

Getting real – How do Canadians view the environment and energy?

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The environment as an issue has historically grown in importance on the public’s agenda when economic times are good, and fallen back when economic times are bad. However, Ipsos Reid’s most recent public opinion polling for the Canadian Nuclear Association (CNA) suggests that this historical trend may be at an end. While most economic indicators point to at least a reasonably strong economy, concern about environmental issues is on the march. An overwhelming 85% of Canadians are concerned about

“climate change.” At the same time, only 56% rate the overall quality of the environment in their province as good or better. And, there is widespread perception that the quality of the environment is getting worse (47% worse, 44% same, 9% better).

This stew of public concern about the environment is no more boiling than in Ontario. In the country’s largest province, only 46% rate the overall quality of the environment in the province as good or better. Half (51%) think that things are getting worse (42% same, 7% better). Only half (53%) rate the overall quality of air in the province as good or better, while only slightly more (63%) say this about the overall quality of water in the province.

Well then what about energy?

At the same time as environmental issues rise on the public’s agenda, concerns about future energy supply are also widespread. Only 37% of Canadians (38% of Ontarians) believe that conservation efforts on their own by consumers will be enough to offset growing demand. And only half (54%) of Canadians (and only 34% of Ontarians) believe that there is enough electricity supply in their province to meet future needs. Indeed, in all provinces except Quebec concerns about future energy supply are near or at historical highs.

So how do Canadians see moving forward?

Canadians increasing concern about the environment does translate somewhat into their views on future energy options. There is overwhelming support for “more government commitment to non-CO2 producing energy sources” (93%) and use of the tax system to incent more efficient energy behaviour (“tax incentives for energy-efficient homes” <92%>), “tax incentives for hybrid cars” <87%>, and “taxing industries on carbon emissions” <81%>). And there is support for “more government commitment to nuclear power” (50%) as well, led by Ontario (62%) and New Brunswick (61%).

Even at a broader level, support for nuclear energy, at least as part of the future energy mix, is growing. Of course the vast majority of Canadians support solar power, wind power and hydroelectric power to meet future demand. Any polling that shows otherwise would be a farce. But support for nuclear as part of the mix has been growing nationally

from 35% two years ago to 44% today. And over this same period, support for nuclear is up from 48% to 63% in Ontario, from 23% to 38% in BC, from 41% to 47% in Alberta, and stands at 52% in New Brunswick.

So what is it that is making nuclear power increasingly acceptable to Canadians?

Canadians continue to have some basic concerns about nuclear energy. They are unsure about long-term disposal and are unclear about costs. Nevertheless, a significant majority of Canadians also believe that nuclear energy is reliable (68%), nuclear power plants in Canada are safe (61%), and that nuclear will always be an important part of our future energy mix (60%). And on an unaided basis, according to Canadians the number one benefit associated with nuclear power is that it is “less harmful to the environment/clean/pollution-free.”

So what is the bottom-line?

The bottom-line from all of this is that Canadians generally, and Ontarians specifically, are increasingly balancing their growing concerns about the environment and related issues with their increasing concerns about energy supply. In effect they are “getting real.” In the past, neither issue had simultaneously grown in importance on the public’s agenda. So Canadians were never really “forced” to think about energy and environment issues in tandem. But as both have emerged as concerns for Canadians, people are taking a more realistic view on differentiating between what would be ideal and what is realistic and practical. And where Canadians are coming down is increasingly on the side of nuclear energy both as a part of the future energy mix and as a viable response to dealing with environmental concerns. They don’t perceive it as the only answer, but as one important part of the equation.