

# This will be the year we finally recognize the real cost of fossil fuels

*More to the Story*

By Ben Bennett

Only people with their head planted firmly in the sand (or anywhere else, for that matter) could still deny weird things are happening to the climate.

Prime minister Stephen Harper's perfect hairstyle would suggest he is not one of those people, but his actions - or lack of them - would suggest otherwise.

Certainly many other folks in the business-above-everything camp seem to be coming around. Preston Manning, the father of the Reform Party and once a pariah to anyone trying to get the environment on the political agenda, seems to have finally seen the economic sense of addressing climate change.

Some western provinces now have carbon-based revenue initiatives of some description, as does Quebec. Others, like Ontario, are looking at them seriously. Even the Pope is said to be considering a statement on climate change. He would not for a minute be considered part of the business camp, but it signifies the level at which the impacts are being noted. If a papal declaration leads to discussions among the faith community that could spell trouble for the Tories.

When the topic was raised in year-end interviews with the prime minister, he did not, as he has in the past, absolutely dismiss the possibility of some kind of fiscal response to the issue. That may not sound like much but everything is relative. If he didn't actually have the interviewer arrested and hauled off by burly men in dark glasses for an inquisition by the House Committee on UnCanadian Activities, then we are perhaps making progress.

Mr. Harper has painted himself right into the denial corner when talking about any new fiscal measures (we call them taxes; politicians use other words), as opposed to handing out election goodies (politicians call them incentives; we call them bribes). So he hasn't left himself much room to move. But move he will.

He knows that his record on the environment file will soon overshadow Julian Fantino's misadventures in the area of veterans' affairs or Mike Duffy's version of Let's Make a Deal. After dumping the most recent major embarrassment, Mr. Harper needs now to work on his own reputation. And he doesn't have much time if he (or the Tory brand) is to have any chance of redemption by the fall election.

Assuming the economy doesn't completely sink, the PM may be able to maintain the illusion of sound financial management. And unless we lose a plane in the Middle East or other personnel on the ground in any number of dangerous places in the world, he

may be able to keep the points has won on foreign policy. If his new veterans' minister does well, that will help, too.

But the environment is no longer a file he can dismiss. *He* is now the pariah and it is hurting Canada's reputation as a good guy. And that upsets even hard-core Tories.

When the falling price of oil started to become an issue, the PM said it would be "crazy" to start applying any fiscal measures that could burden the consumer and by implication, the industry. I would argue the complete opposite.

The price of gas has always been up and down, so even before the current slide, adding a couple of cents on every litre sold would not have been noticed.

Given how low the cost of filling the tank is now, who knows where it will end up? So even if a relatively hefty levy of say, five cents a litre, were added now at the pump, no one could tell (whatever the headlines may scream on the front page of the Toronto Sun).

This is exactly the time to do it.

In contrast to Alberta, industry in Ontario and British Columbia appears to be bouncing back a bit now that the dollar is lower and energy costs are down. And there are all kinds of fiscal tools the feds and the province can use to offer relief if the dollar rises again and that recovery appears in jeopardy.

Heck, it might even let Mr. Harper balance the books this year and leave room for the tax breaks he rashly promised last year to his most loyal supporters – the well-heeled folks with kids.

Mark my words; one way or another, it'll happen in 2015.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at [www.bbc.guelph.org](http://www.bbc.guelph.org).)