

# Taking the Pulse of Albertans on Energy and Climate Change

Donna Kennedy-Glans

After a 44-year Progressive Conservative dynasty, the year-old New Democratic Party government in Alberta is advancing policies to embed its political ideology. The most notable is Premier Rachel Notley's plan for climate change and energy policy reform that coincides with a steep drop in oil prices and economic free-fall in Alberta. How does this new government reconcile their legislative prerogative to push through a partisan mandate and their accountability to consult with the people of Alberta? And, in the midst of this polarized debate about climate change and energy development, why is it essential to hear citizens' voices?

It was clear that Alberta's NDP government would take action in the areas of environmental responsibility and climate change; this was a major plank of the NDP's campaign. In advance of the COP21 climate change meetings in Paris last December, and in concert with the carbon policies announced by a new federal Liberal government, Notley advanced ambitious energy policies that included:

- A refreshed climate change policy, including a broad-based carbon tax on all emissions;
- Accelerated shut-down of coal-fired electricity generation in Alberta, and renewable energy quotas for electricity generation in Alberta;
- A review of the oil and gas royalty system to assure that Albertans are receiving a fair return for their resources; and
- A cap on oil sands emissions.

Notley's approach to energy and climate change included the appointment of expert panels, the Royalty Review Panel and the Climate Change Advisory Panel, established to not only conduct studies but to solicit public opinion. As well, the Alberta delegation participating in the December climate change talks

in Paris included the premier and Environment Minister Shannon Phillips supported by pro-climate change advocates and industry. These policies garnered much-needed positive international feedback during the COP21 process.

Now Albertans live with the aftermath of these commitments, because—make no mistake—these changes will affect Albertans, not policy makers in Edmonton.

When it comes to climate change and energy choices, policy makers speak as if they know what Albertans think and want. But not everyone is sure we have actually heard from citizens. Last September, a group of us launched a short-term initiative called ViewpointsAB to find out what Albertans were thinking. Between September 11th and December 11th, half a million Albertans responded to our invitation to speak up about climate change and the future of energy in Alberta. ViewpointsAB was an effort entirely supported by volunteers with no financial or organizational support from government, political parties, special interest groups, private sector companies or traditional media.

ViewpointsAB emphasized one-on-one dialogue and small group facilitation; individual sharing of viewpoints without editing or reductionism; participative sharing of knowledge and ideas via social media; province-wide outreach targets; and ongoing sharing of viewpoints with formal and informal decision-makers and media.

We also spent considerable time determining the best questions to ask Albertans. We didn't want to skew the opinions, and decided on open-ended questions that allowed people to speak to issues they cared about and to be honest about their preparedness for change, their understanding of choices and their assumptions. We intended to read the provincial pulse of where people were at rather than

pushing them in any particular direction via nudging survey questions. Responses were more emotional than we anticipated—with anger, shame and shaming, and frustration emerging.

Based on our 'pulse-taking', Albertans accept change should and will occur, and they have an appetite to discuss *how* change should occur: *How* will Alberta fairly allocate a cap on oil sands development among investors? *How* will energy efficiency incentives be made available with clear accountabilities and without creating a subsidy economy? *How* will coal plant shut-downs be accelerated without creating stranded assets? *How* will research into green energy be funded and prioritized? *How* do we minimize duplication of infrastructure as we increase renewable electricity? *How* do we retain and attract investors? *How* do we build support for workable pipeline approval processes? *How* do we ramp up the implementation of better practices in non-renewable energy projects? *How* do we maintain economic and secure supply of vital energy in our cold unforgiving climate? Will there continue to be well paying jobs to support families in this re-imagined new world? And, in all of this, *how* do we remain competitive?

In an attempt to appease critics and inspire accelerated change, Alberta's leaders are framing the choices for our energy future in bold, positive language. Yes, citizens agree, our province is moving through a paradigm shift, and disruption may be what's needed. But these changes can only be sustained if Albertans believe in the choices. Engagement across a spectrum of viewpoints is essential to building an innovative and implementable path forward. **P**

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