

The Elephant in the Polling Booth

As I write this there are some 450 wildfires burning across the Canadian north, and the prediction of more to come is bone chilling. Last month, in Alberta alone, there were a staggering 475 fires ablaze that displaced some 16,000 people and incinerated more than 615,000 hectares of forests and towns.

At the same time, Alberta was in the midst of a provincial election.

One would think, given the established links between climate change and more frequent and intense wildfires, that Alberta party leaders would have taken the opportunity to talk about climate change and GHG emission reductions.

Turns out you'd need another think on that, because all reports indicate that neither the Alberta NDP nor the United Conservative Party seized the opportunity to talk about climate impacts.

As one reporter observed, the omission was no doubt tied to the fact that Alberta's economy is reliant on that goose that laid the golden egg, the oil and gas industry. An industry that delivers a whopping 36% of Alberta's provincial revenue and almost a third of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions.

That's the elephant in the polling booth no Alberta politician wanted to talk about. Instead they stuck to other topics like the economy and health care.

But here's the thing – you can't separate the economy or even health care from climate change. Wildfires can cost billions of dollars to fight and millions in insurance payouts. Not to mention the thick blanket of smoke that poses significant health risks to the elderly and vulnerable, especially children and infants.

So, my question is this: at what point in what has become an endless litany of extreme weather events, from wildfires and droughts to floods, will provincial leaders finally stand up and talk about action on climate change? Do we need to reach a catastrophic 2 degree C. rise in global temperatures before they decide to act?

It's a particularly relevant question for Manitobans who will be heading to the polls to elect a new provincial government in October. Especially given that by late May, temperatures were already soaring into the 30 degree C range, and we had six active wildfires burning north of Winnipeg.

One of those fires resulted in the evacuation of some 7000 people from Pimicikamak Cree Nation near Cross Lake. This, when we still have more than 700 climate refugees sitting in Winnipeg hotels, victims of the catastrophic flooding that hit Peguis First Nation in 2022. Families that have been waiting for almost a year for new homes to be built on land that will likely flood again unless an effective climate mitigation strategy is put into place.

Given the circumstances, it's impossible to imagine our provincial politicians **not** talking about climate change. How can they even call themselves leaders, if they haven't yet figured out that every aspect of government should now be viewed through a climate lens, whether it involves infrastructure, transportation, energy, health care, employment or reconciliation.

Troubled times call for visionary leadership, women and men willing to tackle, head on, the process of planning for a future shaped by climate change. Leaders that don't see the climate crisis as the concern of "special interest groups," but as a tremendous source of anxiety for most Manitobans, 85% of whom believe that this province's climate policies rank from poor to fair.

We don't need politicians who avoid talking climate because it's "depressing" or not "saleable" to the voting public. We need politicians who inspire people with a new vision of the future. A future in which our province becomes a leader in sustainability and reaps a portion of the trillions of dollars in economic benefits that are just sitting there, waiting to be made via investments in clean energy and green jobs.

That said, we also share responsibility as voters. Our silence, whether driven by climate anxiety, denial or simply the demands of the daily grind, can sometimes be deafening.

We need to talk about it, with our friends and neighbours, our kids and our politicians. Because until we demand that climate be placed at the top of the agenda, our leaders won't make it a priority.

If you are as concerned as I am, keep your ear to the ground for the time and location of an upcoming leadership debate on climate and the environment. See who comes to speak, and more importantly who doesn't show up then consider who you'll vote for.

Meantime, I'll keep a close eye on the pronouncements of Manitoba party leaders, and if I don't see a clear and coherent strategy for action on climate change, I'll be among the first to let you know.

Erna Buffie is a writer and filmmaker. Read more @ <https://www.ernabuffie.com/>

