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September 22, 2017

Rebuilding Trust

If you've been in a relationship when the trust is gone, you know how difficult it is to rebuild and restore that trust. So it is in politics and public policy.

Canadians sent a clear message, in the lead up to the 2015 federal election, that they had lost trust in our country's environmental assessment processes. Their faith in the fairness and integrity of these processes had been undermined by significant changes made by the Harper government in 2012.

Prime Minister Trudeau pledged that, if elected, a Liberal government would work to earn back that trust by significantly reforming and modernizing Canada's environmental assessment system. Getting these processes right is critical to ensuring the achievement of both economic prosperity and environmental sustainability.

Our government launched a comprehensive review of all federal environmental and regulatory processes - including the federal environmental assessment regime, the National Energy Board, the Fisheries Act and the Navigation Protection Act.

New legislation

Now, after more than a year of extensive consultations with a vast range of stakeholders, we are putting pen to paper on new legislation. By early next year, the government will ask Parliament to enact sweeping changes.

This is an issue in which I have been actively engaged given my role as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

A few weeks ago, I accompanied Minister Catherine McKenna to a series of consultation sessions here in Vancouver with leaders from BC's environmental, business and Indigenous communities. Similar meetings have taken place in every corner of the country and were supplemented by a report of an Expert Panel, over 500 formal written submissions and thousands of on-line comments from Canadians.

In June, the government summarized what Minister McKenna and I heard at those stakeholder meetings and through the broad sweep of consultation in a discussion paper entitled "Environmental and Regulatory Reviews" which you can review on-line at Canada.ca/environmental-reviews.

"Bold and sweeping"

The discussion paper prompted Globe and Mail columnist Gary Mason to

write, "The fact is, the government's environmental agenda is bold and sweeping."

At the heart of the proposed new direction is a shift from "environmental assessment" to "impact assessment". This change is more than semantics. It represents a game-changing move towards a more holistic approach to sustainability that considers cultural, social, health and economic considerations in addition to environmental impacts.

Also under consideration is a legal requirement for an early planning and engagement phase for projects. This will facilitate public discussion and dialogue at the conceptual stage of a project so that concerns and issues can be identified and taken into account early to promote better-designed project proposals and more effective assessments overall.

The discussion paper also proposes greater collaboration with Indigenous governments, increasing transparency by providing Canadians' with high quality information through an open science and data on-line platform, and maintaining assurances of timely decisions through legislated timelines.

Considering cumulative effects

Finally, we are considering the concept of regional impact assessments. This will be particularly relevant for regions in which high levels of ecological disturbance already exist. This will enable effective consideration of cumulative effects and can assist in informing regional planning – something that the current process, with its sole focus on individual projects, cannot effectively do.

Modernizing our assessment process of major projects is important to ensuring that we arrive at good environmental and economic outcomes. It is also key to ensuring we continue to build an economy that enables Canada to meet our international targets to reduce greenhouse gas pollution.

The environmental assessment legislation to be introduced in the House of Commons this fall offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to restore the integrity of and public confidence in these extremely important processes.

Such sweeping reform is essential for Canada's future as we strive to ensure that economic progress and environmental sustainability truly can and do, go hand in hand. Stay tuned.

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