

The leadership forum that was...and wasn't



For those of you who haven't heard, there was a leadership forum on climate and the environment held at the University of Winnipeg on August 29th.

Or at least it was supposed to be a leadership forum.

While Liberal leader Dugald Lamont and Green Party leader, Janine Gibson, showed up, the PC's Heather Stefanson and the NDP's Wab Kinew, were both a no-show.

According to sources, Stefanson declined to appear from the get-go, and instead, indicated that she would send controversial MLA, Kevin Klein, the PC Minister of Environment and Climate for a mere six months.

Not all that surprising, given that former premier Brian Pallister refused to attend a debate on climate and the environment in 2019, while Premier Stefanson, when running for the PCs in Tuxedo in 2011, was a "no show" at a similar debate.

Much more surprising was Wab Kinew's last minute decision to withdraw and send NDP environment critic and Wolseley MLA, Lisa Naylor, in his place. Given that he was featured on posters promoting the event, he had clearly agreed, at one point, to attend.

So why was he a no show? Well, apparently, he and his team decided to prioritize a meeting with physicians to discuss the NDP's recent health care announcements, over an opportunity to speak about climate change and the environment to a province-wide audience of 600.

A puzzling choice, given the predicted impacts of climate change on human health and one which, in my opinion, represents a significant strategic error. Because by sending his environment and climate critic, he seems to be signalling, as did Stefanson, that action on climate change is the purview of a single ministerial portfolio.

Can you imagine a cabinet minister being sent to a leadership debate on the economy? Not a chance.

This, when we've been experiencing a summer plagued by some of the most devastating and costly impacts of climate change to date. For months global news cycles have been dominated by climate headlines, reports on everything from ravaging floods and record high temperatures to wildfires that have claimed a staggering 14 million hectares of Canadian forests, released a billion tons of CO2 into the atmosphere and displaced 1000s of people..

Catastrophic events that are driven, in large part, by climate change.

That's why all party leaders needed to be at this forum. Because contrary to what some may think, climate and environmental issues are not the sole responsibility of a single cabinet minister. To address climate change aggressively and substantively, it should be all hands on deck.

Why? - because a government cannot execute an effective emission reduction or climate resiliency strategy without the laser focus of Ministers responsible for Transportation and Infrastructure, Agriculture, Finance and Economic Development as well as Manitoba Hydro. Not to mention critical input from ministers responsible for Labour, Health Care, and Intergovernmental Affairs.

To be effective, those ministries must collaborate to ensure that every project they undertake, every law and policy they enact and every deal they strike is seen through a climate lens.

That won't happen without clear instructions from the top. And without it, we'll likely remain where we are – a province with piece meal climate polices, whose emissions continue go up, not down.

So why didn't Stefanson and Kinew attend? Well, perhaps they think that you, the voters, simply don't care all that much, or don't care enough to demand that leadership address these issues.

If so, it's a shocking assumption, given that in a 2023 poll 85% of Manitobans indicated our current climate policies rated from poor to fair, while a 2020 poll revealed that almost three quarters of us are either worried or very worried about climate change impacts.

Three years on, during the worst Canadian wildfire season on record, I'd lay bets that the 2020 number has crept a whole lot higher.

If you didn't attend the event, it's worth watching online. The debate was lively and the leaders that did show up - Lamont and Gibson – gave what were, at times, impressive performances. Naylor effectively presented the NDP's position, while Klein had the unenviable task of defending his government's dismal record on climate and the environment.

As to the two leaders who didn't show up? - if you're concerned about these issues, write to Kinew and Stefanson and voice your displeasure at their absence. Then ask them what they, as premier, will do to harness the energy of their cabinet in a full court press aimed at a just energy transition that reduces Green House Gas emissions and puts a province-wide climate resiliency plan into action.

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