

## **WHAT IS 'TRANSITION'? THE TWO REALITIES OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERS IN CANADA**

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### **Study in Brief**

The language of 'transition' has become a buzzword in policymaking, public discourse, headlines, and academic literature. But often, a precise definition of the term is missing from accounts. This research is centred on two related questions: the use of the term 'transition' by various actors in the Canadian energy and environmental communities and the meaning that these actors assign to the term in the context of energy and climate change.

The findings are based on 38 semi-structured interviews conducted over the summer of 2019 with leaders across the energy and environment fields. We selected participants capable of providing a wide range of perspectives. During interviews, participants were asked about their understanding and use of the term 'transition' and how they understand the concept in the Canadian context.

Canada's energy future remains a very contentious topic. Canada's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by transitioning its energy system to a low-emissions configuration is one of the biggest challenges facing the country. Language matters in such a polarized environment, yet there is little research on the contribution of 'transition' language to polarization over energy and environmental issues in Canada. We lack an understanding of what energy and environmental practitioners in Canada understand by this terminology and how they use it in their day-to-day work.

### **Key Findings**

Three key findings emerged from this study. First, a slim majority of those interviewed use the language of transition when speaking about Canada's energy future. Many find the term 'transition' too vague, politicized, non-inclusive, or even pejorative to be useful in the current debate. Others feel that it understates the scale of the changes that Canada must make and masks real differences of opinion.

Second, the research revealed that senior leaders have vastly different understandings about the kind of changes required to address climate change in Canada. Interviewees agreed the country is undergoing an energy transition of some kind, but strongly disagreed about the necessary scale and scope of change. Participants tended toward one of two 'ideal type' realities about transition: Reality I perceives transition as a measured process, driven by market forces, that focuses on reducing GHG emissions through a diversified energy portfolio and innovations in oil and gas, such as carbon capture and storage. Reality II views transition as an urgent set of policy-driven sociopolitical changes in the face of the climate crisis. Emissions reductions, including the phase out of Canada's oil industry, will occur in this context. The 'transition' is envisioned as occurring in the next 10 to 20 years, based on scientifically driven emissions targets.

Third, while Reality I and Reality II offer significantly different visions of Canada's energy future, there are points of convergence between them. They both agree that transition is happening, requires leadership to address and involves costs and benefits to the country's domestic and export energy economies. Key areas of divergence relate to the pace of transition, the future of oil and whether public policies or markets are or should be the key driver of transition.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Do the findings suggest that the language of transition contributes to polarization over energy and climate in Canada? In brief, the answer is yes. Language matters in this debate, but this research reveals that polarization over energy and climate goes much deeper than semantics. There are substantive differences in peoples' visions of Canada's energy future and the realities that underpin them. While the term 'transition' may enable different actors to come to the table to discuss the future, it has masked the scale of differences between peoples' visions.

Both groups identify themselves as 'realists' about transition and believe that their views constitute a practical, sensible approach. Multiple participants mentioned that Canada lacks 'honest conversations' and transparency about the reality of transition – but they had different realities in mind about which they felt Canadians needed to be more honest.

Focusing on key areas of convergence between the two realities can offer a helpful starting point for charting a path forward. No participant, regardless of whether they aligned with Reality I or Reality II, denied the existence of human-caused climate change. In addition, there is agreement that Canada should act with some dispatch, although there is disagreement on both the speed and scope of change required, and the respective roles of policy and markets. There is also a shared belief that navigating transition in Canada requires strong leadership from various sectors of society, and a willingness to moving the conversation beyond unhelpful stereotypes.

### **Relevance for Decision-Makers**

The research suggests the term transition may be doing more harm than good. As ubiquitous as it is in energy and climate debates, it may actually be hampering constructive discussion – even driving polarization.

There are substantive differences in decision-makers' visions of Canada's energy future and the realities that underpin them. Moving past polarization will be nearly impossible if conversations about Canada's energy future fail to achieve greater convergence on these critical differences. The findings in this report are crucial for those interested in addressing polarization in Canadian energy and climate debates. They suggest that those convening dialogues or developing policy about Canada's energy future should begin by focusing on areas of convergence to build bridges between the two realities.

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