

Heather A. Smith

# Choosing not to see

*Canada, climate change, and the Arctic*

In August 2008, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated: “Canada takes responsibility for environmental protection and enforcement in our Arctic waters. This magnificent and unspoiled ecological region is one for which we will demonstrate stewardship on behalf of our country, and indeed, all of humanity.”<sup>1</sup>

“Our Arctic waters.” “Our country.” “We” take responsibility and “we” are the “stewards.” Constructions of ownership and acts of boundary-drawing are deeply embedded in this statement. “We” and “our” are words that function to exclude and simultaneously claim a space as Canadian. The statement also tells us that “we” are committed to the environmental wellbeing of the Arctic and “we” will care for the Arctic on behalf of humanity.

The unfortunate reality is that when we consider the political discourses crafted by the Conservative government of Stephen Harper on the Arctic, we are encouraged to regard Canada as an Arctic power, to focus on sovereignty

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<sup>1</sup> “Prime Minister Harper announces measures to strengthen Canada’s Arctic sovereignty and protection of the northern environment,” office of the prime minister, 27 August 2008, [www.pm.gc.ca](http://www.pm.gc.ca).

and security, and to consider the melting Arctic as an opportunity for economic development. In spite of claims of stewardship, these discourses encourage us to be blind to the realities of climate change, to disregard the problematic nature of sovereignty in an era of global environmental change, and to turn a blind eye to our contribution to the looming environmental tragedy. The government discourse is also shaped in a way that allows the government to appear to be the champion of indigenous peoples, even to the point of co-opting part of their discourse with reference to climate change. However, the government discourse actually obscures alternative views of the Arctic and climate change and discourages us from looking beyond government statements to see the impact on indigenous peoples. As the government, and some academics, debate the finer points of international law regarding the Northwest Passage, envision future terrorist plots with their origins in the Arctic, and ponder the riches that await us, the Arctic melts.

This article begins by examining the dominant themes in the discourse relating to the Arctic as articulated by members of the Canadian Conservative government. In this section I focus on the themes of sovereignty, security, resource development, and climate change. I then turn my attention to an analysis of how the government discourse works to deflect our attention away from the realities of climate change, obscures the Canadian contribution to the problem of climate change, and discourages us from seeing the peoples most affected by climate change in the Arctic. The article ends with reflections on the implications of a government discourse that is built on antiquated and indeed dangerous understandings of the world in which we live.

#### KEY THEMES IN THE CONSERVATIVE ARCTIC DISCOURSE

Canadian government speeches and policy statements about the Arctic are an interesting mix of romantic invocations of the north coupled with aggressive claims of ownership. For example, when announcing the building of a new polar-class icebreaker in 2008, Harper described the initiative as a “major Arctic sovereignty project” and then went on to wax poetic about the Arctic and Canadian identity, stating: “The True North is our destiny, for our explorers, for our entrepreneurs, for our artists. And to not embrace its promise now at the dawn of its ascendancy would be to turn our backs on what it is to be Canadian.”<sup>2</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs

2 “Prime Minister Harper announces the John G. Diefenbaker icebreaker project,” office of the prime minister, 28 August 2008, [www.pm.gc.ca](http://www.pm.gc.ca).

Lawrence Cannon has made similar statements that link Canadian identity to the Arctic, romanticize the Arctic, and make power and ownership claims.<sup>3</sup> And while leaders muse about the true north (verbally planting flags with their references to the English version of Canada's national anthem), and declare Canada to be an Arctic power, the 2010 policy statement on the Arctic concludes with a statement that would have been appropriate in the Cold War era, as its tone is nothing if not aggressive: "when positions or actions are taken by others that affect our national interests, undermine the cooperative relationships we have built, or demonstrate a lack of sensitivity to the interests or perspectives of Arctic peoples or states, we respond...we will never waiver in our commitment to protect our North."<sup>4</sup>

In the midst of all the verbal swaggering, government speeches and policy statements inevitably tell us that there is a growing awareness about the Arctic and provide us with a shopping list of reasons for our interest in the Arctic. The 2009 northern strategy, for example, tells us that "international interest in the North has intensified because of the potential for resource development, the opening of new transportation routes, and the growing impacts of climate change."<sup>5</sup> In response to these opportunities and challenges, the federal government is crafting policy with four priorities, or pillars, in mind: "exercising our Arctic Sovereignty; promoting social and economic development; protecting our environmental heritage; improving and devolving northern governance."<sup>6</sup> And while the four pillars may be presented as equally important in the 2009 northern strategy, the 2010 statement on Canada's Arctic foreign policy leaves little doubt that sovereignty is the most significant priority. It states that "in our Arctic foreign policy, the first and most important pillar toward recognizing

3 See, for example, "Address by Minister Cannon at the news conference for the Arctic Ocean foreign ministers' meeting," 29 March 2010; "Notes for an address by the Honourable Lawrence Cannon, minister of foreign affairs, at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, on Canada's Arctic foreign policy," 6 April 2009; and "Minister Cannon outlines Canada's Arctic foreign policy," 11 March 2009, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, [www.international.gc.ca](http://www.international.gc.ca).

4 "Statement on Canada's Arctic foreign policy: Exercising sovereignty and promoting Canada's northern strategy abroad," Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, 2010, 28, [www.international.gc.ca](http://www.international.gc.ca).

5 "Canada's northern strategy: Our north, our heritage, our future," government of Canada, 2009, 5, [www.northernstrategy.gc.ca](http://www.northernstrategy.gc.ca).

6 Ibid., 2.

the potential of Canada's Arctic is the exercise of our sovereignty over the Far North."<sup>7</sup>

The discussion of sovereignty in the 2009 northern strategy notes that sovereignty includes an enhanced presence in the north as well as the protection of Arctic waters. Sovereignty also involves mapping the Arctic to support claims to the continental shelf. As a bit of a throwaway at the end of this section there is reference to the human dimension, although it is not clear whether it is the human dimension of sovereignty. This section is part of the sovereignty discussion, in which we are told that Canada works with indigenous groups associated with the Arctic Council, but what constitutes the human dimension is unclear.<sup>8</sup> It may well be the case that the use of the term "human dimension" was simply an effort to use language being used by Inuit leaders, in which case it is a weak effort to co-opt language and placate critics.

In the 2010 statement on Canada's Arctic foreign policy, we are told that the exercise of sovereignty in the Arctic happens daily through "good governance and responsible stewardship."<sup>9</sup> Central to Canada's sovereignty claims is the resolution of international boundary disputes and recognition of Canadian sovereign rights over the continental shelf. Ultimately, we are told that "protecting national sovereignty, and the integrity of our borders, is the first and foremost responsibility of a national government. We are resolved to protect Canadian sovereignty throughout our Arctic."<sup>10</sup>

Sovereignty, in the context of the government discourse on the Arctic, as noted earlier, is essentially about control, ownership, and the protection of what we consider to be our territory. While the promotion and protection of Canadian sovereignty includes numerous multilateral diplomatic and international legal initiatives, the securitization of the Arctic is noteworthy. Security is not a pillar or priority in the government documents, but realist constructions of security are deeply embedded in the Arctic discourse as sovereignty claims are used in ways that prop up and reinforce the securitization of the Arctic. For example, speeches made by Canadian politicians, as well as the two respective policy statements on the Arctic, have a tone that is reminiscent of the Cold War when state leaders engaged in defensive and aggressive rhetoric to articulate and support their visions of

7 Statement on Canada's Arctic foreign policy, 4.

8 Northern strategy, 9-13.

9 Statement on Canada's Arctic foreign policy, 5.

10 Ibid., 9.

security for their states. Canadian policy on the Arctic is rife with statements about protecting both our national interest and our borders. All that is within Canadian territory can and will be controlled by “more boots in the Arctic tundra, more ships in the icy water and a better eye in the sky.”<sup>11</sup>

What is not clear, however, is exactly who and what is threatening Canada. As Michael Sheehan notes, “to ‘securitize’ an issue...[is] to challenge society to promote it higher in its scales of values and to commit greater resources to solving the related problems.”<sup>12</sup> The power of securitizing an issue and a region is that through the act of securitizing we are also told by the government, and some academics, what to fear and, implicitly, what not to fear. So what then are the problems we want solved? We are told by the government that “this increased Canadian capacity demonstrates Canada’s presence in the region and will also ensure that we are better prepared to respond to unforeseen events.”<sup>13</sup> It is further suggested by the government and some academics that future potential problems could include environmental emergencies, and terrorists, criminals, and illegal migrants entering Canada through the Arctic.<sup>14</sup> Thus the federal government constructs a future “other” threatening Canada’s borders as a means to justify increased military commitments to the Arctic region. The future others, however, are in fact secondary to more immediate concerns because the securitization of the Arctic is about establishing some sort of presence in the Arctic, “not only to demonstrate to foreign governments that Canada is prepared to defend its sovereignty but to *force* those states to recognize Canadian claims.”<sup>15</sup> What the Canadian government really seeks to protect, through military means, is the economic potential of the Canadian Arctic.

Canada’s Arctic warrior rhetoric is motivated not simply by future unseen threats but also by future opportunities. Merging economy and security, the prime minister himself has articulated the value of the Arctic:

11 Northern strategy, 9.

12 Michael Sheehan, *International Security: An Analytical Survey* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner, 2005), 52.

13 Statement on Canada’s Arctic foreign policy, 6.

14 *Ibid.*, 9. See also Adam Lajeunesse, “The Northwest Passage in Canadian policy,” *International Journal* 63, no. 4 (autumn 2008): 1037-52; Margaret Purdy and Leanne Smythe, “From obscurity to action: Why Canada must tackle the security dimensions of climate change,” *International Journal* 65, no. 2 (spring 2010): 411-33; and Rob Huebert, “Renaissance in Canadian Arctic security?” *Canadian Military Journal* 6, no. 4 (winter 2005-06).

15 Lajeunesse, “The Northwest Passage,” 1041.

“Its economic and strategic value has risen exponentially over the years. The rising global demand for energy and mineral resources has sparked a so-called ‘cold rush’ of countries to the Arctic region, and with the retreat of the ice pack, record numbers of ships are plying our Northern waters. Canada must therefore move quickly to affirm and protect its sovereignty over the archipelago, including the navigable waterways within it, and the undersea extensions of our continental shelf.”<sup>16</sup> The promotion of social and economic development, another pillar of Canada’s Arctic foreign policy, is treated as a means to support and enhance the wellbeing of all northerners, yet the focus is clearly on resource development. The 2009 northern strategy, for example, celebrates the north’s “immense store of minerals, petroleum, hydro and ocean resources” and provides us with maps of potential oil and mineral reserves—thus solidifying visually the Arctic as a space and place of resource wealth.<sup>17</sup> Consistent with the northern strategy, the 2010 statement on Canada’s Arctic foreign policy highlights the vast oil reserves in the Arctic and, interestingly, equates sustainable development with oil and gas, stating that “[a]s an emerging clean energy superpower, Canada will continue to support the responsible and sustainable development of oil and gas in the North.”<sup>18</sup> Of course, the race for wealth is as much about potential futures as opposed to current realities, but the Canadian government is willing to bet on potential opportunities where oil and gas are concerned. The opportunities arise, of course, because of climate change.

One of the most intriguing elements of the way in which the Conservative government constructs the Arctic discourse is the relative marginalization of climate change in the whole equation. Sometimes the impact of climate change is mentioned as a challenge facing the Arctic, or, as in the case of the northern strategy, climate change is given a passing scientific reference. Passing references to climate change are also included in ministerial and prime ministerial speeches. For example, in a speech given in March 2009, Cannon stated that “the government has focused global efforts on both the impacts of climate change in the region and efforts to adapt to them.”<sup>19</sup> He states elsewhere that Canada will “work through appropriate multilateral mechanisms like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate

16 “Harper announces measures to strengthen Canada’s Arctic sovereignty.”

17 Northern strategy, 16.

18 Statement on Canada’s Arctic foreign policy, 11.

19 Cannon speech, 11 March 2009.

Change to address these challenges.”<sup>20</sup> In July 2009, Cannon framed climate effects as resulting from activities outside of the Arctic region, stating that “in the north, climate change, melting ice and rising contamination levels result from activities that take place thousands of kilometres away from the region, but still have a disproportioned impact on its environment.”<sup>21</sup>

In the statement on Canada’s Arctic foreign policy, the treatment of climate change is more substantive than in the 2009 document. Similar to Cannon’s statement above, the source of climate change is located outside the region, and indeed Canada, and we are told that what happens in the Arctic will have global repercussions and require a global solution. The now-common Conservative statements on climate change are applied to the case of the Arctic: Canada is committed to contributing to the global effort by taking action to reduce Canadian emissions. Canada will work with its North American partners. Canada will be “constructively engaging with our international partners to negotiate a fair, environmentally effective and comprehensive international climate change regime.”<sup>22</sup> Canada will also continue to support work on adaptation.

The difficulty with this treatment of climate change is that it hides more than it reveals. As part of discussions of the Arctic, the Canadian government and some scholars treat climate change primarily as a catalyst for change. Climate change is the source of the melting ice; climate change is caused by someone else; climate change is external to future plans for oil and gas exploration—but Canada is committed to working on efforts to combat climate change. What would happen if the government actually shared the severity of current and projected impacts of climate change in the Arctic? What if it told Canadians what it meant by contributions to efforts to global efforts? What would happen if the people who were most immediately affected by climate change had a real voice? What then would we say about the Canadian government discourse on the Arctic?

#### WHY DON’T WE SEE CLIMATE CHANGE?

The Arctic discourse as framed by the Conservative government minimizes the depth and breadth of climate change impacts. There is a common

20 Cannon speech, 6 April 2009.

21 “Notes for an address by the Honourable Lawrence Cannon, minister of foreign affairs, on the release of the government of Canada’s northern strategy,” 26 July 2009, [www.international.gc.ca](http://www.international.gc.ca).

22 Statement on Canada’s Arctic foreign policy, 19.

recognition of melting sea ice both by the government and scholars working in this area but the melting sea ice is typically the jumping-off point for discussions of new transportation routes, increased access to resources, and the enhanced need to protect Canada's northern borders. However, the reality is that climate change impacts in the Arctic are not limited to thinning and melting sea ice.

The Arctic climate impact assessment, one of the most substantive regional impact assessments to date, details the range and depth of climate change impacts. First and foremost, central to the assessment is the observation that the Arctic is one of the regions most vulnerable to climate change impacts. "Annual average arctic temperature has increased at almost twice the rate as the rest of the world over the past few decades."<sup>23</sup> As a result, tree lines are expected to shift northwards, fires are expected to be more common, and new species can be expected in the Arctic. The melting sea ice that is a cause for celebration for some, in terms of access to new resources, will have and is having a devastating impact on the habitat of polar bears, seals, and seabirds, "pushing some species toward extinction."<sup>24</sup> Coastal communities will be faced with coastal erosion and rising sea levels. The relocation of communities is expected (and indeed planned and underway in some cases). Thawing permafrost will also disrupt current transportation routes and as "frozen ground thaws, many existing buildings, roads, pipelines, airports, and industrial facilities are likely to be destabilized, requiring substantial rebuilding, maintenance and investment."<sup>25</sup> The assessment also highlights the fact that indigenous peoples are facing devastating cultural and economic impacts. Traditional ways of knowing and traditional ways of life are being undermined by rapid environmental change. Finally, the impacts being felt in the Arctic and the future predictions are not isolated events but are caused by global emissions; there will be broader implications. Glacial melting will contribute to sea-level rise and the loss of Arctic snow and ice may contribute to further global warming. As we know, the Arctic is not a neat, tidy, unique space distinct from the rest of the world. We know that climate change is also affecting the rest of Canada and the world. However, the actions of current and past

23 "Impacts of warming in the Arctic: Executive summary," *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8, <http://amap.no/acia>.

24 *Ibid.*, 10.

25 *Ibid.*, 11.



Canadian governments on climate change have never signalled any sense of the urgency of climate change.

If we consider the commitments of the Conservative government in any depth we see that this is a government that does not seem to be terribly concerned about climate change. When the Conservatives came to office they publically denounced Canadian commitments to the Kyoto protocol, saying they were unachievable. Canadian negotiators have routinely been accused of trying to undermine international negotiations. The Conservative government frames the issue of climate change as global and routinely argues that Canada only emits a small percentage of global emissions, conveniently overlooking per capita emissions and historic contributions to current levels of greenhouse gases. Ottawa demands are made that large emitting states such as China take on emissions-reductions targets, while Canada is more than 25 percent above its Kyoto target. Canada's current target ties Canadian action to the American target but also requires that the American target be legislated. And while we wait to see if the Obama administration can secure an environmental victory on climate change, Canada promotes itself as an energy superpower. Nowhere in the Conservative climate change policy, or in the discussion about climate change in the Arctic, is there recognition that we are part of the problem.

In fairness, previous Canadian governments were not great climate change leaders either. Consecutive governments have failed to take substantive action. The US administrations also have weak records. Given all the evidence of current impacts, one has to wonder whether there is some kind of climate change denial or whether perhaps it is argued that given that it is happening, we might as well make the best of it. If we "make the best of it," does climate change become an opportunity?

Climate change is an opportunity from the perspective of the "global culture of carboniferous consumption."<sup>26</sup> It is an opportunity if we assume that we can continue our current consumptive lifestyles unfettered. But perhaps if we listened to those in the Arctic whose lives and cultures are under siege, we might be prompted to revisit some of those assumptions about opportunities.

The indigenous peoples of the Arctic are not a homogenous entity and there are debates within communities about the balance between development and traditional environmental ways of being and knowing. However, if we consider indigenous voices' perceptions of the effects of

26 Simon Dalby, "Geopolitical identities: Arctic ecology and global consumption," *Geopolitics* 8, no. 1 (spring 2003): 198.

climate change and traditional environmental knowledge, we are challenged to consider the way in which our western gaze shapes our understanding of the Arctic.

As noted in the chapter on indigenous perspectives on climate change in the scientific report of the climate impact assessment, traditional environmental knowledge is a contested term, but at minimum it includes recognition of the spiritual nature of knowledge and assumptions of how indigenous peoples are connected to the land, and it encompasses “the various systems of knowledge, practice, and belief gained through experience and culturally transmitted among members and generations of a community.”<sup>27</sup> Indigenous ways of knowing do not subscribe to the compartmentalization and categorization common to western ways of knowing. In the words of Dene elder Bella T’selie, “scientists like to talk about things apart. We think in holistic terms and cannot think about things separately. Dene spirituality is in traditional knowledge. Dene ways are very formal. We cannot separate spirituality in Dene, but scientists think this is ridiculous.”<sup>28</sup>

Inuit elders, like Dene elders, have observed changes in their landscape. The weather has become unpredictable and as a result their knowledge of the world in which they live has no longer become reliable. As noted by elder N. Attungala of Baker Lake, “Inuit have a traditional juggling game. The weather is sort of like that now. The weather is being juggled; it is changing so quickly and drastically.”<sup>29</sup>

As the weather is juggled because of activities outside of the Arctic, the peoples of the north become the equivalent of the canaries in the global environmental coalmine and their leaders have called for inclusion in ongoing state-based discussions about the future of the Arctic. As Sheila Watt-Cloutier stated at the Copenhagen climate change meetings in 2009, “the people whose lives depend upon the ice and snow for cultural survival must be a central component of all our plans. We must not permit the discussion of northern development to be conducted only in terms of sovereignty, resources, and economics. The focus must be on the human dimension, human communities and protection of human cultural rights.”<sup>30</sup>

27 Henry Huntington and Shari Fox, “The changing Arctic: Indigenous perspectives,” in *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment*, 64.

28 *Ibid.*, 78.

29 *Ibid.*, 82.

30 Sheila Watt-Cloutier, “Reclaiming the moral high ground,” *Nunatsiaq Online* 21, December 2009.

A substantive inclusion of indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing into the dialogue related to the Arctic would fundamentally disrupt the dominant narrative currently articulated by the Canadian Conservative government. Indigenous peoples remind us that we are not just stewards—masters of our domain—but are connected to, and are part of, the land. We are not just isolated consumers of oil and gas. We are connected to each other through environmental processes that disregard attempts to draw lines between us and them. Our actions affect others in real and tangible ways. Perhaps the power of this knowledge helps us to understand the exclusion of indigenous peoples from the Canadian-sponsored meeting of Arctic Ocean states that saw American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton leave in protest, in part over the exclusion of indigenous peoples?

#### CONCLUSION

So what happens when we consider the Conservative government discourse on the Arctic in light of the realities of the climate change impacts in the Arctic? What happens when we expose the limited and ineffective nature of Canadian climate change policies? How does our understanding of the Arctic change if we include the voices of indigenous peoples?

We see that the assumptions of control and domination that are so central to the idea of sovereignty in the Conservative discourse on the Arctic are naive and dangerous. They are naive because they entail some sort of control over the future of the Arctic, when in fact we cannot control the environment. Climate change impacts will not be linear and are not limited to melting sea ice. All of the Arctic, indeed all of the world, will be affected by climate change. Plans for oil-and-gas drilling will be disrupted by environmental changes that will also disrupt infrastructure and transportation routes.

We also see that climate change impacts are not simply about the future; they are taking place now. Our past consumption is affecting the Arctic environment and wellbeing of indigenous peoples now. The Arctic is not simply a space of future opportunities. Action is needed now. And the action that is needed now is not more boots on the tundra. The militarization and securitization of the Arctic does not address the problem of climate change.

The way the Conservative discourse securitizes the Arctic serves only to divert our attention from our own complicity in environmental degradation. We are encouraged by the Conservatives and some scholars to be fearful of the arrival of illegal migrants or terrorists in the Arctic. These intangible and future threats justify military spending and rhetorical swaggering while simultaneously downplaying the ways in which we are the creators

of our own insecurities. Canadians and consecutive Canadian governments have chosen to not take climate change seriously. Rather than blame those outside of Canada for climate change, as does Lawrence Cannon, we need to look within our own borders and ask: how are we responsible?

When we include the voices of indigenous peoples, we are made aware of the human dimension of climate change. The Arctic is more than a map of potential resources; it is someone's home. So when the Conservative government tells us we will care for the Arctic for all of humanity, perhaps we should question the credibility of this statement. We are not taking care of the Arctic for all humanity; we are taking care of the Arctic for ourselves. We are protecting our consumptive lifestyles and turning a blind eye to the juggling game in which we are involved.

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