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Environmentalists shift focus to more grassroots, less government

Facing a less friendly government, green groups leave Ottawa in pursuit of public support

By Margo McDiarmid, CBC News | Posted: Oct 03, 2014 5:28 PM ET | Last Updated: Oct 03, 2014 10:29 PM ET



Protesters demonstrate against the Northern Gateway pipeline in Vancouver last May. As environment groups have lost influence in Ottawa, they have turned their attention to local causes, with greater success. (Darryl Dyck/Canadian Press)



Environment groups go grassroots 2:42

Global warming is not the only kind of climate change environmental groups in Canada have had to deal with in recent years.

They've also been dealing with a major shift in the political climate that has forced them to change their approach to everything from carbon emissions to pipeline projects to keep up public support for their causes.

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Many have simply given up on spending a lot of time talking to the federal government and have turned instead to local and provincial issues — and knocking on a lot of doors.

Graham Saul, executive director of Ecology Ottawa, says it's a whole different game, with more focus on generating support and donations in suburban areas.

"We've knocked on 50,000 doors in the east end of Ottawa in the past year and a half," he said in an interview with CBC News.

"These are the areas where the battle for the soul of Canada is currently being fought, and yet these are also areas where the Canadian

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environmental community has not made an adequate effort to develop a strong base of support."

The environmental movement has had to transform itself to get to this point, and Saul is good example of the evolution.

As the former head of the Climate Action Network, a lot of his time was spent talking about international climate issues and lobbying the federal government on action to curb emissions.

All that ended when the Harper government was elected in 2006.

'Persona non grata'

"We went almost overnight from a situation where there was an active debate and policy discussion with the federal government, to the point where anyone who cared about climate change was essentially persona non grata," he said.

It wasn't that the Conservatives were anti-environment, it just wasn't on their political radar when they first took power, according to Bruce Carson, a senior adviser to Prime Minister Steven Harper from 2006 to 2009.

Carson is fighting his own legal battles now and is no longer in government. But back then he was working for the new Tory government as it was, in his words, "scrambling around," trying to get a handle on the groundswell of public interest in the environment.

In contrast to the Liberals, there was little interest among Conservatives in cozy meetings with environmental groups, Carson said.

"You've got a very practical guy as the prime minister and the days of bringing people in to chat and pat them on the head and send them on their way doing nothing, those days were gone," he said in an interview.

By the time the global recession hit in 2008, public interest in the environment had dropped and environmental groups were floundering — and discovering they had no ground game.

"We're very good at what you might call the air campaign, where we're able to participate in the debate about ideas," said Saul. "But when the polls go south, we're less well-equipped to do the hard grassroots organizing.

"We had to ... change our tack a little bit."

Out of Ottawa

The same had happened in the U.S. around 2005 when groups were shut out by the Bush administration, according to environmentalist and broadcaster David Suzuki.

"The challenge came when two former members of the Sierra Club in the United States published an article in which they said environmentalism is dead," said Suzuki in an interview with CBC News.

"That was the big shot that had a lot of environmental groups really reassessing what we were doing."



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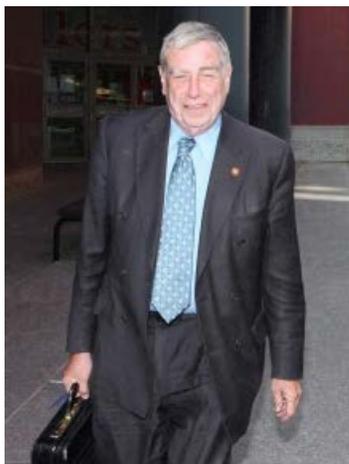
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Bruce Carson, a former aide to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, says the Conservative government wasn't interested in 'cozy' conversations with environmentalists when it came to power. (Jake Wright/Canadian Press)

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Oct. 4, 2014 2:01 PM

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Many organizations in North American went back to local organizing. In Canada, several, including the David Suzuki Foundation, scaled back their Ottawa presence.

Suzuki's new cross-Canada Blue Dot Tour is an example of his new approach: appealing to youth and families. He's talking to audiences across Canada about enshrining the right to a healthy environment in the Constitution.

There's not a federal politician in sight.

"I think there is lobbying that still goes on, but we are getting back to the focus of getting grassroots support, which has always been a strength of the environmental movement," he said.

Big business?

But critics say the new green grassroots is more about fundraising than anything else.

"Environmentalism at the NGO level ... has become a big business," said Rick Anderson in an interview with CBC.

Anderson is a political strategist and CEO of i2 Ideas & Issues, an advertising firm whose clients include the energy industry.

He thinks the tactics are effective, but lead to less thoughtful environmental conversation, essentially "dumbing it down."

To feed the fundraising beast you need to be in news, said Anderson. "The way to get headlines is sometimes to be outrageous, and so you take strong positions that don't necessarily lead to solutions. But they get you stories in the press, and stories in the press lead to a higher profile, and a higher profile usually leads to making more money."



Environmentalist and CBC broadcaster David Suzuki in January launched what he called his last major project, to enshrine clean air and water in the Charter of Rights. (Mark Blinch/Canadian Press)

But environmental activists like Tzaporah Berman point to the recent climate rally in New York that attracted more than 300,000 people, as well as growing pipeline protests, as proof these tactics are working.

"The fact you see thousands and thousands of people get out in streets all the time, from northern Quebec to British Columbia, is a direct result of more effective organizing within the environmental movement," she said in an interview from Vancouver.

Pipeline projects feeling the impact

She first got involved in huge Clayoquot Sound protests against clearcut logging in B.C. in 1993. She sees parallels with what's happening today.

"We've never seen closer relationships with unions and environmental groups, and First Nations and environmental groups, and scientists and environmental groups."

It's leading to growing concern in Conservative circles about effects on the energy industry and the economy.

"There's no question that if effectiveness is stopping major economic projects like the pipelines, they've been effective," said Carson.

"I never would have thought, sitting in the Centre Block in 2006, we would be having this discussion in 2014 about the inability ... to move

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forward on an essential part of the energy economy, the transportation of energy."

Ecology Ottawa's Saul says his group is now focused on the 2015 federal election, hoping to turn local support into national momentum.

"This is a political struggle and we need to proceed in a way that reflects a political movement and a real social movement."

Which means being an environmentalist these days is about knocking on every door you can find.

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