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The costs of environmental idealism

October 2025





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Executive summary | *sommaire*

Under the Trudeau government, Canada embraced a green agenda that prioritized environmental ideology over economic pragmatism.

Through a combination of restrictive laws, aggressive regulation, and general funding of activist “green” groups, the federal government empowered a legal and bureaucratic apparatus designed to obstruct natural resource development. These environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) – often subsidized by taxpayers – deployed tactics ranging from lawfare to procedural sabotage, creating a hostile environment for investment and infrastructure growth.

These tactics reflect the gravitation of progressive policies in the US and Canada over the past several decades toward an “ideology of scarcity” that elevated procedural caution and regulation over building and growth. A particular strain of organized environmentalism has advanced much of the anti-development ideology, creeping into our legal, political, and academic institutions and contributing to decades of lower GDP growth and declining productivity.

Beginning in the 1970s, environmental advocacy groups began suing project developers and pushing governments and courts to strengthen government permits and oversight to thwart development projects. The environmental movement began supporting private litigants using “lawfare” or “busybody” strategies. This approach has become, intentionally, very expensive and time-consuming for developers. It is relatively easy for environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) to initiate such challenges, and their objectives are achieved as much by challenging approvals and permits as by winning those cases.

Far from fighting back, the federal government has accommodated their often extreme interests through regulatory, legislative, and financial support. This accommodation has not only produced poor policy outcomes; it has led, predictably, to spending abuses, waste, and a dearth of accountability.

The federal government has shown an almost unlimited appetite for directing public dollars towards environmental initiatives, growing spending in that category by 381 per cent between 2015 and 2023, and increasing environmental grants and contributions

funding to third parties by an order of magnitude. A number of non-partisan public audits have found significant shortcomings in the allocation of federal environmental funding.

Canada is facing many political and economic headwinds. In response there is growing public and political commitment to build more infrastructure to bolster economic growth and diversify trade. A majority of Canadians support the development of every type of infrastructure, from highways to ports to oil and gas to nuclear.

Organized environmentalism poses a challenge to these goals when it uses the regulatory process to block development. The federal government must endeavour to retract the funding and influence it has granted such groups and stop being a party to efforts that actively undermine Canadian interests and projects. In addition to rationalizing Canada's environmental assessment frameworks, it should:

- Pare down “environmental protection” and ENGO spending to reasonable levels following its decade of unprecedented growth.
- Ensure higher levels of transparency and accountability for the grants and contributions ENGOs receive.
- Limit the instances in which independent organizations are financed wholly or substantially by the federal government.
- Ensure those organizations are subject to financial transparency measures equivalent to those faced by the public sector.

It is no longer acceptable for the ideological preferences of the few to use our liberal democratic values and processes to stymie the economic aspirations of the many.

If Canada doesn't reverse course, it risks locking in economic stagnation and regulatory paralysis. Investors will walk, projects will stall, and the country will fall further behind in global competitiveness. The cost of inaction isn't just lost growth – it's a diminished future for all Canadians. **MLI**

Sous le gouvernement Trudeau, le Canada a instauré un programme environnemental fondé sur des considérations idéologiques plutôt que sur des impératifs économiques pragmatiques.

Le gouvernement fédéral a établi un cadre juridique et bureaucratique conçu pour faire obstacle à la mise en valeur des ressources naturelles, à travers un ensemble de lois restrictives, de réglementations strictes et de fonds substantiels pour les groupes d'activistes écologiques. Pour créer un climat défavorable aux projets d'investissement et d'infrastructures, ces organisations non gouvernementales de l'environnement (ONG-E) – fréquemment financées par les contribuables – ont mis en œuvre une série d'actions allant des poursuites judiciaires au sabotage procédural.

Ces manœuvres illustrent le déplacement depuis quelques décennies – aux États-Unis et au Canada – des politiques progressistes vers une « idéologie de la rareté », dont découle un courant de prudence et de réglementation qui a pris le pas sur la création et la croissance. L'environnementalisme a contribué à la consolidation de l'idéologie anti-développement, laquelle s'est infiltrée au sein de nos institutions juridiques, politiques et universitaires, et a contribué à des décennies de croissance économique stagnante et de déclin de la productivité.

À compter des années 1970, dans le but de contrer les projets de développement, les associations de défense de l'environnement ont entrepris d'intenter des actions en justice à l'encontre des promoteurs, tout en exerçant des pressions sur les gouvernements et les tribunaux pour qu'ils renforcent les réglementations et la surveillance. Le mouvement environnementaliste a alors commencé à soutenir les justiciables engagés dans des luttes considérées comme inutilement épuisantes et sans issue, une démarche qui s'est révélée délibérément onéreuse et chronophage pour les promoteurs. Désormais, les ONG-E parvenaient aisément à rejeter leurs requêtes d'approbation et de permis en vue d'atteindre leurs propres objectifs.

Au lieu de les écarter, le gouvernement fédéral a plutôt pris soin d'accompagner ces intérêts extrémistes en leur fournissant un soutien réglementaire, législatif et financier. Cette complaisance a non seulement, comme il fallait s'y attendre, amoindri la qualité des politiques publiques, mais a aussi entraîné des abus en matière de dépenses et d'imputabilité.

Entre 2015 et 2023, l'appétit quasi insatiable du gouvernement fédéral pour les initiatives environnementales a entraîné une augmentation de 381 % du financement public dans ce domaine, ainsi qu'une croissance exponentielle des subventions et des contributions à des tiers. Un certain nombre d'audits publics ont mis en évidence d'importantes lacunes en ce qui a trait à l'utilisation des fonds fédéraux destinés à l'environnement.

Le Canada fait face à de nombreuses difficultés politiques et économiques. C'est pourquoi l'engagement à construire de nouvelles infrastructures pour renforcer la croissance et diversifier les échanges n'a cessé d'augmenter. La majorité des Canadiens appuient le développement de tous les types d'infrastructures : autoroutes, ports et secteurs du pétrole, du gaz et du nucléaire, notamment.

L'environnementalisme organisé freine l'atteinte de ces objectifs lorsqu'il use du processus réglementaire pour entraver le développement. Le gouvernement fédéral se doit de se désengager du financement et du soutien qu'il accorde aux groupes concernés et de se retirer des initiatives manifestement nuisibles aux intérêts et aux projets canadiens. Outre la rationalisation des cadres d'évaluation des incidences environnementales, il est impératif qu'il :

- Réajuste à des niveaux raisonnables les dépenses consacrées à la « protection de l'environnement » et aux ONG-E, à la suite d'une décennie de croissance sans précédent.*

- *Resserre les obligations de transparence et de reddition de compte des ONG-E en matière de subventions.*
- *Limite les cas dans lesquels il finance les organisations indépendantes pleinement ou substantiellement.*
- *Veille à ce que ces organisations adhèrent à des normes de transparence financière équivalentes à celles du secteur public.*

*Il n'est plus acceptable que les préférences idéologiques d'un petit nombre empiètent sur les aspirations économiques de la multitude par l'entremise de nos processus et de nos valeurs démocratiques. Si le Canada ne modifie pas sa trajectoire, il risque de devenir captif d'une stagnation économique et d'une paralysie réglementaire. Les investisseurs se retireront, les projets seront mis en suspens et le pays accusera un retard supplémentaire en matière de compétitivité internationale. Le coût de l'inaction met en péril l'avenir de toutes et tous, et non pas uniquement de la croissance. **MLI***

Introduction

You want to deliver for people and make their lives better? You got to figure out how to do it. I don't care how much you love working people. They can't afford a house because all the rules in your state make it prohibitive to build.

I don't want to know your ideology, because you can't build anything. It does not matter.

– US President Barack Obama, July 2025

These remarks from former US President Barack Obama (as quoted in Saenz 2025) mark the belated realization by the American left that decades' worth of blocking development has hurt both average working people and the left's political fortunes.

Intellectually, Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson's manifesto *Abundance: How We Build a Better Future* (2025) has exemplified the argument. Influential and divisive, it argues that for the past several decades, progressive policies in the US have gravitated toward an “ideology of scarcity,” which elevated procedural caution and regulation over actual growth. The authors advocate instead for a “politics of abundance” – a new vision that embraces innovation and development rather than constraining progress.

Canada has been subject to the same anti-development ideology, advanced by the same strain of organized environmentalism. That ideology has crept into our legal, political, and academic institutions and has contributed to the decades of lower GDP growth and declining productivity the nation has experienced. Canadians are finally rejecting it (see, e.g., Nanos Research 2025).

But in Canada there has not yet been any serious introspection into how progressive ideologies and strategies have led to outcomes in this country from which a correction is necessary. In the absence of a critique from the left, this paper offers one from the right.

In a pluralistic society such as Canada, environmental organizations have every right to adopt and advocate for their preferred positions. The problem lies in the extent to which the federal government has accommodated their often extreme interests through regulatory, legislative, and financial support. This accommodation has not only produced poor policy outcomes; it has led, predictably, to spending abuses, waste, and a dearth of accountability.

“ *It is time for a “politics of abundance”
— a new vision that embraces
innovation and development.*

The Carney government, elected in April 2025, has rhetorically reflected the desire of Canadians to “build, baby build” and to “do things that had not been imagined or had not been thought possible at a speed we haven’t seen before” (Tran 2025). To manifest these aspirations and turn them into concrete deeds, it must overhaul the policies that have developed over the past decade and that prevent Canadians from accomplishing this.

To assist in this endeavour, this paper outlines first how anti-development strategies became influential and embedded in Canadian environmental assessments; and second, how this was paired with funding for environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) and climate initiatives that bolstered ideological objectives. Environmentalists themselves have been the main beneficiaries of this trend; actual climate impacts have been minimal while economic impacts have been dire.

The paper concludes by offering recommendations to redress the negative, anti-development impacts of the environmental movement on the Canadian economy and prevent similar abuses in the future. Whether or not Canadian ENGOS recalibrate their approaches, the federal government must stop actively supporting strategies that obstruct project development and undermine the public interest.

From activists to litigants

In many ways, the modern environmental movement has contributed to the high quality of life we enjoy in the Western world. Its origins are often traced to the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, which exposed the dangers of pesticides such as DDT. The book catalyzed both the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in the United States in 1970, and then major environmental laws such as the *National Environmental Policy Act* (1970), *Clean Air Act* (1970), and *Clean Water Act* (1972). Water and air quality improved significantly in their wake.

California pioneered this trend; in 1970, under then Governor Ronald Reagan, it introduced landmark environmental legislation, the *California Environmental Quality Act* (CEQA). But the CEQA inadvertently set the stage for the proactive and litigious tendencies that characterize the environmental movement today.

In 1972, in *Friends of Mammoth v. Board of Supervisors* (8 Cal.3d 247, 1972), a property-owner-turned-environmental advocacy group successfully sued to stop a condominium development at a California ski resort using the provisions of CEQA. The landmark decision expanded the reach of the legislation by ruling that environmental impact assessments must apply not only to public projects but also to private projects that require government approval, permits, or support. Potential environmental damage from private developments was now subject to public review and governmental oversight.

This regulatory shift created a powerful tool for anyone wanting to slow or block development. A fundamental strategy of the environmental movement – supporting private litigants so they could sue private developers using environmental legislation – was born. In the subsequent 50 years the strategy has morphed incrementally so that projects today face a labyrinth of environmental assessments, reviews, and litigation. As US Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote in an 8-0 decision limiting the reach of environmental impact statements on May 29, 2025, “A 1970 legislative acorn has grown over the years into a judicial oak that has hindered infrastructure development under the guise of just a little more process. A course correction of sorts is appropriate” (Supreme Court of the United States 2025).

Environmental litigation in Canada

A similar legislative and policy path unfolded in Canada. In 1970 Canada established the Department of Environment, alongside the *Pest Control Products Act* (1969), *Canada Water Act* (1970), and *Clean Air Act* (1971). In 1973, the government established the first federal environmental assessment and review process, screening projects “to ensure [...] they do the least possible damage to our natural environment” (Canada 2023). The Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, which ran from 1974 to 1977, contributed to the evolution of Canadian thinking about both environmental assessments and Indigenous consultation.

The development of guidelines and an administrative body, the Federal Environmental Assessment Review Office (FEARO), in 1984 further strengthened the federal environmental review process. Finally, when the federal government passed the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* in 1992 (CEAA 1992) it provided a statutory basis for federal assessment.



The use of environmental assessment as a tactic to block development in Canada reached a critical juncture in 2012.

The use of environmental assessment as a tactic to block development in Canada reached a critical juncture in and around 2012, with a concerted and well-funded effort by ENGOs to block the Northern Gateway pipeline in northwest BC and diminish the Canadian public’s positive views of the project (its “social licence”). As one example, ENGOs ran a campaign to flood public regulatory hearings on the pipeline with vocal opponents. They succeeded, encouraging more than 4,300 individuals and groups to register, attend, and speak (see Canadian Press 2012). The groups also raised significant funds so Indigenous groups could litigate the project in court (see Nagata 2015), a practice that many Indigenous leaders have since denounced as “eco-colonialism” and assert they were misled (see Cattaneo 2018).

Then Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver expressed his frustration with those efforts in an open letter published across national newspapers on January 9, 2012:

These groups threaten to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda. They seek to exploit any loophole they can find, stacking public hearings with bodies to ensure that delays kill good projects. They use funding from foreign special interest groups to undermine Canada's national economic interest.

They attract jet-setting celebrities with some of the largest personal carbon footprints in the world to lecture Canadians not to develop our natural resources. Finally, if all other avenues have failed, they will take a quintessential American approach: sue everyone and anyone to delay the project even further.

They do this because they know it can work. It works because it helps them to achieve their ultimate objective: delay a project to the point it becomes economically unviable. (Oliver 2012)

Oliver had a solution in mind: a new environmental assessment approval regime.

Our regulatory system must be fair, independent, consider different viewpoints including those of Aboriginal communities, review the evidence dispassionately, and then make an objective determination. It must be based on science and the facts. We believe reviews for major projects can be accomplished in a quicker and more streamlined fashion. We do not want projects that are safe, generate thousands of new jobs, and open up new export markets to die in the approval phase due to unnecessary delays.

Unfortunately, the system seems to have lost sight of this balance over the past years. It is broken. It is time to take a look at it. (Oliver 2012)

Oliver won the battle but lost the war. The Harper government advanced a new version of the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* (CEAA 2012)

and it entered into force in July 2012. But it created a backlash, and the ability of environmental groups to delay or stop development they did not like in Canada using the regulatory system actually got worse in subsequent years.

“A chilling effect”

The Harper government was intent on using its federal powers to stymie the environmental movement’s influence. In the March 2012 federal Budget, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced fundamental changes to federal environmental laws that became CEEA 2012; provided funding for the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) to audit the political activities of many prominent environmental charities; and cut funding to the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, an independent body established by Parliament in 1988 that conducted regular studies on subjects like the effects of a warming planet on the Canadian economy and how to deal with reducing greenhouse gases (Paris 2012).

The new federal environmental review process curtailed the scope of environmental reviews, narrowed types of projects requiring federal assessment, reduced agencies with review authority from about 40 to only three, committed to recognizing provincial reviews with a “one project, one review” approach, instituted political oversight, and committed to fixed timelines (see, e.g., Davidson 2012). Environmentalists strongly criticized the new approach, which they suggested gutted the review process.

The CRA audits caused further uproar and pushback. The audits were reasonably grounded: at the time, the CRA had a rule (based on *CRA Policy Statement CPS-022, Political Activities*) (CRA 2003) that limited charitable organizations to spending no more than 10 per cent of their resources (funds, staff time) on (non-partisan) political activities. Many environmental and other NGOs were engaged in activities that far exceeded that.

The CRA established a political-activity audit group in 2012, consisting of nine people in Ottawa and six auditors across Canada, and set itself a goal of 10 audits its first year of operation (Beeby 2014). At least half of the initial subjects of scrutiny were environmental NGOs that had been engaged in anti-

pipeline activity: Tides Canada Foundation, Tides Canada Initiatives Society, Ecology Action Centre, Equiterre, and Environmental Defence Canada Inc. An audit into the David Suzuki Foundation, West Coast Environmental Law, the Pembina Foundation, and Amnesty International followed soon after. The audit process sparked what was widely described as an advocacy “chill” – a reticence amongst NGOs to engage in political advocacy for fear of an audit, and the expensive legal bills and possible revocation of charitable status it could bring (see Mayer 2014).

At the same time, political tides were turning and a federal election was looming. The 2015 Liberal campaign platform committed to both a “new, fair” environmental assessment process and “clarifying the rules” governing “political activity” for charities (Liberal Party of Canada 2015).

The Liberals of course were elected in 2015 and soon made good on their commitments.

A new regime

As part of Bill C-86, introduced and passed in 2018, the government made changes to “remove the quantitative limits on the resources a charitable organization or charitable foundation can devote to political activities” altogether. It also amended the *Income Tax Act* so that charities could take part in unlimited public policy dialogue and development activities (CRA 2023).

With the limits on political activities of environmental NGOs removed, funding became a top priority. The federal government obliged.

As Sargent and Egan (2025) documented, the Trudeau government’s spending on environmental protection grew by 381 per cent between 2015 and 2023, by far the highest rate of any category of spending (see Table 1).

No specific breakdown of that funding is available from public sources. However, internal auditing at Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), where some but not most of the federal government’s “environmental protection” spending is directed, yields some insights.

TABLE 1: Federal spending by function, 2015 vs. 2023

	2015	2023	\$ change	% change
General public services	47,798	74,154	26,356	55.1
Defence	15,773	22,309	6,536	41.4
Public order and safety	8,543	15,706	7,163	83.8
Economic affairs	8,730	32,798	24,068	275.7
Environmental protection	3,410	16,400	12,990	380.9
Housing and community amenities	1,578	4,214	2,636	167.0
Health	5,261	10,558	5,297	100.7
Recreation, culture, and religion	4,250	6,208	1,958	46.1
Education	3,741	9,747	6,006	160.5
Social protection	95,124	182,012	86,888	91.3
TOTAL	194,208	374,106	179,898	92.6

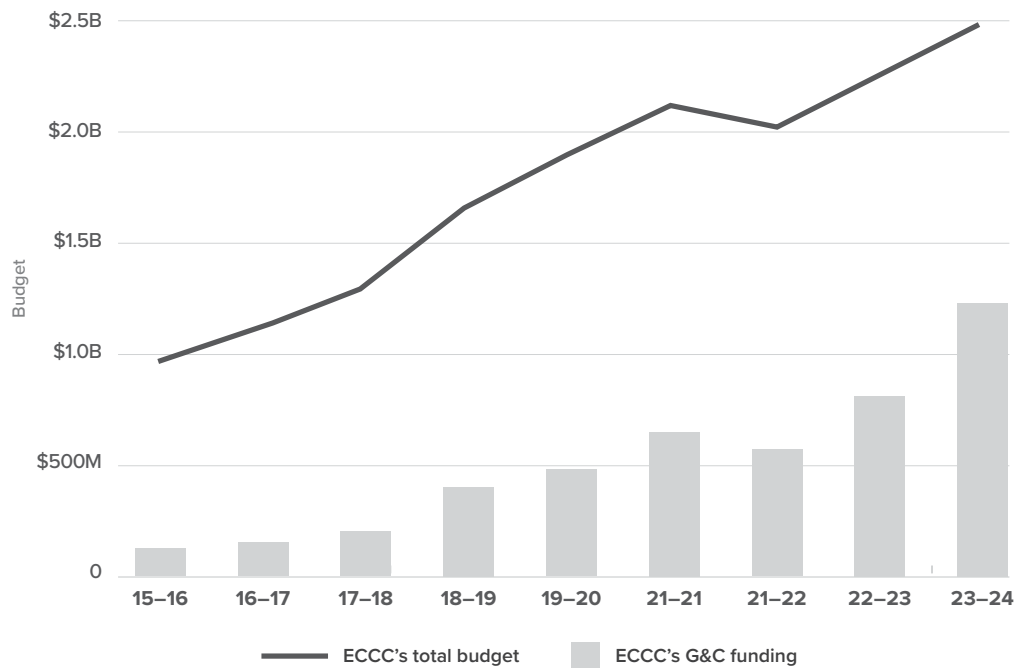
Note: Dollar figures are in millions of dollars.

Source: Statistics Canada. 2024b. As quoted in Sargent and Egan (2025).

The ECCC departmental budget grew at a ferocious pace, from just under \$1 billion in 2015–16 to about \$2.5 billion in 2023–24. Most of this increase was directed to its grants and contributions, growing from about a tenth of its budget to half (see Figure 1). Grants and contributions (also known as G&Cs) are “transfers of money, goods, services or assets made from an appropriation to individuals, organizations or other levels of government, without the federal government directly receiving goods or services in return” (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2025).

As ECCC’s audit and evaluation branch described it in 2024, this marked “an unprecedented growth in the grants and contributions funding provided to the Department to support priorities” (Environment and Climate Change Canada 2024). ECCC is just one of many departments to provide grants and contributions to third parties for environmental and climate objectives, and many ENGOs receive grants from multiple departments. So, the ECCC numbers provide a sample, rather than a comprehensive overview of ENGO and other environmental third-party funding under the Trudeau government.

FIGURE 1: ECCC's growth of grants and contributions funding and total budget, by fiscal year.



Source: Environment and Climate Change Canada 2024.

The *Public Inquiry into Anti-Alberta Energy Campaigns* was a 2019–2021 inquiry that the Alberta government commissioned to investigate allegations that foreign organizations were funding Canadian groups to oppose Alberta’s oil and gas industry. It assessed, in a financial summary produced by Deloitte, that federal funding for Canadian ENGOs increased by nine times from the Harper government (2006–2014) to the Trudeau government (2015–19) (Alberta 2021a). This period actually preceded the major ramp-up in ECCC G&C contributions. But it is illustrative of the sea change in approach to funding environmental groups between the Harper and Trudeau eras.

In 2018 the federal government also introduced Bill C-69, the *Impact Assessment Act* (IAA). It became law in June 2019 following a tumultuous period of protests and public hearings against what then Alberta Premier Jason Kenney dubbed the “No More Pipelines Act.” The purpose of the Act, from Alberta’s point of view, was to legislate away the possibility that Northern Gateway and pipeline projects like it could be revived, especially when seen

in conjunction with Bill C-48, the *Oil Tanker Moratorium Act*. Both received Royal Assent on the same day.

Amongst a number of substantive changes, the IAA expanded the scope of federal assessment from the traditional purview of mitigating negative environmental impacts to assessing the full gamut of positive and negative environmental, economic, social, and health impacts of potential projects. It also tested whether a project's effects could hinder or contribute to the federal government's ability to meet its climate change commitment, making any GHG emissions a legitimate reason to reject a project.

The government also adjusted the Canadian environmental assessment framework in such a way that made it easier for ENGOs to participate in – or, as critics feared, obstruct – reviews. Under the previous environmental assessment regime, CEAA 2012, a “standing test” ensured that only those directly affected or with relevant expertise could be deemed interested parties and considered eligible to publicly participate during an environmental assessment. That changed with IAA, which opened up participation to anyone.

As s.11 of the IAA notes:

The Agency must ensure that the public is provided with an opportunity to participate meaningfully, in a manner that the Agency considers appropriate, in its preparations for a possible impact assessment of a designated project, including by inviting the public to provide comments within the period that it specifies. (*Impact Assessment Act* 2019)

The *Impact Assessment Act* further obliged the new Impact Assessment Agency of Canada to “establish a participant funding program to facilitate the participation of the public” (*Impact Assessment Act* 2019), so that ENGOs not only had the ability to participate in the environmental assessment of a project but could also apply to have some or all of their costs covered.

Alberta filed a constitutional reference question with the Alberta Court of Appeal within two weeks of Bill C-69 passing and, joined by seven other provinces, was ultimately successful in appealing to the Supreme Court of Canada. In October 2023 the Court found the majority of the IAA to be unconstitutional. The federal government subsequently made minor amendments that Alberta, joined by Saskatchewan and Ontario, is once again appealing as inadequate.

The IAA has been successful in achieving what its critics warned it would do: blocking development. As of writing only two projects, Cedar LNG and Ksi Lisims LNG, both with Indigenous proponents, have been approved under the *Impact Assessment Act* in the over six years since it passed.

Lawfare and busybodies

Although enhancing the ability of the public to participate in public decisions may seem innocuous and healthy, for many proponents it sparked dread. The process had been developed in such a way that it could easily be used, or abused, as a strategy to stymie development. Critics have called such challenges to environmental decisions “vigilante litigation” or “lawfare” (see Silbert 2018). The methods are comparable across Western nations with a common law system, in particular the large, resource-producing federations of Canada, Australia, and the United States and their constituent provinces and states, although it is prevalent in Europe also.

An empirical study on the impact of the US *National Environmental Policy Act* (NEPA) assessed 355 major transportation and energy infrastructure projects that completed a federal environmental study between 2010 and 2018. It observed predevelopment litigation on 28 per cent of the projects requiring an environmental impact statement, 89 per cent of which involve a claim of a NEPA violation. The highest litigation rate was for solar energy projects, nearly two-thirds of which are litigated, followed by pipelines (50 per cent), transmission lines (31 per cent), and wind energy projects (38 per cent) (Benyon and Wilson 2023).

Although no similar or fulsome study of Canadian federal assessments exists, an EY study prepared for the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association, *Regulatory Competitiveness in Canada’s Pipeline Industry*, found that the average time to approve oil and gas pipeline applications increased from 357 days in 2009 to 681 days in 2016 (Royal Bank of Canada 2019).

This has manifested in what is getting built, or not, in Canada. According to an analysis of the Natural Resources Canada Major Projects Inventory, the number of projects completed in Canada declined by 36 per cent between 2015 (88 projects) and 2023 (56 projects) (Exner-Pirot, 2024). In the same period the Canadian population grew by about 5 million residents, an increase of just over 13 per cent. Development has stopped keeping up with demand.

A recent case is illustrative of the lawfare strategy. In April 2024, the BC Energy Regulator granted permits for construction on a section of the Prince Rupert Gas Transmission (PRGT) pipeline. The PRGT will feed the proposed Ksi Lisims LNG project in northwest BC being co-developed by the Nisga'a Nation with Rockies LNG and Western LNG.

The Skeena Watershed Conservation Coalition, the Kispiox Valley Community Centre Association, and the Kispiox Band appealed the decision to the BC Supreme Court, with Ecojustice, an ENGO, as their legal counsel. They argued that the regulator failed to enforce a permit condition requiring a cumulative effects assessment before construction could start.

BC Supreme Court Justice Michael Tammen dismissed the legal challenge from the community and environmental groups, ruling they did not have the legal standing to bring the case. Tammen articulated a sentiment common in this and other cases:

To some extent, Skeena and Kispiox CCA appear to be “busybody” litigants, seeking to challenge a micro-decision made in the course of a much larger project when that decision does not meaningfully affect them (*Skeena Watershed Conservation Coalition v. British Columbia Energy Regulator* 2025 BCSC 1607).

Tammen further found that the Kispiox Band Council did not have standing as it is not the rights and title holder for the Gitxsan people, whose hereditary chiefs have a project agreement with PRGT Ltd. and did not raise the same concerns.

While the challenge did not ultimately affect the permit, the process itself is expensive and time-consuming and is a constant challenge for developers. It remains very easy for ENGOs to initiate such challenges, and their objectives are achieved as much by constantly challenging approvals and permits as by winning those cases.

The lawfare trend has now moved from regulatory intervention to strategic climate litigation: the use of lawsuits as a tool to bring about broader societal and systemic change related to climate change, rather than resolving individual disputes. According to the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law's Climate Change Litigation Database, in 2023 at least 230 new climate litigation cases were filed globally, out of a total of about 1,850 since 2015. The

plaintiffs in more than 70 per cent of all cases were either individuals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or both. As the centre described it, this trend reflects “an effort by civil society actors to use the courts to raise concerns about climate action,” rather than challenge particular permits or projects (Setzer and Higham 2024).

In other words, environmental lawfare is evolving and finding ever new legal loopholes. An example in Canada is the addition of the greenwashing amendment in 2024 to the federal *Competition Act* to prevent oil and gas companies from communicating their environmental activities.

The amendment, spearheaded by ENGOs, has had dramatic intended and unintended consequences on dozens of Canadian economic sectors, including suppressing public dialogue and free speech (see Savage and Exner-Pirot 2025).

Another example is the July 2025 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on “Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change,” which has been heralded as a tool to add legal risks to new fossil fuel developments and approvals.

“Scapegoating” environmentalists: Efforts to expose coordinated ENGO activity

In the United States, greater NGO scrutiny followed a March 2025 *Free Press* article that revealed that the Justice Department was investigating the allocation of \$20 billion from a greenhouse gas reduction fund that had been directed to eight non-profit groups in the weeks after Joe Biden lost the US presidential election but before President Donald Trump was inaugurated. Grants for the eight recipients, several of which were only formed in August of 2023 after the grant application window opened, ranged from \$400 million to \$6.9 billion (Rowley 2025).

On June 4, 2025, the US Congress held a hearing on the issue in a session called “Public Funds, Private Agendas: NGOs Gone Wild” (Library of Congress 2025). The House Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on Delivering on Government Efficiency (DOGE) aimed to expose what

the majority described as a scheme where left-wing NGOs, in collaboration with Democrat officials, received billions in taxpayer dollars to advance partisan agendas. They called for NGO funding to be cut, and for increasing accountability to “drain these slush funds dry,” arguing that taxpayer money was being wasted on politically motivated programs.

“Environmental lawfare is evolving
and finding ever new legal loopholes.”

Ranking Member Melanie Stansbury (D-NM) criticized the hearing as a “wild journey of baseless conspiracy theories,” arguing that it unfairly targeted non-profits and lacked credibility.

In Canada, the “environmental and other radical groups” that in 2012 Minister Oliver complained were threatening “to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda” (Oliver 2012) have been subject to varying levels of scrutiny.

The efforts of independent researcher Vivian Krause captured the imagination of many in Alberta’s oil patch. Her investigation into the Tar Sands Campaign, a coordinated and mostly foreign-funded ENGO effort that had as its stated goals to “stop/limit pipelines and refinery expansions,” “force tar sands water, toxics, and land reforms” and “significantly reduce future demand for tar sands oil” (Northrop 2008) eventually led to a full, \$3.5 million public inquiry by the Alberta government from 2019–2021.

Alberta’s *Public Inquiry into Anti-Alberta Energy Campaigns* found that:

- Seven campaigns specifically targeting divestment in the Alberta oil sands achieved more than 1,000 divestments representing \$8 trillion, according to the campaigners;
- Total foreign funding of “Canadian-based” environmental initiatives reached at least \$1.28 billion between 2003 and 2019 (Alberta 2021b).

By and large, efforts to review the funding and motivations of ENGOs in Canada have been successfully characterized as right-wing, corporate, or conspiratorial “scapegoating” (see, e.g., Canadian Press 2021) or a “political witch hunt” of well-meaning environmental groups (see e.g. French 2021).

The Green Slush Fund Scandal

A number of recent, independent, non-partisan public audits into green spending are not as easily dismissed. Federal auditors have found significant shortcomings in the allocation of federal environmental funding in at least three reports: (1) a departmental audit of the administration of grants and contributions at ECCC, dated June 2024 (and released in September 2024); (2) a report by the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development (CESD) on the Strategic Innovation Fund's Net Zero Accelerator, released in April 2024; and (3) an independent assurance audit conducted by the Auditor General of Canada on the Sustainable Development Technology Fund (SDTF), released June 4, 2024.

ECCC grants and contributions audit

The departmental audit, conducted between December 2022 and October 2023, assessed the operational effectiveness of governance, risk management, and internal controls for administering ECCC's grants and contributions (G&C) portfolio. This was pertinent given the dramatic expansion in its mandate and budget. The audit identified a \$652 million increase in ECCC's G&C budget from 2016–17 to 2022–23, with funding allocated to over 1,700 projects managed by third parties to address the government's climate change and environmental priorities (Environment and Climate Change Canada 2024).

Political scrutiny of the audit results focused on the amount and nature of the funding. The House Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates held meetings on the “Federal Grants and Contributions Process,” on October 1, 8, and 29, 2024. Opposition members questioned the approval process for ECCC's budget increase and the allocation of funds to foreign companies, problematic domestic firms, and American universities. Ultimately the committee advocated for tighter oversight and more extensive audits, and raised concerns about the need for enhanced transparency and accountability in G&C administration.

Net Zero Accelerator

The CESD report on the Strategic Innovation Fund's Net Zero Accelerator found that the government was unsuccessful in its \$8 billion effort to give Canada's largest-emitting manufacturing industries the incentive to decarbon-

ize their operations. Only two of the 55 companies in Canada that emitted more than 1 megatonne (MT) of CO₂ signed on to contribution agreements.

Indeed, out of a total of 17 agreements, only 5 recipients explicitly committed to reducing a specific amount of greenhouse gas emissions. They received total funding of \$886 million and collectively agreed to reduce 6.2 megatonnes of greenhouse gas emissions, at a cost of \$143 per tonne.

For the remaining recipients, when Commissioner Jerry DeMarco looked at the total funding committed by the Net Zero Accelerator compared with the direct greenhouse gas reduction possible according to contribution agreements, the cost was \$523 per tonne.

This compares unfavourably, of course, to the \$80 cost per tonne for Canada's consumer carbon tax when it was cancelled by the Liberal government in March 2025. Even with those high implied costs, the commissioner identified a risk that there was double counting of emission reductions (Office of the Auditor General 2024a).

DeMarco called the \$8 billion program “a very large outlay of taxpayer dollars for what I would say are relatively limited results... It's simple enough to dole out money but you need to do it in a way that creates value for money for taxpayers because ultimately it is taxpayers who are paying” (Blacklock's Reporter 2024).

Speaking to the House Environment Committee on May 2, 2024, Bloc Québécois MP Denis Trudel (Longueuil-Saint-Hubert, Quebec) echoed the commissioner's concerns, stating, “We are the people's representatives. I can't believe this. All we're asking for is accountability for the contracts that were signed. I cannot fathom why we're spending so much time discussing something that should go without saying” (House of Commons Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development 2024).

The Committee agreed by unanimous vote to order disclosure of the subsidy contracts under the program. This was done *in camera*, but the contracts have not been released publicly.

Sustainable Development Technology Fund

Despite the cost and waste exposed by these two reports, it was the Sustainable Development Technology Fund (SDTF) audit that turned into a political maelstrom, becoming what was dubbed by the Conservatives as the “Green Slush Fund Scandal.”

The Sustainable Development Technology Fund was created in 2001 as a federally funded, arm's-length foundation and operated as a not-for-profit corporation. According to its contribution agreement with the minister of Industry, Science and Innovation, the fund's goal was to advance clean technology innovation by funding and supporting technology projects at the pre-commercial development and demonstration stages.

“ *The Sustainable Development Technology Fund audit turned into a political maelstrom ... dubbed by the Conservatives as the “Green Slush Fund Scandal.”*

The department received whistleblower reports of financial mismanagement and human resource malpractice in February 2023. It subsequently performed an internal review of its practices and hired a law firm to review its labour and employment practices and policies.

The whistleblower group secretly recorded the Industry department's assistant deputy minister, Doug McConnachie, on August 25, 2023. He commented that “There's a lot of sloppiness and laziness. There is some outright incompetence and, you know, the situation is just kind of untenable at this point... The minister [Champagne] is going to flip out when he hears the stuff and he's going to want an extreme reaction, like shut it all down” (Leblanc 2023).

Indeed, Minister Champagne froze funding for SDTC in early October 2023.

The full extent of the wrongdoing at SDTC came to the public's attention following the release of a report by the Auditor General of Canada on June 4, 2024. The auditor found “significant lapses” in SDTC's “stewardship of public funds” including:

- Awarding funding of \$59 million to 10 ineligible projects of the 58 the auditor examined, which did not meet key requirements set out in the contribution agreements between the government and the foundation.

- Not following the foundation’s conflict-of-interest policies in 90 cases that were connected to approval decisions, representing nearly \$76 million in funding awarded to projects.
- Not meeting certain requirements of the SDTF’s enabling legislation, for example by supporting the reduction in the membership of its council from the mandated 15 to just two (Office of the Auditor General 2024b).

The auditor also found that in 12 out of 18 completed sample projects, the projected reductions of greenhouse gas emissions were, on average, half of what was presented at the time the project proposals were assessed.

Following the release of the auditor’s report, Champagne abolished SDTF altogether and moved its funding to the National Research Council of Canada, which is not arm’s-length and reports directly to the minister.

The Conservatives smelled blood in the water. On June 10, 2024, they passed a motion with the support of all opposition parties “That the House order the government, Sustainable Development Technology Canada (SDTC) and the Auditor General of Canada each to deposit with the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, within 30 days of the adoption of this order” a long series of document types; and that “the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel shall provide forthwith any documents received by him, pursuant to this order, to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police” (House of Commons of Canada 2024).

The documents were not all produced and not sent to the RCMP. House Speaker Greg Fergus, a Liberal MP, found on September 26, 2024, that a “*prima facie* question of privilege has been established,” thereby taking priority over virtually all other parliamentary business. This led to a months-long filibuster, in which the Opposition waited for the documents to be handed over and the government refused to do so.

Fergus temporarily suspended the stalemate in December so the House could vote on the Fall Budget Statement, a key piece of legislation for government spending, before rising for the Christmas break. This of course precipitated a separate political crisis, with the resignation of Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland on December 16, 2024, and subsequently that of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on January 6, 2025.

In another time, more scrutiny and public attention might have been devoted to a system exposed as rife with cronyism, and to the taxpayer dollars

wasted on green schemes with limited emissions reductions. The re-election of President Donald Trump, resignation of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Canadian federal election of April 2025, and the imposition of American tariffs all diverted Canadians' attention. The system is still in place.

Digging deeper on ENGO funding

The federal government has given billions of dollars in climate and environmental grants and contributions to hundreds of organizations. Since 2018, the amount and date of such funding is searchable on the Open Government website, a welcome tool for transparency and accountability (Government of Canada 2025). All data cited below come from that website.

However, it remains difficult to evaluate how ENGOs are using taxpayer funds and whether or what impact the funding is having. Organization names must be searched individually to determine contribution amounts, and information regarding the nature of the contribution is limited. While a comprehensive analysis of environmental grants and contributions is beyond the scope of this paper, we evaluated a sample to determine trends and uncover insights.

In some cases, the specific deliverable listed in the portal is not referred to or reported on in either the department's website or the ENGO's annual report. For example, Pollution Probe received \$5 million in November 2021 for installing approximately 500 Level 2 connectors and up to approximately 60 Level 3 fast chargers; \$500,000 in January 2023 for 42 EV chargers and \$7 million in October 2023 for 626 electric vehicle chargers (note: multiple agreements with different amounts and deliverables were reported in the Open Government portal for Pollution Probe and it is not clear which amount was ultimately contributed). Neither Natural Resources Canada nor Pollution Probe seem to provide any publicly available accounting of how many EV chargers have been built with that funding and when.

In some cases, the deliverable for the contribution agreements is not listed at all. For example, Equiterre received \$2.34 million in May 2021. The only government description of the funding is six words: "For transportation on a

human scale!” The Equiterre website identifies it as “an awareness campaign on large vehicles,” but it is not clear what the metric or deliverable is (Hon. Steven Guilbeault was a senior director at Equiterre until 2018 when he stepped down to run in the 2019 federal election, but was not the minister of environment at the time of this funding agreement).

In some cases, Natural Resources Canada allocates funding to a group that has only limited previous experience to complete the deliverable. For example, the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care (CCGHC) received \$177,809 in 2023 to “promote greater awareness among Canadians of electric vehicles and charging infrastructure.” The CCGHC’s mandate is to “support those seeking a stronger, healthier and more sustainable health service delivery system.” It is not obvious what competence it has in transportation.

In some cases, the amount listed in the Open Government Grants and Contributions portal is not reflected in the recipient ENGO’s annual report and financial statement, or the ENGO produces no annual report or financial statement. For example, the Open Government portal records 34 grants and contributions going to the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources between 2016–2024, but only the 2023–24 annual report is available on its website – and that has only limited financial information. It is not possible to determine how or whether taxpayer dollars were spent and accounted for.

In some cases, the recipient ENGO provides a substantive financial statement and evidence of impact on its website, and demonstrates transparency and accountability, as in the case of the International Institute for Sustainable Development. But this doesn’t seem to be a requirement.

Canadian Climate Institute

In one case, the lack of financial transparency is glaring.

The Canadian Climate Institute (CCI), established in 2020, is an independent, non-partisan research organization that has as its mission providing evidence-based analysis on climate policy to educate and inform those working towards Canada’s transition to a net-zero economy.

Its founding marked the restoration of a federal climate advisory body after more than a decade of political shifts. In 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney established a National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE) as a consensus-building forum between business, environmental, and Indigenous leaders. However, in 2012, the Harper government abolished

the NRTEE and cut its funding, reflecting growing tensions between environmentalists and federal climate policy at the time.

In response to the gap left by its closure, the Trudeau government supported the creation of the CCI as a modern replacement, with funding from Environment and Climate Change Canada, to reintroduce independent, expert-driven climate policy analysis into the national conversation.

The CCI is registered to a PO Box in Bobcaygeon, Ontario, and has no published physical address. It was originally established as the Canadian Institute for Climate Choices (CICC) but changed its name to Canadian Climate Institute in February 2022.

According to publicly available sources, upon its establishment in January 2020 the CICC received \$20 million over five years from the federal government. According to the Open Government G&C portal, it then received \$500,000 under the new CCI name on December 5, 2022, from ECCC for “Policy analysis and stakeholder views on climate and environmental impacts of inactive oil and gas wells” and an additional \$30 million for an “expert engagement initiative on clean growth and climate change” on April 4, 2023, again from ECCC.

CCI’s annual report for its initial year (2019–20) asserted it had a \$2.4 million operating budget. The extent of that financial reporting is a one-page infographic. The annual reports for 2020–21 (an approximately \$4.7 million operating budget); 2021–22 (\$4.7 million operating budget); 2022–23 (\$6.4 million operating budget); and 2023–24 (\$8.5 million operating budget) provide similar levels of financial information, which is to say minimal.

The 2024–25 annual report provides no financial reporting at all.

Whether the at least \$50.5 million the CCI has received from the federal government in the past five years has provided a good return on investment can be debated elsewhere. But the paucity of transparency in how that money has been spent – and what accounts for the remaining \$35.2 million it has not divulged in its annual reports – is a red flag. It violates best, or indeed any practices, in public accountability. It is a creature of the federal government and appears to get all or most of its funding from Ottawa. But because it has been established as an arms-length organization, taxpayers have no explanation or accounting from either CCI or ECCC on how the money is being spent. It would seem to have the same risk of financial mismanagement as the SDTC.

There is also the question of its independence. The CCI appears to be fully or mostly funded by the federal government. The federal government then draws on its work to justify particular environmental policies. It did this, for example, by referring to CCI's work in a discussion paper entitled *Powering Canada Forward: Building a Clean, Affordable, and Reliable Electricity System for Every Region of Canada*, which claimed that "the average Canadian household will spend 12% less on energy in 2050 compared to 2020" by moving away from fossil fuels and towards primarily wind and solar energy to power homes, vehicles, and businesses (Natural Resources Canada 2023; see Harland and Dion 2023 for the original CCI paper). The paper laid the basis for the federal government's clean electricity strategy, including its finalized Clean Electricity Regulations, in December 2024.

Whether the research uses a credible methodology and is of credible independence or not, there is certainly the appearance of a conflict of interest – the perception that the government is funding third parties to provide evidence to justify its preferred policy options.

Federation of Canadian Municipalities

One other case demonstrates not mismanagement but a distortion in priorities and an almost unlimited appetite for directing public dollars towards environmental initiatives.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) is a national advocacy group representing about 2,100 municipalities of all sizes along with 20 provincial and territorial municipal associations. It advocates for municipalities' needs to be reflected in federal policies and programs, and is based in Ottawa.

Canadian municipalities are besieged by a variety of challenges, including aging and inadequate infrastructure, housing unaffordability and homelessness, and a gap between revenue raising authority and public responsibility. Despite these tremendous needs, federal funding to FCM has almost exclusively been directed to initiatives to "support and accelerate Canadian municipalities' transformation to resilient, net-zero communities" (Natural Resources Canada 2024), via the Green Municipal Fund (GMF).

Established in 2000, the GMF emerged as two separate initiatives under Budgets 2000 and 2002: the Green Municipal Enabling Fund (GMEF) and the Green Municipal Investment Fund (GMIF), each initially endowed with \$125

million from the federal government. In 2005, these two were merged into a single revolving fund now known as the Green Municipal Fund.

Over the years, the fund expanded through incremental federal investments. It has seen a significant upsurge in the past seven years, with a contribution of \$125 million in 2018, \$950 million in 2019, and \$530 million in 2022 (Natural Resources Canada 2024).

Separately, according to the Open Government portal, the federal government gave the FCM \$530 million in March 2024 to support “LC3 [Low Carbon Cities Canada]-FCM Collaboration on Community Climate Action Projects” and \$290.9 million in November 2023 to “advance the Government of Canada’s commitment to plant an additional two billion new trees over the next 10 years.”

Unlike the CCI, the FCM publishes extensive financial statements on its website. An internal audit by Natural Resources Canada found that it exercised appropriate and effective financial management (Natural Resources Canada 2024).

The concern is not that the Green Municipal Fund is being mismanaged. It is that the federal government has directed almost all of its support to Canadian municipalities for green initiatives, contrary to Canadians’ priorities.

An analysis of the FCM 2025 financial statement reveals that net assets in the FCM General Fund were \$12.25 million, versus \$1.0875 billion in the Green Municipal Fund endowment – a ratio of approximately 1:88.

Outside influence

In addition to inappropriate ENGO influence and funding within Canada, there are legitimate concerns that the Communist Party of China is behind some of the funding and narratives that the environmentalist movement in North America is advancing. The claim, broadly speaking, is that China has used environmental groups to exploit Western regulatory frameworks and undermine the West’s ability to build infrastructure. This belief is prevalent among those on the conservative side of the political spectrum.

In addition, some are convinced that China has supported the promulgation of narratives about the existential threat of climate change, the nefarious nature of fossil fuels and their producers, and the need to urgently switch to solar and wind power, grid storage, and electric vehicles, including by subsidizing those products – all while they burn coal at record high rates. This benefits China, of course, by undermining North American energy security and economic prowess, hampering our ability to secure enough energy to compete on AI, and creating markets for and dependence on products in which China dominates the supply chain.

A 2024 paper from the conservative US think tank the Heritage Foundation, *Chinese Handcuffs: How China Exploits America's Climate Agenda*, encapsulates the concerns. It recommended that the United States:

- prioritize US energy independence and dominance;
- withdraw from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change;
- adopt a framework that recognizes China's supposed cooperation in environmental agreements as a means to achieving competitive advantages over the US;
- investigate the revenue streams of prominent environmental advocacy groups within the US; and
- increase the level of investigations of Chinese companies investing in the United States (Walsh and Harding 2024).

The Heritage Foundation's concern has moved into official Washington. A June 25, 2025, Senate hearing by the subcommittee on federal courts, oversight, agency action, and federal rights, titled *Enter the Dragon – China and the Left's Lawfare Against American Energy Dominance*, examined allegations of a coordinated effort involving the Chinese Communist Party, foreign donors, and leftist legal activism to undermine US energy independence through litigation and judicial influence. Chair Sen. Ted Cruz, a Texas Republican, opened the proceedings thus:

First, foreign money from entities tied to the Chinese Communist Party flows into the United States to bankroll climate advocacy groups who litigate against American energy. Second, activist lawyers flood our courts with lawsuits designed not to win policy debates but to bankrupt energy producers and to dismantle energy infrastructure through sheer attrition.

Third, the judiciary itself is being quietly captured and brainwashed as left-wing non-profits host closed door trainings that indoctrinate judges to adopt the ideological goals of the climate lawfare machine. (US Senate Committee on the Judiciary 2025)

Democratic Ranking Member Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) dismissed the claims as projection, arguing that climate change itself is the real threat (US Senate Committee on the Judiciary 2025).

In Canada, evidence of direct Chinese support for ENGOs is anecdotal and sparse. However, there is evidence both of Chinese manipulation of public opinion and of Canadian collaboration with Chinese interests. Virginia-based cybersecurity firm Mandiant Inc. reported in June 2022 that a Chinese information operations campaign identified as “Dragonbridge” was being used to advance the strategic political interests of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

“Critics claim that China has used environmental groups to exploit Western regulatory frameworks and undermine the West’s ability to build infrastructure.”

The Dragonbridge campaign was a network of thousands of inauthentic social media accounts coordinated across platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and more. The accounts often masqueraded as concerned local residents or environmentalists and disseminated messages emphasizing environmental hazards, health risks, or labour concerns tied to rare earth mining and processing projects.

As part of the campaign, China spread disinformation about Canadian rare earths miner Appia Rare Earths and Uranium Corp. after it reported positive drilling results at its project in Saskatchewan. A post from “Ashely Wilson” stated: “[t]he protection of the lake, everyone’s responsibility, if once mining, how to ensure the health of workers, firmly resist.” Another user, “Farrah”, stated: “[i]t’s not exciting, our lakes will be destroyed.”

“Brown Emily” and “Gonzales Bonnie” were equally appalled, respectively referring to the discovery as “terrible” and “terrifying” (Business Council of Canada 2023).

It is highly likely that Chinese and Russian bots have employed similar influence campaigns, masquerading as concern for the environment, with other projects.

Chinese efforts to undermine Canadian resource extraction are not always clandestine. They are sometimes sponsored by our own government.

As an example, a peer-reviewed article published in *Science* in January 2024 argued that there were major gaps in emissions reporting in the Alberta oilsands and the oil produced from there was much more emissions-intensive than was captured in, for example, Environment Canada’s National Pollutant Release Inventory program (He et al. 2024). The article listed 24 co-authors including American, Chinese, and Canadian contributors, 10 of whom worked for Environment and Climate Change Canada. The funders of the research were listed as the US National Science Foundation and the Ministry of Science and Technology of China.

The article used an “innovative aircraft-based technique” to show that “Canada’s oil sands spew massive amounts of unmonitored polluting gases” (Jones 2024). The technique was not approved or required by ECCC, which is why it was not included in official reporting.

A sophisticated and apparently coordinated media campaign about the findings ensued immediately following its publication. Articles from *The Guardian*, CBC News, and the Canadian Press highlighted that “tar sands” pollution was up to 6,300 per cent higher than industry was reporting. Social media posts from environmental activists Tzeporah Berman, Keith Stewart of Greenpeace, and the David Suzuki Foundation all catastrophized the findings. No one mentioned Chinese scientific collaboration or funding. (MLI submitted an ATIP (Access to Information and Privacy) request to the federal government in February 2024 to access the correspondence between the ECCC authors and their American and Chinese co-authors. No results had been returned at time of writing.)

This was not the only formal collaboration between ECCC and Chinese counterparts. Hon. Steven Guilbeault in his capacity as minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada visited China in August 2023 for the annual general meeting of the China Council for International

Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED). Guilbeault attended in his role as executive vice chair, and at the time of writing is still listed on the CCICED website as holding that position.

A 2022 report from the DC-based think tank the Jamestown Foundation described CCICED's nefarious intent as such:

CCICED also serves influence purposes, exploiting foreign government officials and NGO heads (including the Canadian minister of environment) – who are given what appear to be mere token positions on the council – for green-washing propaganda while receiving money (CCICED's total budget amounts to roughly \$20,000,000) from the foreign states and organizations that the councillors represent. (Jirouš 2022)

There is no evidence, and this article does not allege, that any persons or groups were deliberately collaborating with China with the intention of advancing their interests at the expense of Canada's. And yet it is reasonable to point out that, unintended or not, the actions of ENGOs and environmentalists in Canada have undermined our ability to build, grow economically, and maximize energy production, and that these actions can benefit China in geopolitical competition.

Towards a politics of abundance

Canada is facing many political and economic headwinds, and in response there is growing public and political commitment across the political spectrum to build more infrastructure to bolster economic growth and diversify trade partnerships. A majority of Canadians support the development of every type of infrastructure, from highways to ports to oil and gas to nuclear (see Akin 2025).

There is also growing recognition that organized environmentalism poses a challenge to this through its successful efforts to stymie and block development using the regulatory process. Throughout the Western world, including in Canada, there are now efforts to streamline approvals and

permitting and reduce the bureaucratic burden on those who would build. It is incumbent upon Canadian ENGOs and progressives to reflect on the excesses of their efforts over the past 20 years and identify ways of advancing their environmental objectives that are not detrimental to Canadian economic and social development.

Whether or not this is a path ENGOs pursue, the federal government must endeavour to retract the funding and influence it has granted such groups and stop being a party to efforts that actively undermine Canadian interests and projects.

Such efforts should include:

- paring down “environmental protection” and ENGO spending to reasonable levels following its decade of unprecedented growth;
- ensuring higher levels of transparency and accountability for the grants and contributions ENGOs do receive;
- limiting the instances in which independent organizations and funds are primarily or fully financed by the federal government; and
- ensuring those organizations are subject to financial transparency measures equivalent to those faced by the public sector, where they do exist.

In addition, governments should explore:

- options for stricter standing criteria to limit the participation of ENGOs in environmental assessment hearings, tribunal proceedings (e.g., energy boards) and court challenges;
- tighter timelines for interventions;
- higher evidentiary thresholds; and
- cost awards or security for costs against ENGOs that act like “busybody” litigants.

In the absence of appropriate legislative and policy guardrails, pro-development organizations will start to resort to lawfare themselves. In March 2025, a jury in North Dakota found Greenpeace liable for more than US\$660 million in damages for their role in orchestrating protests against its Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016–17. Obstruction is starting to have a price.

While superficially satisfying, Canada will not be in a better position economically and politically if the solution to lawfare from the left becomes lawfare from the right. Governments must provide for a better alternative.

The tides on environmental litigation are turning. On June 30, 2025, progressive Democratic Governor of California Gavin Newsom signed legislation significantly overhauling the landmark *California Environmental Quality Act* laws, threatening to reject the state budget unless lawmakers rolled it back. While environmental groups were angry at the changes, a large majority of Californians supported it (see *Politico* 2025). Left-leaning American politicians who want their jurisdictions to thrive, and who want to win elections, have started to do the work of rolling back the environmental movement's excesses.

Many are waiting for such a return to sanity to come to Canada. It is no longer acceptable for the ideological preferences of the few to use our liberal democratic values and processes to stymie the economic aspirations of the many. ENGOs may yet reject the opportunity to recalibrate their methods. The federal government must not. **MLI**

About the author



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Exner-Pirot sits on the boards of the Saskatchewan Indigenous Economic Development Network and the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, and is a research advisor to the Indigenous Resource Network. She is a Network Coordinator at the North American and Arctic Defense and Security Network and managing editor of the *Arctic Yearbook* (an international, peer-reviewed annual volume). She has published over 45 peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and edited volumes, and presented at over 100 conferences and events nationally and internationally, in addition to authoring dozens of op-eds in Canada's top publications. **MLI**

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