

OPINION

Can language drive polarization in the fight against climate change?

By MARISA BECK AND MONICA GATTINGER (/AUTHOR/MARISA-BECK-AND-MONICA-GATTINGER) APR. 8, 2020

Language around climate change, specifically on the term 'transition,' masks fundamentally different views about Canada's energy and climate future, say researchers at the Institute for Science, Society and Policy at the University of Ottawa.



Protesters convene on the Hill for a climate rally. Research suggests that the term 'transition' may be doing more harm than good. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

The term “transition” is widespread in Canada’s energy and climate debates. What do people mean when they say it? What do people think when they hear it?

A new study by Positive Energy at the University of Ottawa revealed that energy and environmental leaders are often talking past one another when they use the term. In fact, the research shows that decision-makers are grounded in two distinct realities about Canada’s energy future.

To find out whether language drives polarization in energy and climate debates, we interviewed 42 senior leaders from business, government, environmental NGOs, and Indigenous organizations. We asked them whether they use the term “transition,” if they think it helps or hinders discussion, and how they define it.

The main finding? Language and terminology matter. They can bring people to the table or drive them apart. In the case of transition, ambiguity surrounding the term does a bit of both. More than anything, though, it masks fundamentally different views about Canada’s energy and climate future.

Just over half of study participants use the term, but there was broad consensus that it is unhelpful. While the word is accessible and familiar, it is also seen as vague, politicized, and non-inclusive. Participants, particularly those from the oil and gas industry, found the term polarizing and felt excluded by its use. From their perspective, it is fuel deterministic (transition *away* from oil and gas), and excludes the sector’s emissions reductions efforts. Others suggested the term doesn’t sufficiently capture the challenges facing Canada.

When we scratched below the surface to understand how leaders define transition, we discovered that the term obscures two competing visions that differ significantly in their scope and pace of change. We call them “realities” because those in either camp see themselves as “realists” when it comes to transition. No participant fit perfectly into either category, but all of them leaned heavily towards one or the other.

The first, “Reality I,” is most common among participants from industry, government and regulatory agencies. It perceives “transition” as a measured process of change, focused on reducing GHG emissions through a diverse energy portfolio that includes renewable energy, nuclear power, oil and gas, and carbon capture technology. Market forces are the main driver, supported by policy that doesn’t impose excessive costs on industry and individuals.

“Reality II,” most common among environmental groups and Indigenous participants, views transition as an urgent process rooted in the world facing a climate crisis. This reality nests scientifically derived climate targets within a much broader set of political and economic reforms related to energy. It does not see a future for oil and gas in Canada’s energy mix and believes fossil fuels should be eliminated. Here, policy is the main driver.

We did find some convergence between the realities. There’s agreement that Canada is in a transition of some sort, triggered by climate change. Participants also differentiated between the domestic and export energy economies when it comes to costs and benefits. They also identified the need for strong leadership, although they disagreed over who should lead and what should be done.

So, what should we make of this? Does the term transition help decision-makers chart a path for Canada’s energy future? Or does it lead to people talking past one another and drive polarization?

The research suggests the term may be doing more harm than good. As ubiquitous as it is, it may be hampering constructive discussion, even driving polarization. Using terms like “emissions” and “emissions reductions” may be a better approach.

But the study reveals this is more than just semantics: there are two competing “realities” among energy and environmental leaders. Moving forward, it would be helpful if conversations about Canada’s energy future focused on areas of convergence to build bridges.

No study participant denied the existence of human-caused climate change. That’s a solid starting point. There’s also agreement that further action is required to address climate change. And while the speed and scope of change is a major point of contention, we now have a stronger understanding of areas of disagreement. Addressing divergent views carefully but meaningfully could help chart a positive path forward.

This could all enable leaders to start talking with—not past—each other.

Dr. Marisa Beck is the research director for Positive Energy and the Institute for Science, Society and Policy at the University of Ottawa. Professor Monica Gattinger is the chair of Positive Energy and director of the Institute for Science, Society and Policy at the University of Ottawa.

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