit doesn't guarantee that the facts are accurate or the values commendable. Narratives often contain claims that are false and value statements that are biased, unfair, and even offensive. The lesson for policymakers is that verifying facts is not enough to validate a narrative. The values must be assessed as well.

This validation requires a further distinction: values vs. emotions. Just as facts and values are different things, so are emotions and values. Emotions are highly subjective states that tell us how we *feel* about a situation, but how we feel is not a reliable indicator of what a situation is really like. For example, a situation can make us feel afraid, even when there is nothing to fear. We can begin to sort out these different elements of a narrative by considering four basic questions:

1. ***What is the key message of the story?*** What overarching lessons or instructions does the story offer? For example, does the situation pose a threat to the values at issue or does it help us realize them? Are we being warned or encouraged?

2. ***Can we distinguish our emotions from the values that the story highlights?*** Immigration is a hot-button issue and stories about it can trigger powerful emotions, ranging from fear to elation. However, emotions are a subjective response to the story. They can greatly influence our behavior, but they should be distinguished from the values that the story is about.

3. ***What is the context around the message and the values?*** Facts matter. Does the story accurately describe key circumstances and situations?

4. ***How well do these key factors (message, values, context) align?*** A narrative describes a situation in a way that highlights certain values. Typically, the story conveys an overarching message about those values. Do the context and the values come together in a way that supports the overarching message? Is the message saying something that deserves to be heard?

These questions help us separate the key elements of a narrative and assess how the story brings them together. Typically, people don't sort and analyze stories this carefully. If a story resonates with them, they regard that as validation. In fact, this resonance often comes from their emotions, which, as already noted, are highly subjective and an unreliable guide to a story's validity. A more critical assessment of the way these elements fit together may lead to a very different conclusion.

Appendix B: Climate and Economy: Can We Build a Shared Narrative?

Discussion Paper

By Don Lenihan | June 2020

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A Note on The Dialogue Session

The four discussion themes in the Driving Dialogue and Debate series (immigration, environment vs. the economy, western alienation, a polarized electorate) raise policy issues where conventional public debate is failing to produce solutions. As the four discussion papers make clear, narrative plays a critical role in these debates.

This second session on Environment vs. Economy will consider the challenges facing the Government of Canada as it reviews options for a plan to help restart the economy, as the pandemic recedes. Should it go green? Would a green plan exclude support for the oil and gas industry? Can the plan strike an acceptable "balance" between the two sides?

The goal of the dialogue is not to decide what a recovery plan should include. Rather, it is to examine the key assumptions and values that are being advanced by environmentalists and industry through their competing narratives, then consider whether there is enough common ground to build a shared narrative that brings the two sides closer together. The dialogue will focus on three key questions:

- How are the two narratives being used in the current policy context?
- Is there a real opportunity to construct a shared narrative?
- If so, what would this new story say and how would it be developed?

Introduction

Ottawa is [rumoured](#) to be working on an ambitious stimulus package for the recovery phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan, apparently, will be green. So, has the Trudeau government given up on the oil and gas industry?

In his first mandate, Justin Trudeau declared that balancing the environment and the economy was a signature policy of his government. By the end, this meant buying and building the Trans Mountain Pipeline to ensure access to markets for Alberta's oil, while reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions through a carbon tax and tougher regulations on the industry.

The approach seems to have done as much to divide the country's leaders as to unite them. Who can forget "The Resistance" photo on the cover of [Maclean's](#)? The stimulus package will send a signal whether the government still believes in a balanced approach.

Narrative plays a critical role in this calculation. Consider climate change. Someone who puts a high value on the short-term priority of preserving jobs will be more willing to live with the risk of melting glaciers than someone who cares passionately about the well-being of future generations. These people can look at the same facts and studies yet draw opposing conclusions about how best to respond – and that's where narrative comes in.

Each side will have a story to tell about why they see things as they do. These stories are more than collections of facts and arguments. An effective narrative is like a textured picture – a map – of how subjective factors, such as values and priorities, fit together with objective ones, such as data and facts. And this can make an informed exchange of views difficult and divisive.

But if narrative often divides people, it can also unite them. A "shared narrative" is a story that is created by combining or integrating different – and often competing – narratives. A successful shared narrative establishes common ground so that people who disagree can start discussing their differences in ways that both sides are more likely to see as respectful and fair.

If the Trudeau government is still committed to the oil and gas industry, its primary challenge lies in narrative building. Canadians will need a shared narrative that shows how support for the industry can be part of a single coherent plan to build a sustainable economy.

Is such a story even possible? Perhaps, but it will take some imagination. Let's start by reminding ourselves where we are.
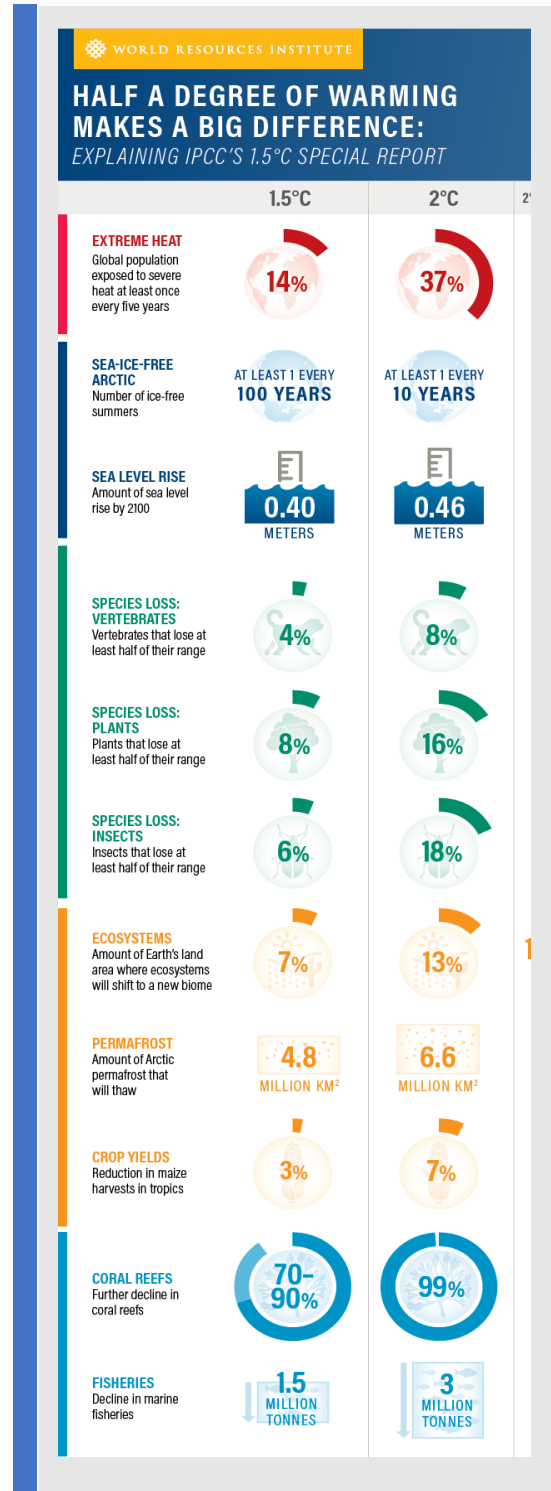
The Environmentalists' Climate Change Narrative

The United Nation's International Panel on Climate Change relies on thousands of leading climate scientists from around the world to investigate and report on climate change. The 2018 IPCC report delivered an extraordinary and deeply disturbing message to the world, declaring that:

- The planet is currently 1°C warmer than preindustrial levels and on course to rise by more than 3°C by 2100. The consequences would be catastrophic.

- A window exists between now and 2030 to keep global warming below 1.5°C, but this requires an unprecedented, global transition to clean technologies and a decisive reduction in current carbon emissions.

The news is very bad. Even if we keep the temperature increase to between 1.5° and 2°C, the consequences will be dramatic, including increases in extreme weather, melting polar ice caps, rising sea levels and flooding in coastal areas, widespread extinction of species and other loss of biodiversity, including up to 90 per cent of the world's coral reefs. The sidebar shows the difference in impacts as the temperature climbs from 1.5° to 2°.

G20 countries are the main cause of global warming, accounting for 78 per cent of GHG emissions. The four biggest emitters are China (28 per cent), the United States (14 per cent), India (7 per cent), and Russia (5 per cent). Canada is responsible for about 2 per cent of GHGs and, under the Paris Agreement, has committed to reduce these to 30% below 2005 levels by 2030. A recent United Nation's Emissions Report states that Canada is currently expected to exceed its targets by 15 per cent.

WORLD RESOURCES INSTITUTE

HALF A DEGREE OF WARMING MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE:
EXPLAINING IPCC'S 1.5°C SPECIAL REPORT

	1.5°C	2°C
EXTREME HEAT Global population exposed to severe heat at least once every five years	14%	37%
SEA-ICE-FREE ARCTIC Number of ice-free summers	AT LEAST 1 EVERY 100 YEARS	AT LEAST 1 EVERY 10 YEARS
SEA LEVEL RISE Amount of sea level rise by 2100	0.40 METERS	0.46 METERS
SPECIES LOSS: VERTEBRATES Vertebrates that lose at least half of their range	4%	8%
SPECIES LOSS: PLANTS Plants that lose at least half of their range	8%	16%
SPECIES LOSS: INSECTS Insects that lose at least half of their range	6%	18%
ECOSYSTEMS Amount of Earth's land area where ecosystems will shift to a new biome	7%	13%
PERMAFROST Amount of Arctic permafrost that will thaw	4.8 MILLION KM²	6.6 MILLION KM²
CROP YIELDS Reduction in maize harvests in tropics	3%	7%
CORAL REEFS Further decline in coral reefs	70–90%	99%
FISHERIES Decline in marine fisheries	1.5 MILLION TONNES	3 MILLION TONNES

The environmentalists' narrative on climate change is built from facts like these and can be summarized as follows:

The Environmentalists' Climate Change Narrative

The world is hurtling toward global catastrophe. Urgent action is the only way to mitigate the consequences and this requires a massive and rapid transition to renewable energy, and the immediate and decisive reduction of GHG emissions.


The Oil and Gas Industry Narrative

- Canada's oil and natural gas industry is the country's largest private sector investor, injecting nearly $13 billion into the national economy in 2017, and creating about 223,000 direct and indirect jobs.

- The Alberta Oil Sands have an estimated $313 billion of capital investment to date, including $10.6 billion in 2018.

- The production and delivery of oil products, natural gas and electricity in Canada contributes about $170 billion to Canada's $1.8 trillion gross domestic product (GDP), or just under 10%.

- In 2018, the energy sector paid nearly $17 billion to Canadian governments through corporate income taxes, sales and payroll taxes, royalties and land sales.

- Canada produces less than 2 percent of the world's GHG emissions. The oil sands account for 11% of this and 0.1% of global emissions. From 2000 to 2017 the emission intensity of oil sands operations dropped by about 28%, thanks to technological improvements.

- A recent study for the Clean Resource Innovation Network finds that Canada's oil industry is the country's largest investor in clean technology, accounting for 75 per cent of the $1.4 billion spent annually.

- According to Statistics Canada, Canadian businesses reported spending $8.4 billion on environmental protection in 2016 (the latest year for which Statistics Canada has published data). The single biggest contributor was

the oil and natural gas industry, which invested $3.7 billion (see infographic below):
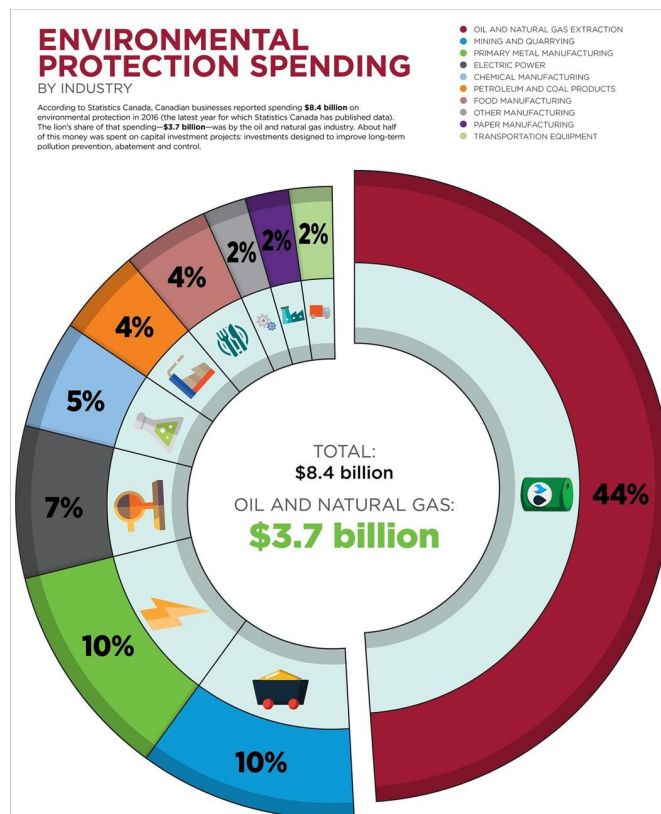
The "industry narrative" on climate change is neatly captured in a recent article in *Inside Policy Magazine*, where Ken Coates argues as follows:

The Industry Narrative on Climate Change

Canada requires a climate change agenda, just not the one that environmentalists are calling for. There will be no immediate transition to a renewables-based economy, however much proponents of the so-called Green Economy might like it. The only realistic path forward is to recognize that Canadian-produced oil and gas will remain a major part of Canada's energy supply and that the energy sector is an integral part of the climate change planning process, not opponents of the search for an effective transition to a more sustainable economy.

The COVID-19 Recovery: A Window of Opportunity?

In the last few weeks, the COVID-19 pandemic may have tipped the scales on this debate. As world leaders make plans to restart their domestic economies, there is growing support for the view that this is a unique opportunity to accelerate the transition to a green economy:

- **An** international panel **of distinguished economists has released a study showing** that investments in renewable energy are much more likely to **boost economic growth** for recovery than fossil fuels, in addition to slowing *global warming.*

- Jim Balsillie, co-founder of RIM and the chair and co-founder of the Council of Canadian Innovators, argues that structural changes in Canada's economy that would normally have taken years have been concentrated into a few months and, as a result, Canada is ready for rapid and largescale investment in clean tech.

- Former Green Party Leader Elizabeth May contends that the current collapse in oil prices is not just a downturn. The industry is no longer sustainable. She argues that "Oil, as the energy of the future, is dead" and that the conditions are in place for a massive green shift.

- Resilient Recovery has collected more than 350 signatories representing 2,150 companies in a campaign for a recovery plan that acts rapidly to invest in and expand clean energy and cleantech initiatives and programs. An informal task force (which includes Prime Minister Trudeau's former principal secretary) will deliver recommendations to the federal government in the coming weeks.

But if pressure is mounting for a green recovery some of these advocates are also concerned about deepening the tensions between different regions. Resilient Recovery, for example, insists that a green recovery plan "can't leave any sector or region behind."

In fact, many westerners are feeling left behind. Oil is at rock-bottom prices and demand has plummeted. The Government of Alberta has been calling on the federal government to come to the industry's aid – to the tune of about $30 billion – but so far, Ottawa has provided a package for about $2.5 billion. Lots of people out west are unimpressed and there is genuine concern about what might come next.

So, has the government concluded that it must choose between a green agenda and supporting the oil and gas industry or is a balanced approach still possible?
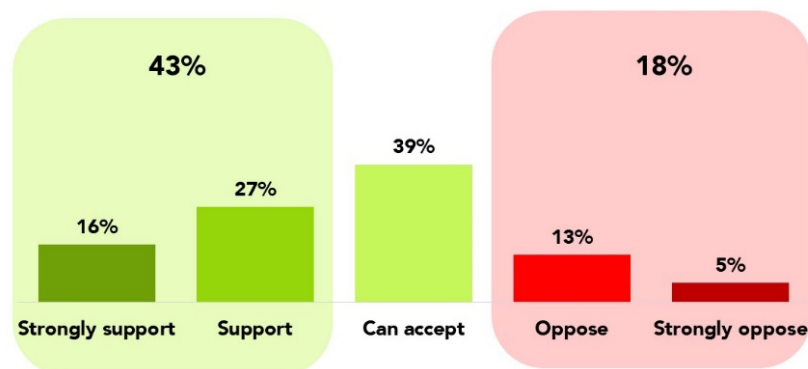
Is there Middle Ground?

Some see reasons to be hopeful that a balance can be struck:

- Recent research (and here) by the University of Ottawa's Positive Energy usefully distinguishes between views that are "polarized" and those that are "fragmented." The report notes that polarized views on the environment and the economy are more typical of political leaders and advocates than the public. Canadians' views, it observes, are better described as fragmented, that is, they don't have a single, definitive view of the situation.

  For example, a Positive Energy survey finds that most Canadians support (29 per cent) or somewhat support (26 per cent) growth in the oil and gas sectors. Indeed, 60 per cent say they would be more supportive of fossil fuel energy if Canada had more proactive climate policies (26 per cent agree, 34 per cent somewhat agree). This suggests there is room (and openness) to align these views in new ways that could lead to a balanced approach – a shared narrative may be possible.

- Polling data from Earnscliffe Strategy Group also suggests the public is open to alternatives. It finds that Canadians are significantly more inclined to support than oppose an aid package that compensates oil and gas companies for converting to the production of renewable energy.

- Public opinion data from Abacus Research reveals that a majority in all regions of the country is willing to go along with a support package for the oil and gas sector:

SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE TO OIL/GAS SECTOR

43%
16% Strongly support
27% Support
39% Can accept

18%
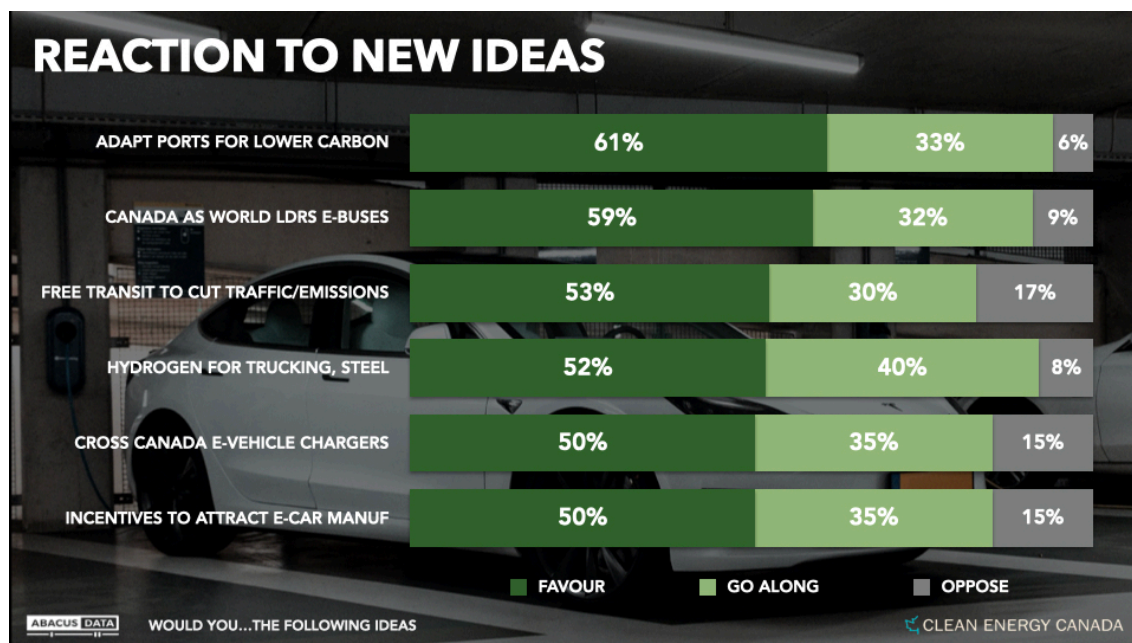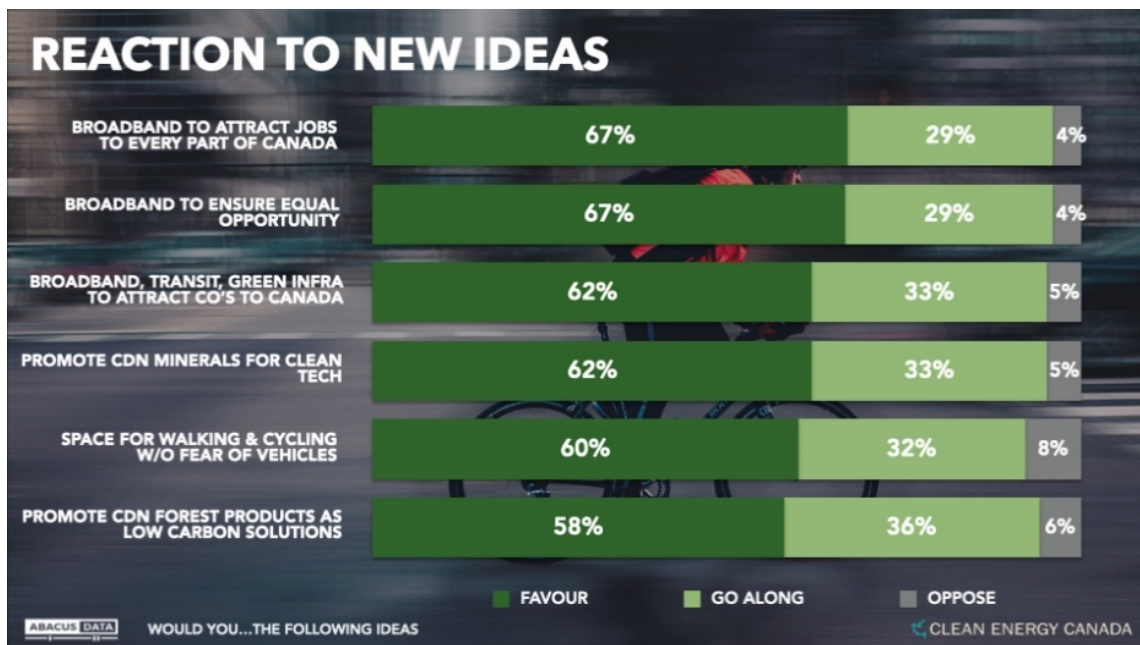13% Oppose
5% Strongly oppose

ABACUS DATA

The price of oil has hit an all-time low which is having hurt workers and the economies in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland and Labrador. Would you support or oppose the federal government doing more to help those impacted by the significant drop in oil prices?

- At the same time, Abacus [finds](#) that the pandemic has not diminished public support for infrastructure changes that will create a cleaner Canadian economy in the future:

REACTION TO NEW IDEAS

	FAVOUR	GO ALONG	OPPOSE
BROADBAND TO ATTRACT JOBS TO EVERY PART OF CANADA	67%	29%	4%
BROADBAND TO ENSURE EQUAL OPPORTUNITY	67%	29%	4%
BROADBAND, TRANSIT, GREEN INFRA TO ATTRACT CO'S TO CANADA	62%	33%	5%
PROMOTE CDN MINERALS FOR CLEAN TECH	62%	33%	5%
SPACE FOR WALKING & CYCLING W/O FEAR OF VEHICLES	60%	32%	8%
PROMOTE CDN FOREST PRODUCTS AS LOW CARBON SOLUTIONS	58%	36%	6%

ABACUS DATA   WOULD YOU...THE FOLLOWING IDEAS   CLEAN ENERGY CANADA

REACTION TO NEW IDEAS

	FAVOUR	GO ALONG	OPPOSE
ADAPT PORTS FOR LOWER CARBON	61%	33%	6%
CANADA AS WORLD LDRS E-BUSES	59%	32%	9%
FREE TRANSIT TO CUT TRAFFIC/EMISSIONS	53%	30%	17%
HYDROGEN FOR TRUCKING, STEEL	52%	40%	8%
CROSS CANADA E-VEHICLE CHARGERS	50%	35%	15%
INCENTIVES TO ATTRACT E-CAR MANUF	50%	35%	15%

ABACUS DATA   WOULD YOU...THE FOLLOWING IDEAS   CLEAN ENERGY CANADA

An apparent lesson from such research is that, while the views of advocates may be increasingly irreconcilable, Canadians still seem open to the idea that the

government can find ways to go green that do not exclude the oil and gas industry – and the tens of thousands of Canadians who depend on it.

However, if those Canadians in the middle are to avoid being pulled to the extremes, they need a single, consistent story to tell about how the two sides fit together. Clues about this storyline can be found in some of the options already being discussed.

For example, an Alberta task force is looking at hydrogen, which can be extracted from Alberta's Oil Sands. As Adam Radwanski notes, hydrogen is a potential future energy source for heavy industrial transportation, such as trucks. And if governments invested in hydrogen infrastructure in key regions, such as fueling stations, this could help establish the demand needed to encourage nationwide scale-up and exports.

Other options for aligning industry and the environment more closely include geothermal energy, and carbon capture and storage. The IPCC 2018 report shows that carbon removal is necessary for moving to net-zero emissions and for producing net-negative emissions to compensate for any overshoot of 1.5˚C.

A Shared Narrative on Climate Change

Storytelling is both a basic human skill and a social need. People can hear a story once and remember it, sometimes for the rest of their lives. Moreover, a good narrative "travels." People like to tell stories, talk about them, and hear new ones.

Most importantly, narrative helps people understand the unknown and adjust to the unfamiliar. It uses metaphors, images, mood, and dramatic tension to make sense of complex situations and to help people navigate through them. If Canadians are to make the most of the recovery period ahead, we need a story to tell about how our economic future can bring us together as a country. It is the role of politics to provide one.

Appendix C: Jason Kenney's Fair Deal Option: Will It Solve Western Alienation?

Discussion Paper

By Don Lenihan | June 2020

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Introduction

Like many westerners, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney believes that Confederation has treated his province unfairly. He is determined to do something about it, starting with a province-wide referendum on Equalization in 2021. The rest of Canada should take note – especially, Ottawa.

This comes at a critical time. Western alienation may have been around since the days of John A Macdonald, but the levels of discontent have never been higher. An Ipsos poll last November reports that six-in-ten Canadians (59%), including a majority in all regions, felt the country was more divided than ever. One-third (33%) of Albertans and slightly more than one-quarter (27%) of Saskatchewan residents said that their province would be better off separating from Canada.

While the COVID-19 crisis has eased these tensions, most agree that this is temporary and that, once the pandemic recedes, the tensions will resurface.

Kenney's Fair Deal Panel is a wildcard here. After listening to Albertans for several months, it has delivered 25 recommendations that calls on Alberta to demand a lot more autonomy from Canada. However, while Kenney seems determined to act, he also insists that this is about fairness. The goal is to right the wrongs of the past and, hopefully, put the relationship with Ottawa on a new footing.

I agree that this is the right way to frame the issue, but I want to raise three basic points about fairness that everyone – including Kenney – should keep in mind as the process unfolds.

A Fair Deal Should Focus on Fairness

Although Kenney insists that Alberta only wants fairness, he sometimes takes a different view. For example, only 42 per cent of Albertans polled by the Panel thought that the province should pull out of the Canada Pension Plan. A mere 35 per cent supported creating a provincial police force. Yet both are key recommendations in the report. Why?

At a press conference, the Panel's Chair, Oryssia Lennie, responded by noting that the Panel had also heard from experts and interest groups. Presumably, the ideas came from them. Kenney went further, explaining that his government will study the recommendations to see if they result in a "net benefit" to Albertans. If so, he concluded, they too will be put to a referendum.

Some may wonder what this has to do with fairness. Kenney seems to be saying that Albertans' interest in pan-Canadian programs like the CPP or the RCMP can be calculated in dollars and cents. If so, the discussion between Albertans and the rest of Canada is not about, say, shared identity, history, values, or goals, it is essentially about self-interest.

This puts things in a different light. Now the Fair Deal process looks more like a way to strengthen Kenney's bargaining position and rally his troops before he sits down with Ottawa. (Interestingly, Kenney concluded with a [comment](#) that he has long-believed that Alberta should "take a page out of Quebec's playbook" to maximizes its "leverage" within the federation.)

To be fair, there are good reasons that Kenney may want it both ways. He may believe that the process is about fairness, yet also believe that any future discussions with Ottawa will be very tough and that Albertans need a shrewd negotiator. So, if he is posturing here, maybe he thinks he must.

Except, the net-benefit view not only competes with the fairness view, it *undermines* it. For Alberta and the rest of Canada to find common ground, both sides must be willing to take a *fair* look at each other's concerns and claims. This requires openness, goodwill, and trust.

The self-interest view suggests that for Kenney the process is about maneuvering to get the best deal possible for Alberta. Rather than building trust, this is more likely to fuel further demands from Albertans and create suspicion in the rest of Canada.

Indeed, within days of the press conference, one of Kenney's own caucus members was arguing that Alberta should be using separation as a threat. Kenney felt obliged to publicly [shout him down](#), replying that "Either you love your country, or you don't."

Fairness Means Seeing Both Sides

Although tens of thousands of Albertans participated in the Fair Deal process, it was never designed to get Albertans listening to one another – let alone other Canadians – or deliberating over new ideas. On the contrary, the Panel's Terms of Reference framed the process as an enquiry into how Albertans have been unfairly treated.

This had consequences for the report. It speaks almost exclusively from an Alberta perspective – and the view is decidedly bleak. The Panel reports (page 50) that people across the province talked about "losing their voices, losing their stories, losing their identities. Indeed, Alberta's story is increasingly being told, and often inaccurately, by others."

While no one is challenging Albertans right to tell their story, a significant part of it, one assumes, is about being a part of Canada and being Canadian. Yet, there is almost no mention of this aspect of their identity, the benefits, or their reasons for wanting to remain in Confederation.

A process that is seeking to restore fairness should examine the relationship from both sides; it should look for shared understandings, as well as grievances. This leads to our third point about fairness.

Fairness is Personal – It is about Identity

The alienation story is about the imbalance of power between governments. But alienation is not just about governments, it is also about the people who live under them. The sense of grievance here is not just institutional, it is personal.

Kenny's fair deal approach should be seen in this light. Alienation is about more than harmful national policies. It is also about the impact of those policies on people's identity. As Lisa Young observes, Alberta's regional identity is largely defined by grievance.

Could a fair solution change this? Perhaps. It could aim to create a counter-current in the culture, a counter-narrative that tells a new story about who Albertans are and their relationship to the rest of Canada.

Practically, this means the coming discussions should include more than intergovernmental negotiations about power and autonomy. The process should also engage citizens in the task of redefining their identity through a **shared narrative**.

A shared narrative is a story that people with conflicting narratives create together through dialogue and discussion. Neither side can build it alone. The work, like the story, must be shared by citizens on both sides of the border.

The two sides would engage in a conversation aimed, first, at showing each other that they are still listening – that they are able to discuss the issues that matter and explore ideas for a shared vision of the future.

Second, they would tell their stories about Confederation: what they think is important and beneficial, how the members' interests differ, and how they can be accommodated.

In effect, both sides would be saying something about how they see themselves, as Canadians and as regional members of the federation. They would be learning about one another's views and experiences and finding points of contact.

Participants would have to agree to stand back and try to see the bigger picture, rather than just their respective parts of it. This builds bridges and creates common ground. Special techniques could be used to align different stories in ways that both sides might recognize and accept.

In sum, the lesson here is that Kenney's fairness option needs to tell a new story about Alberta. This story is not just for Albertans, it is for all Canadians. Both sides need it to help them imagine what a shared future might include and to make them feel that they have reasons to remain together.

Building such a story would be challenging, but not impossible. Expectations should be modest. The issues can't be solved overnight, but they don't have to be. Culture change takes time. Just getting people on both sides to start thinking and talking a little differently would be enough for now.

It would start building openness, understanding, and trust across the country. That would help ensure that Canadians inside and outside of Alberta are receptive to the idea of change.

Such a process need not be unwieldy or hugely expensive. Residents might gather in local venues, such as churches and community centres, and use online forums to connect with people in other parts of the country.

Finally, such a process would create a larger, public conversation around the intergovernmental discussions that will be underway – one that engages citizens from both sides, and which could help set some parameters around what everyone thinks is reasonable and fair. Without some progress on this front, a lasting solution will be hard to find.

Conclusion

Western alienation is as old as the provinces afflicted by it, but something new seems to be happening. The depth of the discontent is not only concerning, it could threaten the federation. Kenney's claim that Albertans just want a fair deal is the right response. But if he wants Ottawa and the rest of Canada to listen, he needs to build credibility around that claim. These three observations would help lay the path.

Appendix

The Western Alienation Narrative

Western alienation is hardly new, and the driving idea is familiar to most Canadians: Central Canada (Ontario and Quebec) controls Parliament (currently 199 of 338 seats) and it has used this power for the economic exploitation of the west.

The view goes back at least to John A. Macdonald's National Policy, which forced westerners to buy manufactured goods from Central Canada, rather than the US. Since then, the narrative has taken root through a lengthy list of policies and decisions, such as:

- Unreasonably high freight rates in the 1880s, which made it very expensive for western farmers to get their grain to seaports;
- Pierre Trudeau's National Energy Plan in the 1980s, which forced Alberta to sell cheap oil to Central Canada; and
- Brian Mulroney's decision to take the maintenance contract for CF-18 fighter jets away from Winnipeg and award it to Montreal.

Today, many Albertans and Saskatchewanians believe that the oil industry is being sacrificed to help the Liberal government meet its commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The Current Context

Last year's federal election could be a turning point, especially in Alberta and Saskatchewan. A combination of the federal Liberal's carbon tax, failure to get pipelines built, and new restrictions on environmental assessment seem to have taken their toll. The Conservative Party took 33 of Alberta's 34 seats in Parliament and all 14 of the seats in Saskatchewan.

An Ipsos poll reports that six-in-ten Canadians (59%), including a majority in all regions, felt the country was more divided than ever. One-third (33%) of Albertans and slightly more than one-quarter (27%) of Saskatchewan residents said they thought their province would be better off if it separated from Canada. To be fair, these are not the only provinces who feel they are not respected. Ipsos finds a remarkable degree of dissatisfaction across the country, as noted in the following bar graph.

As for how well Ottawa is doing, Ipsos reports that just 25 per cent of British Columbians say Ottawa represents them well, compared to 15 per cent in Alberta and 50 per cent in Ontario.

This already-tense situation was further inflamed over the winter by a series of cross-country blockades and protests in support of the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs, who were seeking to stop the Coastal GasLink pipeline from going through their territory. The industry argues it had already negotiated agreements with the bands, but that internal politics spilled over into the projects.

RESPECT

The percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement "My province is respected by the rest of the country"

Agree ■ Disagree

	B.C.	Alta.	Sask.	Man.	Ont.	Que.	Atlantic
Agree	57%	26%	29%	39%	53%	29%	29%
Disagree	43%	74%	71%	61%	47%	71%	71%

SOURCE: ANGUS REID INSTITUTE

NATIONAL POST

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have lowered the temperature, at least for now. In recent months, there has been little talk of climate change or the Trans Mountain pipeline. Still, most agree that the tensions are just below the surface. As the pandemic recedes, some event will likely set things off again – possibly, Kenney's referendum on Equalization.
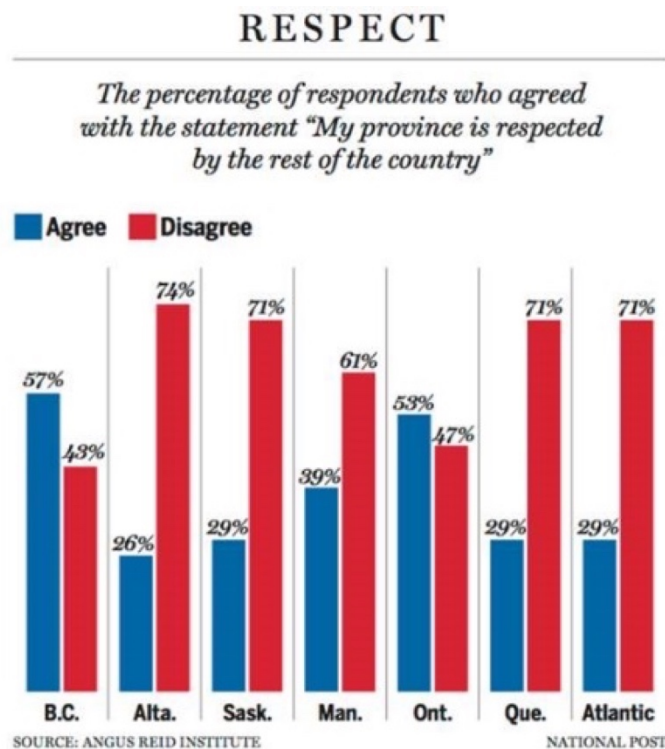
Appendix D: Polarization, Populism and Wexit: What's Next?

Discussion Paper
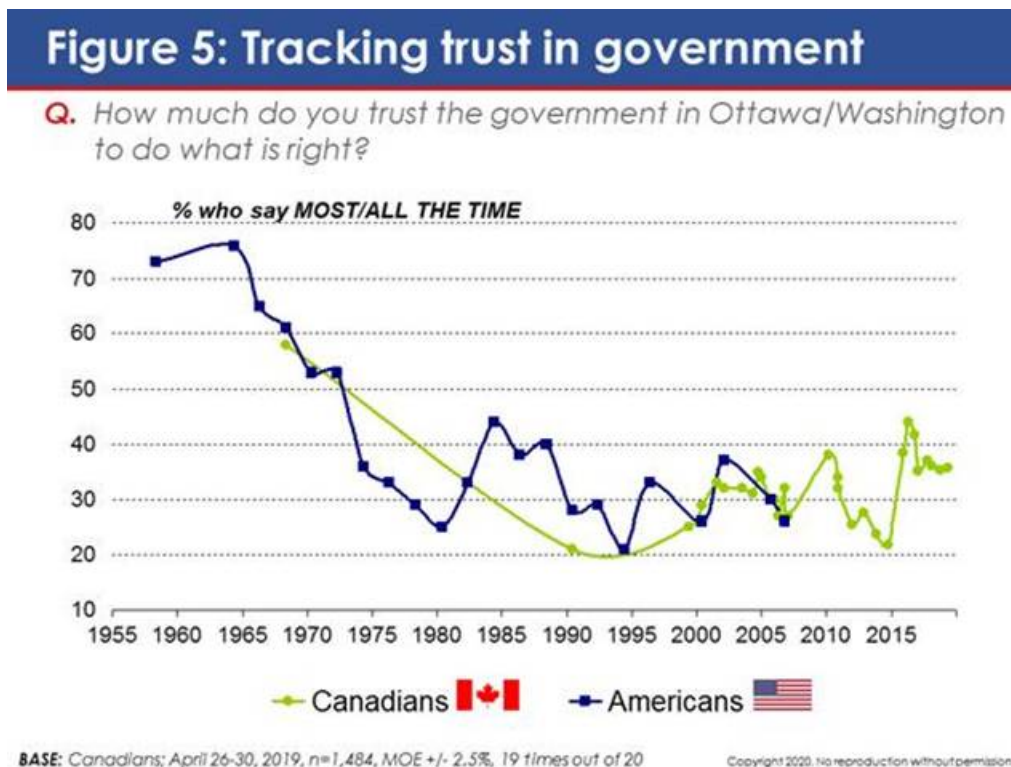
By Don Lenihan | July 2020

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Introduction

Populism is sweeping the globe, but so far Canada has been relatively untouched. That may be about to change. High quality candidates are rumoured to be lining up to run for Wexit in the next federal election. Do they know something that the rest of Canada doesn't? Maybe.

In western democracies, trust in government has been declining for decades and, as Ekos Research reports, Canada is no exception:

Figure 5: Tracking trust in government

Q. How much do you trust the government in Ottawa/Washington to do what is right?

% who say MOST/ALL THE TIME

BASE: Canadians; April 26-30, 2019, n=1,484, MOE +/- 2.5%, 19 times out of 20

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Lots has been written about this trend and the links to populism (e.g. see Northern Populism), but there is one aspect that deserves closer attention: **the growing distrust (cynicism?) in our public debates**. This is a key driver of contemporary populism, especially in western Canada. Let's start with a bit of background.

The Roots of Contemporary Populism

Looking back, governments of the past seemed more able to take on difficult tasks than those today. Think of bilingualism or the national healthcare system. Cabinet may have made the decisions, but ministers relied on a network of people – including the caucus, party, riding associations and, ultimately, the community – to help identify issues and "broker" solutions.

The system was hierarchical, but policy making included discussions and trade-offs as ideas worked their way through the system. Election platforms also played an important role.

Traditional Governance System
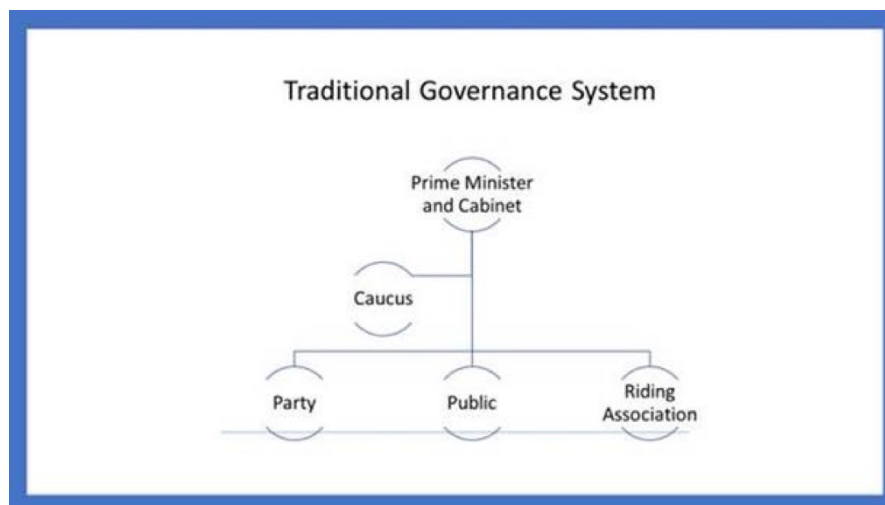
By the 1980s, the system was changing. Political strategists were experimenting with public opinion research (polls, focus groups and surveys) and they were quick to see the potential. With a simple telephone poll, a leader could learn more in two days about how the public viewed an issue than he or she might learn in three months through the old channels.

As Susan Delacourt has ably shown, parties began using these tools to target important subgroups. From small businesses to seniors, policies were tailored to meet specific needs, then marketed to the group, much like consumer goods.

This was a very different way of doing policy that allowed leaders to sidestep much of the messy work of brokerage politics, that is, of working through the trade-offs between competing interests. Now the focus was on creating a simple, clear story – a "narrative" – that was easily recognizable by the target group and that would "sell" them on the policy.

While this shift seemed like a good idea at the time, some troubling consequences are now becoming clear, as the following example shows.

Polarizing the Issues

Over the last few years, thousands of migrants have crossed into Canada at locations with no customs office, then claimed refugee status. Critics have branded them as "cheaters" and "queue-jumpers" who are stretching Canadians' goodwill to the limits.

Conservative MP Michelle Rempel warns that if the flow isn't stopped, "the dialogue in Canada is going to switch from 'how we do immigration' to 'if we do immigration.'"

In fact, the polling says otherwise. Canadians disagree with the practice, but most still think the government is doing a good job of managing the immigration system. They recognize that the situation is more complex than Rempel suggests.

Not that this will change anything. Rempel is not trying to work through the issue. This is about "product marketing" not problem-solving. She is intentionally oversimplifying to highlight aspects of the issue that she believes resonate with her target group.

Specifically, calling these migrants "queue-jumpers" and "cheaters" creates an emotionally charged narrative in which the migrants, who are mainly visible minorities, threaten to overwhelm Canada's immigration system. And that's the real story Rempel is sending to her target group.

This is not just a tactic of conservatives. Progressives can be equally one-sided in their treatment of issues. On climate-change, for example, a growing number insist that the only way to save the planet is an immediate halt to the use of hydrocarbons.

Most Canadians disagree. While they want action on climate change, recent polling finds that a majority in all regions is willing to go along with some kind of support for the ailing oil and gas sector.

The good news from examples like these is that, while partisans and advocates often frame complex issues in black-and-white terms, lots of Canadians remain open to finding middle ground.

The bad news is that this requires the kind of careful discussions and debate that one rarely sees anymore. If those in the middle want to join the debate, increasingly, they must abandon the middle ground and take a side, which brings us back to the decline in trust.

There is a high price to pay for the oversimplification of issues. **It polarizes public debate, which undermines confidence (public trust) in the process.** While that is a problem on many levels, it is especially relevant to a discussion on populism. It gives the populist narrative the air of truth.

Populism – From Polarized Issues to a Polarized Society

Typically, populists allege that some group, such as a professional elite or a political party, has gained control of the policy process and is using it to advance their own interests. The process, they say, is biased and can't be trusted.

Thus, the western alienation narrative accuses Central Canada of using its majority in Parliament to exploit the west. Brexiters tells a similar story about how Britain's power has shifted from London to Brussels. Donald Trump railed about the need to "Drain the Swamp" by driving the corrupt elites out of Washington.

Like Rempel, populists are unapologetic about their black-and-white view of the policy process. They are interested in marketing, not problem-solving. They are using a narrative to polarize debate and force people in the middle to choose a side. Except, now the issue is about more than policy. It is about the fairness of the system itself, and that raises the stakes.

Thus, the alienation narrative transforms Albertans' anger over oil or Equalization into an expression of something deeper and graver: their right to control their lives, their communities, and their economy. Now it is about democracy.

This makes it personal and emotional. Once someone embraces this narrative, it is extremely difficult to win them back. So, how far along is the west?

Whither Wexit?

Western alienation has been at historic highs. Many in the region disagree deeply with the decisions coming from Ottawa and feel disconnected from the process. There is a growing sense of powerlessness and distrust.

That said, western alienation is not Wexit and a sizable majority of westerners remains in the middle, not on the extremes. They are westerners, but they are also Canadians.

Still, it would be a mistake to take this for granted. Outside the west, people may assume that in a debate over separation the arguments go in Canada's favour, such as that Alberta is landlocked or that its economy is too dependent on oil.

Perhaps. But let's not forget how many westerners have already embraced the alienation narrative, especially in Alberta and Saskatchewan. These people may still be Canadians, but an increasing number of them might better be described as "conditional" Canadians.

They see the federation as unfair at best, and they blame Central Canada for many of their troubles. This means any debate about their place in Confederation will be personal and emotional. And a debate is coming.

Next year, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney will hold a referendum on Equalization, and perhaps others after that. Wexiters will be on the front lines and they will play to these emotions.

To respond effectively, Canada needs more than a list of costs and benefits. It needs a counter-narrative that speaks empathetically to people's feelings of alienation by speaking convincingly to their place in Confederation.

Unfortunately, as we have seen, our collective capacity for finding and holding middle ground has been seriously eroded. Building such a narrative requires lots of work and both sides must be willing to listen and accommodate. So far, this is not happening.

To his credit, Justin Trudeau made a serious effort on climate change and the economy, even buying a pipeline. But any hope of reconciliation seems to have been dashed in the last election – at least in Alberta and Saskatchewan. His government is likely feeling cautious about any new overtures.

Indeed, some people argue that the federal Liberals should do nothing at all about Wexit. If it rises, they say, that would split the conservative vote, which is good for the Liberals. This is as short-sighted as it is cynical. It might help the Liberals win an election, but it could seriously damage the country.

It's time to get serious. If high-quality candidates really are lining up to run for Wexit, that is a wake-up call. Our governments shouldn't just hand the floor to those who will drive debate to the polarized edges. They should ensure that westerners who believe in the middle still have a strong, clear, and effective voice.

Rebuilding the Relationship – Looking Ahead

We conclude with four points to consider as we look for ways to strengthen the relationship:

1. *Stop over-simplifying.* Our world is defined by globalization, digital technologies, and speed. Issues are increasingly interconnected, which creates tensions of all kinds, from climate change and the economy to cultural diversity and shared norms. Good policy making is about finding a workable balance between competing values and/or interests, not dividing people with black-and-white analyses and solutions.

2. *Reconnect communities to the policy process.* The traditional policy process, however imperfect, had roots in the community. There was meaningful participation at different levels, which provided legitimacy and a shared commitment to the results. Governments should experiment with ways to allow people from different parts of a province, region, or the country to connect, explore issues together, and help resolve tensions and define shared commitments.

3. *Build a shared narrative for Confederation.* Ottawa should launch a national conversation where Canadians from across the country can work together to define a shared narrative that speaks to the west's place in Confederation. Citizens would share their stories about Canada and discuss their goals and aspirations, shared and different. They could work on developing shared narratives for important shared goals, such as a plan to transition to a sustainable economy that works for all regions.

4. *Build policy skills that will strengthen the federation.* There is no silver bullet for western alienation. It rests on a long history of grievances. But we shouldn't lose sight of how well Canada can and often does work. Throughout our history, brokerage and accommodation have been central themes, from choosing a federal system to establishing bilingualism. To revive these skills, governments should pick some issues where the public is already in the middle and open to some creative bridge-building.