



# Tackling the Climate Crisis—Towards a Just, Sustainable, and Public Future

Responding to the Climate Crisis with a Strong Public  
Sector

2023





The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 13 Component unions. Taken together, we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 425,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

The office of the National Union of Public and General Employees is on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

We recognize the crimes that have been committed and the harm that has been done and dedicate ourselves as a union to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and striving for justice.

Bert Blundon, President

Jason MacLean, Secretary-Treasurer



## Responding to the Climate Crisis with a Strong Public Sector

To tackle the climate crisis head on, we need ambitious, transformative action to transition to a lower-carbon economy and to ensure that no one is left behind. According to the IPCC, we need “immediate, rapid, and large-scale reductions” in climate change-causing GHG emissions to keep the Paris goal within reach.<sup>1</sup> In the release of its February 2022 report, the IPCC was clear: “half measures are no longer an option.”

The federal government under Trudeau has, to its credit, increased the level of ambition of Canada’s climate commitments: stronger emissions reduction targets,<sup>2</sup> increased contribution to global climate finance,<sup>3</sup> and investment in areas like green home retrofits and zero-emission vehicles.<sup>4</sup> But it still has not gone far enough.

The government’s approach has been described as a “one eye shut” approach.<sup>5</sup> Despite a strengthening of policies and some gains made in climate action, that progress is offset by continued support for the fossil fuel industry, as emissions from the oil and gas sector have continued to rise.<sup>6</sup> This is illustrated by the corporate tax credit for carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS) that was a major piece of the 2022 budget. CCUS has been criticized by academics and environmentalists, and even a former oil executive, as an unreliable and expensive technology that will only reinforce our dependence on fossil fuels.<sup>7</sup> The tax credit was seen as just another subsidy to fossil fuel companies.<sup>8</sup>

Researchers have also pointed out that, instead of stronger regulation, the federal climate plan focuses on incentives for industry, consumers, and home owners, which are insufficient for discouraging investment in fossil fuel infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> They also tend to benefit more affluent households. Some of these technologies are cost prohibitive to many workers and households. Governments need to ensure that green technologies, infrastructure, and programs are affordable and accessible for all people, not just for the wealthy and not just for those who own their own homes.

Tackling the climate crisis also requires cooperation across borders and levels of government. The commitment and actions taken at the provincial/territorial level vary considerably across the country. However, a recent analysis by the Pembina Institute found that not a single province or territory is prepared to deliver on climate action.<sup>10</sup>

Despite federal targets for 2030 and 2050, half of Canada’s emissions (those from Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba) are not covered by a provincial or territorial 2030 target, and almost 75% of national emissions (from Alberta, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba) are not covered by a 2050 target. The Pembina report also finds that none of the oil- and gas-producing provinces are adequately preparing for the decline of production with Just Transition plans, and no jurisdiction is using all of the available policy tools to lower transportation emissions. Oil and gas production and transportation are the 2 sectors driving emissions growth.<sup>11</sup>

Governments need to step up their game, and they need to do it fast. The public sector is uniquely positioned to respond. The public sector has an important role to play in both

*mitigating*, and *adapting to*, climate change. These processes must go together, but addressing each in turn can help us think about the many roles of the public sector.

The World Wildlife Fund describes these distinct but interrelated terms as follows:

*Climate change mitigation* means avoiding and reducing emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere to prevent the planet from warming to more extreme temperatures. *Climate change adaptation* means altering our behavior, systems, and—in some cases—ways of life to protect our families, our economies, and the environment in which we live from the impacts of climate change. The more we reduce emissions right now, the easier it will be to adapt to the changes we can no longer avoid.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Public Sector as a Vehicle for Mitigation**

The science is clear that we need to drastically and rapidly reduce GHG emissions. This will require a whole-of-economy approach. The public sector is uniquely positioned to intervene and, in doing so, can be a proactive agent of change by facilitating the transition, rather than by simply reacting or picking up the pieces.

Major roles for governments are to invest and to regulate. The federal government, with its provincial, territorial, and municipal counterparts, needs to invest in renewable energy, sustainable infrastructure, and green transportation, and ensure they are delivered through a strong public sector. Governments can also implement regulations on industries and institutions, such as requirements for green building codes, emissions caps, and green procurement.

In 2021, NUPGE joined labour organizations from around the world in endorsing the Trade Union Program for a Public, Low-Carbon Energy Future.<sup>13</sup> Neoliberal climate and energy policies tied to privatization and commodification have failed to stop the rise of GHG emissions. The Trade Union Program emphasizes the importance of public energy systems to ensure the energy transition is socially just, economically viable, and effective in reaching climate goals.

Governments also need to support the retrofitting of buildings and other infrastructure. The energy required to run buildings, including our homes and workplaces, accounts for about 20% of Canada’s annual carbon emissions.<sup>14</sup> Energy efficient buildings will help to reduce emissions, make life more affordable, and will support green jobs.<sup>15</sup> Governments need to change regulations, policies, and building codes to support retrofits.<sup>16</sup> They can offer programs to make them affordable and accessible. Governments can also require that all new buildings be energy efficient—and they can fund it, such as through green social housing.<sup>17</sup> Canada needs a long-term strategy to decarbonize our buildings.<sup>18</sup> Governments have a responsibility to ensure that all people have access to climate-friendly technology and infrastructure, regardless of where they live or their income level.

Another important area is improving public transit so that people have realistic alternatives to driving. But chronic under-investment means that public transit systems in Canadian cities are decades behind where they need to be, and transit service in smaller communities is limited or nonexistent. The federal government must be willing to fund a much greater share of transit infrastructure and operating costs.

It is important that the infrastructure and services needed to reduce GHG emissions be publicly procured, owned, maintained, and operated. In the long-term, public delivery of services and infrastructure is the best use of public funds and brings greater accountability and transparency.

Indeed, according to privatization researchers, privatization is fueling the climate crisis:

When it comes to the threat of climate change, public control over policy making is critical. Private forces guided by profit-motive, like fossil fuel companies, may seek to enrich shareholders at the risk of causing catastrophic environmental impacts. As such, privatization deals in the realm of climate hand over decision-making from the public, which stands to face the consequences of these impacts, to the profiteers who benefit from them. That's an untenable situation if we hope to build an environmentally sustainable future where everyone is afforded the right to a healthy planet.<sup>19</sup>

Privatization has also been shown to reduce the quality of public services and contribute to worsening economic inequality.<sup>20</sup>

Governments may say they can't afford to invest in ambitious climate action and that it should be left to the market and private companies. But it is clear that privatization and tax breaks for the wealthy have failed. It's the state that is uniquely positioned to inject large sums of money into the economy and take on debt unlike individuals or businesses.<sup>21</sup> What's more, we can't afford *not* to act.

In a 2022 report, the IPCC reported that the costs of climate change impacts in Canada have been increasing since 1983, from an average of \$0.4 billion to \$1.9 billion annually.<sup>22</sup> For instance, the severe flooding in BC last year caused at least \$450 million in insured damage, according to the Insurance Bureau of Canada.<sup>23</sup> That was in addition to the roughly \$155 million in insured damage caused by the wildfires earlier in the year. And this does not account for the human cost, the impacts on livelihoods, the cost to entire ecosystems, and the disproportionate impact on Indigenous communities.

Furthermore, if governments were to implement fair taxation, for which there is clear public support, this would lead to new sources of revenue and help to tackle income and wealth inequality.

There is also the matter that Canada gives more public finance to the fossil fuel sector, per capita, than any other G20 country.<sup>24</sup> A recent report by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) found that provincial governments' fossil fuel subsidies in

the main fossil-fuel-producing provinces—Alberta, BC, Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador—have reached levels that rival that of the federal government’s.<sup>25</sup>

The federal government has committed to phasing out fossil fuel subsidies, which NUPGE has called for, but action remains to be seen. Also, provinces need to commit to phasing out fossil fuel subsidies. Governments should be redirecting that money to more environmentally sustainable sectors and to supporting workers and their communities that are affected by the transition.

The federal climate plan *A Healthy Environment and a Healthy Economy*, which was released in late 2020, commits \$15 billion to be invested in climate action.<sup>26</sup> On a per capita basis, this figure pales in comparison to what many European countries and the US are committing.<sup>27</sup> We need increased public investment in climate action to reduce emissions and foster a greener economy.

### **Public Services Help Us to Adapt**

Decarbonizing the economy is essential. But, as UNEP’s *Adaptation Gap 2021* report demonstrates, “the need to adapt to the impacts of climate change already locked in are just as important.”<sup>28</sup> The report finds that, although countries are increasingly including adaptation in their climate plans and policies, more needs to be done in areas of planning, implementation, and financing. It is important to note that the cost of adaptation is 5 to 10 times higher in the Global South than the current amount of financing, to which wealthy countries like Canada should contribute their fair share.<sup>29</sup>

As noted above, public services, and the workers who deliver them, are on the front lines in a crisis. They are directly responding to the effects of climate change, keeping their communities safe and supported, and continuing to deliver critical services through it all. From providing care and emergency response, to repairing infrastructure, to coordinating it all, NUPGE members are in the thick of things.

Because these and other public services play a key role in responding to the effects of the climate crisis, which are projected to intensify, investing in expanding high-quality, inclusive, and universal public services will be a key part of climate change adaptation. Specifically, this will involve investing in public services like health care, social services, and disaster response and management, as well as in areas like energy, water, and public transportation. Public services can also offer good, green, and unionized jobs that sustain communities.

The Canadian government’s climate plan focuses on greening physical infrastructure, like buildings.<sup>30</sup> This is essential, as noted above. But investing in social infrastructure is also important for fostering a more sustainable and equitable economy. Investing in expanding and improving public services can not only help to tackle climate change, but also advance equality.<sup>31</sup>

Investing in public services also means investing in the workers who deliver these critical services. These workers deserve fair wages, benefits, pensions, and safe and healthy working conditions, as well as the resources they need to do their jobs. Workers’ rights

must be safeguarded, regardless of employment status, unionization status, or immigration status.

Furthermore, the workers in these sectors know what is needed to strengthen and adapt public services to respond to the crisis. And so, they must be at the decision-making tables. This is a crucial part of a Just Transition.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Climate change widespread, rapid, and intensifying – IPCC," Press release, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), August 9, 2021, <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Net-Zero Emissions by 2050," Government of Canada, last updated July 11, 2023, <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/environment/weather/climatechange/climate-plan/net-zero-emissions-2050.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Canada's international climate finance," Government of Canada, last updated December 19, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/environment/weather/climatechange/canada-international-action/climate-finance.html>.

<sup>4</sup> *A Healthy Environment and a Healthy Economy: Canada's strengthened climate plan to create jobs and support people, communities and the planet* (Gatineau: Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020), <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/environment/weather/climatechange/climate-plan/climate-plan-overview/healthy-environment-healthy-economy.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Angela V. Carter and Truzaar Dordi, "Correcting Canada's 'one eye shut' climate policy," Cascade Institute, Technical Paper #2021-4, April 16, 2021, <https://cascadeinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Carter-Dordi-Canadas-one-eye-shut-climate-policy-1.1-April-16.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Deborah de Lange, "We must stop investing in the fool's gold that is fossil fuel," *iPolitics*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.ipolitics.ca/opinions/we-must-stop-investing-in-the-fools-gold-that-is-fossil-fuel/>; Julia Levin, "Buyer Beware: Fossil Fuel Subsidies and Carbon Capture Fairy Tales in Canada," Environmental Defence, March 31, 2022, <https://environmentaldefence.ca/2022/03/31/buyer-beware-fossil-fuels-subsidies-and-carbon-capture-fairy-tales-in-canada/>; Bruce Wilson, "Tax credit for carbon capture the wrong horse to back in a race against time," *The Hill Times*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.hilltimes.com/2022/04/06/tax-credit-for-carbon-capture-the-wrong-horse-to-back-in-a-race-against-time/354281>.

<sup>8</sup> "Federal budget makes inroads into dental care; Missed opportunity on pharmacare and long-term care," Press release, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), April 7, 2022, <https://policyalternatives.ca/newsroom/news-releases/federal-budget-makes-inroads-dental-care-missed-opportunity-pharmacare-and>.

<sup>9</sup> CCPA National Office, "New federal climate plan hindered by commitment to fossil fuel production," *The Monitor*, December 15, 2020, <https://monitormag.ca/articles/new-federal-climate-plan-hindered-by-commitment-to-fossil-fuel-production/>.

<sup>10</sup> Nicole Dusyk et al., *All Hands on Deck: An assessment of provincial, territorial and federal readiness to deliver a safe climate* (The Pembina Institute, July 2021), <https://www.pembina.org/pub/all-hands-on-deck>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



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<sup>12</sup> “What’s the difference between climate change mitigation and adaptation,” World Wildlife Fund, accessed September 8, 2023, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/what-s-the-difference-between-climate-change-mitigation-and-adaptation>.

<sup>13</sup> “Trade Union Program for a Public, Low-Carbon Energy Future,” launched November 4, 2021, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cNoOqfAsmFTYlt-dmVbsbiK0oiWY5kk0Wjk2cXA8J0Q/edit>.

<sup>14</sup> Karen Clarke-Whistler and Ed Whittingham, “Canada’s homes and buildings are key to unlocking growth,” Pembina Institute, May 17, 2017, <https://www.pembina.org/op-ed/unlocking-clean-growth>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Ross, “Addressing climate change by retrofitting Canada’s existing buildings,” *Policy Options*, June 14, 2021, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/june-2021/addressing-climate-change-by-retrofitting-canadas-existing-buildings/>.

<sup>17</sup> UN-Habitat, *Green Building: Interventions for Social Housing* (Nairobi: UN-Habitat, 2015), <https://unhabitat.org/green-building-interventions-for-social-housing>.

<sup>18</sup> Brendan Haley and James Gaede, “Canada needs an ambitious energy-retrofit plan for buildings,” *Policy Options*, February 11, 2020, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/february-2020/canada-needs-an-ambitious-energy-retrofit-plan-for-buildings/>.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Cohen and Allen Mikaelian, “How Privatization Fuels Catastrophic Climate Change,” *In These Times*, February 16, 2022, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/privatization-climate-change-environment-fossil-fuels?emci=f5f9fcf2-1290-ec11-a507-281878b83d8a&emdi=6f008489-1590-ec11-a507-281878b83d8a&ceid=4711835>.

<sup>20</sup> NUPGE, *Privatization Overview*, Backgrounder (Ottawa: NUPGE, February 2020); In the Public Interest, *How Privatization Increases Inequality* (Washington, D.C.: In the Public Interest, September 2016), [https://www.inthepublicinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/InthePublicInterest\\_InequalityReport\\_Sept2016.pdf](https://www.inthepublicinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/InthePublicInterest_InequalityReport_Sept2016.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> NUPGE, *The Myths About Tax Cuts* (Ottawa: NUPGE, November 2019).

<sup>22</sup> The Canadian Press, “New climate change report highlights rising danger, costs for Canadians,” *CBC News*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/ipcc-climate-change-canada-1.6367036>.

<sup>23</sup> Brianna Charlebois, “B.C. floods caused at least \$450M in damage, insurance bureau says” *CBC News*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-flood-damage-1.6280393>.

<sup>24</sup> Bronwen Tucker and Kate DeAngelis, *Still Digging: G20 Governments Continue to Finance the Climate Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Oil Change International and Friends of the Earth, May 2020), <http://priceofoil.org/2020/05/27/g20-still-digging/>.

<sup>25</sup> Janetta McKenzie, Estan Beedell, and Vanessa Corkal, *Blocking Ambition: Fossil fuel subsidies in Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland and Labrador* (Winnipeg: International Institute for Sustainable Development, February 2022), <https://www.iisd.org/publications/blocking-ambition-fossil-fuel-subsidies-canadian-provinces>.

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<sup>26</sup> Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), *A Healthy Environment and a Healthy Economy*.

<sup>27</sup> Vanessa Corkal, Estan Beedell, and Philip Gass, *Investing for Tomorrow, Today: How Canada's Budget 2021 can enable critical climate action and a green recovery* (Winnipeg: International Institute for Sustainable Development, March 2021), <https://www.iisd.org/system/files/2021-03/canada-budget-2021-climate-action-green-recovery-en.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), *The Gathering Storm: Adapting to climate change in a post-pandemic world*, Adaptation Gap Report 2021 (UNEP, 2021), <https://www.unep.org/resources/adaptation-gap-report-2021#:~:text=Estimated%20adaptation%20costs%20in%20developing,opportunity%20to%20finance%20climate%20adaptation.>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> ECCC, *A Healthy Environment and a Healthy Economy*.

<sup>31</sup> Dru Oja Jay, "Want to Fight Inequality and Climate Change? Then Improve Public Services," *The Tyee*, May 23, 2018, <https://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2018/05/23/Fight-Inequality-Improve-Public-Services/>.

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