

Government, Anti-Reflexivity, and the Construction of Public Ignorance about Climate Change: Australia and Canada Compared

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This article examines how the conservative-minded administrations of John Howard's Liberal Party in Australia (1996–2007) and Stephen Harper's Conservative Party in Canada (2006–present) sought to manage public impressions of climate change and climate change policy. Australia and Canada are important nations for global climate change politics, given that both have highly developed, resource-driven economies and among the highest per capita emitters of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the world. Both nations have also vacillated between support for and obstruction of strong international climate agreements.

The Howard and Harper administrations have been among the most vehement opponents of forceful international action to mitigate climate change, while anchored in societies largely supportive of such measures. This article compares the strategies deployed by the two governments to legitimate their actions to their respective domestic publics. In doing so, we draw on the notion of "anti-reflexivity" proposed by McCright and Dunlap,¹ which is a response to optimistic assumptions about the potential influence of reflexive modernization on environmental politics, as well as concepts from an emerging field called "the sociology of ignorance."² Our comparison finds that both governments deployed a range of ignorance-building strategies intended to lessen public commitment to strong mitigation action. While many studies of political resistance to climate change focus on the role of denial, skepticism, and counter-claims, our research suggests a significant role for what we call "affirmation tech-

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1. McCright and Dunlap 2010.
2. Smithson 1988; and Gross 2007.

niques,” or the rhetorical acceptance of the consensus position on climate change followed by concerted attempts to control precisely what acceptance means.

Anti-Reflexivity, Ignorance, and Government

Climate change is a challenging problem on many levels, and several social and political theorists have recently argued that the issue is potentially transformative.³ Hulme, for instance, suggests that “the idea of climate change should be seen as an intellectual resource around which our collective and personal identities and projects can form and take shape. We need to ask not what we can do for climate change, but ask what climate change can do for us.”⁴ The idea here is that the climate change issue gives individuals and institutions alike a chance to rethink economic, social, and political structures and habits—if we are going to have to change and adapt anyway, here is a golden opportunity to rethink how we, as a global society, would like to live.

While this scenario may be idealistic, part of its appeal (at least to social scientists) is its consistency with longer-standing narratives about reflexive modernization.⁵ Theories of reflexive modernization posit that the modern world has gone through two distinct periods of reform. The first (or simple) phase involved the formalization of many key institutions in Western society and is associated with the rise of industrial capitalism, the modern state, and the systematic application of the scientific method to problems of economic production, war, and medicine.⁶ Importantly, the first phase of modernization was dependent on, or at least facilitated by, leaving other institutions and practices untouched. Thus first modernity was built on such unfortunate foundations as gender inequality, racial and ethnic discrimination, and environmental exploitation. The second (or reflexive) phase in the modernization project is the product of these contradictions, gradually exposed through the actions of social movements, the increasingly obvious human role in natural disasters and problems, and advances in social and natural science. These forces push societies into a state of “self-confrontation” whereby they are compelled to address the side effects of earlier modernization, such as environmental degradation, alongside such classic problems as scarcity, inequality, and production, in increasingly complex problem sets.⁷

According to some, global climate change is elevating and forcing self-confrontation at an unprecedented scale. Beck takes this argument furthest, suggesting that the breadth and severity of the climate problem are creating a con-

3. E.g., Beck 2009; Giddens 2009; Hulme 2009; and Urry 2011.

4. Hulme 2009, 326.

5. Beck et al. 1994.

6. Beck et al. 2003, 5.

7. Beck et al. 2003, 16.

dition of “enforced cosmopolitanism,” whereby “global risks activate and connect actors across borders who otherwise don’t want to have anything to do with one another.” In turn this furthers the development of new forms of official politics (international agreements) and progressive “sub-politics” at the grassroots level.⁸

A main criticism of this line of thinking, however, is that it reflects the European moment more than the global reality.⁹ There are in fact deep divisions among and within developed nations on how to respond to these pressures. Recently, McCright and Dunlap have advanced the concept of “anti-reflexivity” to analyze “movement[s] that attempt to protect the industrial capitalist order of simple modernization.”¹⁰ That anti-reflexivity is a movement is important, as it implies that this phenomenon is not just about inertia (which could be termed “non-reflexivity”),¹¹ but the *intentional* mobilization of resources and strategies to counter the self-confrontation that anchors reflexive modernization. McCright and Dunlap’s research has shown that the predominant method of the anti-reflexive movement involves the dissemination, manipulation and suppression of knowledge claims.¹² The most successful of these tactics in conflicts over climate change has involved casting doubt on the consensus position of the IPCC, constructing a “non-problematicity” narrative in which climate changes are normal or benign, and exerting pressure for “non-decision making” by, among other things, using economic arguments to highlight the unreasonable costs of mitigation.¹³

In the remainder of this paper, we argue that the Howard and Harper administrations have strongly pursued anti-reflexivity on climate change issues. Before we do so, however, we highlight two ways in which we depart from McCright and Dunlap’s conceptualization. First, given that they focus on the US, they emphasize the role of corporate strategy, civil society, and ideological polarization in the anti-reflexive movement. Their analysis stresses the role of industrial lobby groups, think tanks, private foundations, openly partisan media, and corporate-backed citizen organizations in advancing non-consensus interpretations of the climate change issue. The absorption of climate change into the so-called “culture wars” of US politics provides these views with a ready audience among the general population.¹⁴ In Australia and Canada, however, such groups have less public legitimacy, and the general population is less polarized on climate change issues. Neither Canada nor Australia has a tradition of political polarization, and opinion polling shows that the populations of both coun-

8. Beck 2009, 61 and 95.

9. McCright and Dunlap 2010.

10. McCright and Dunlap 2010, 101.

11. E.g., Murray 2009.

12. See McCright and Dunlap 2003.

13. McCright and Dunlap 2010, 100.

14. McCright and Dunlap 2011, 180.

tries have supported the principle of climate change mitigation with relative consistency.¹⁵ This means that, unlike in the United States, *government* has been the key spokesperson and critical agent of anti-reflexivity in these countries.

Our second departure from McCright and Dunlap (which is more of an extension) involves our use of concepts from the *sociology of ignorance* to better understand the knowledge politics of climate change in these two cases. McCright and Dunlap argue that one of the key goals of the anti-reflexive movement is “consciousness-lowering” among policymakers and the general public to social and environmental problems.¹⁶ This points to the dynamic role that ignorance or “not knowing” plays in social life generally and climate politics in particular. Our starting point for this is Smithson’s classic work on the role that ignorance plays in facilitating social action.¹⁷ Drawing on the symbolic interactionist tradition in sociology, Smithson argues that there are strong social norms against knowing, particularly when knowing causes social discomfort or loss of face, or when it interferes with small talk and pleasantries (as when a stranger offers “too much information!”).¹⁸ Importantly, this desirable ignorance also extends to organizations, which frequently assume that keeping employees on a “need to know basis” enhances productivity by minimizing distractions.¹⁹ Overall, this suggests that ignorance is not the opposite of knowledge, but is in fact a part of how *knowing* is constituted. Gross posits that knowledge and non-knowledge are united by the “bridge” of trust.²⁰ Drawing on Simmel, he argues that we are comfortable not knowing things, or only knowing them fleetingly, about the people or institutions we deal with, so long as we trust their actions to be predictable and benign.

While sociologists of ignorance go to great lengths to conceptualize and compare different forms of “not knowing,” our focus here is on how the Howard and Harper administrations have mobilized the knowledge-trust-ignorance dynamic to advance an anti-reflexive agenda. This means moving beyond the notions of denial and deception. While these play a significant role in the Canadian and Australian cases, our analysis shows that *acceptance* of climate change also plays a significant role (in one case more than the other) in anti-reflexivity. Specifically, we argue that rhetorical acceptance of climate change opens up room for the construction of the “trust bridge” that allows people to be comfortable with non-knowledge. In turn, this suggests that anti-reflexivity is a more complex political and discursive strategy than it first appears.

15. Harrison 2007: 94; and Bailey and Maresh 2008. There is recent evidence that public opinion is beginning to polarize in both Canada and Australia along voting lines. However, the level of polarization is substantially lower than in the US (Tranter 2011; and Borick et al 2011).

16. McCright and Dunlap 2003, 351.

17. Smithson 1985; and Smithson 1988.

18. Smithson 1985, 157–63.

19. Smithson 1985, 166.

20. Gross 2007, 746.

Methods

The strategies employed by the two governments were examined using primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources included academic and non-academic histories, commentaries, and analyses, as well as media coverage of key events and announcements. Two types of primary sources were analyzed. First, we reviewed official policy and legislative documents from both countries relevant to climate change issues. These included annual national reports to the UNFCCC, and policy statements such *Securing Australia's Energy Future* (2004) and Canada's *Clean Air Act* (2006) and *Turning the Corner* strategy (2007). Second, we examined climate change-related communications from the two administrations, including press releases, media briefings, and ministerial speeches (including those of both prime ministers). These were acquired via Internet archives, and a concerted effort was made to review communications from all years of the respective governments. All primary sources were coded iteratively, meaning that themes were identified at each reading, and then entered into a bank of possible codes that were used for each subsequent document. Strategies were identified subjectively by grouping the codes into larger categories. We then subjected key passages within selected texts to discourse analysis to illustrate the strategies in action (see below).²¹ Because we are focusing on political strategies, our focus is on the words and actions of senior leadership—the respective prime ministers and Cabinet members—as well as those of relevant committees and ministries involved in climate change issues.

Constructing Public Ignorance: Australia and Canada Compared

Background

While Canada and Australia are a world apart geographically, they are in fact very similar countries. Both are former British colonies that have inherited many of England's political institutions, notably the parliamentary form of government that grants considerable powers to the prime minister and cabinet ministers. Both are also federations of states (Australia) and provinces (Canada) that have legal jurisdiction in areas such as environment, resource management and economic development. Their wealth has historically come from resource exploitation for export, with manufacturing and knowledge economy sectors remaining relatively underdeveloped. As middle powers, Australia and Canada have historically favored multilateral approaches to global problems and issues.²²

It is this tradition of multilateralism, perhaps more than anything else,

21. Gee 2011.

22. Harrison 2007; and Stevenson 2009.

that guided both nations' early responses to the climate change issue. The Canadian government was among the first to publicly commit to reducing greenhouse emissions in 1988. At the time, the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney (whose party would later merge with the populist Canadian Alliance to become the Conservative Party now led by Stephen Harper) was eager to build on the success of the Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion that had been negotiated the year before. Mulroney thus convened a conference entitled "The Changing Atmosphere" in Toronto, committing Canada to a 20-percent reduction in GHGs by 2005.²³ The early Australian story reads in much the same way. The Labor Government of Robert Hawke accepted the "Toronto target," publicly committing to it in 1990 and introducing a "National Greenhouse Response Strategy" in 1992 (by that time Paul Keating had succeeded Hawke).

Early enthusiasm soon gave way to policy stagnation in both countries. These stories are well documented elsewhere.²⁴ As a quick summary, both nations suffered greatly in the global recession of 1991–1992, thus dampening enthusiasm for carbon regulation. Most significant, however, was the mobilization of the fossil fuel industry and their allies in both federal and provincial/state governments.²⁵ These interests were particularly vocal in the lead up to the final negotiations of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. Both Australia and Canada signed the protocol (Canada committing to a 6-percent reduction of GHGs from 1990, Australia to an 8-percent increase), although this did not end the controversy in either country. Despite the fact that the Howard government had agreed to Kyoto, the prime minister shocked many allies by announcing in June 2002 that Australia would not ratify the agreement. In Canada, the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien ratified in December 2002, but failed to introduce meaningful legislation to reduce GHGs.²⁶ In January 2006, Stephen Harper's Conservatives defeated Chrétien's successor, Paul Martin.

Comparing the Howard and Harper Governments

The comparison presented below is a study in both similarities and differences. Both Howard and Harper began their respective mandates at times of heightened public awareness of climate change issues—in the lead up to Kyoto, and in the wake of the 2007 IPCC report and the film *An Inconvenient Truth* respectively. Both also had to deal with concrete commitments to reduce GHGs and vocal environmentalist and opposition groups determined to keep climate change on the political agenda. There are key differences as well. The two administrations have governed at different times, and climate change debates are more complex today than during Howard's time. It is therefore likely that some of the differ-

23. *New York Times*, June 28, 1988, 1.

24. Simpson et al. 2007; Macintosh 2008.

25. Pearse 2007; Paehlke 2008, 70.

26. Simpson et al. 2007, 73.

Table 1
Usage of Key Anti-Reflexivity Strategies in Australia and Canada

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>Canada</i>
Public denial or skepticism of anthropogenic climate change or its severity	Frequently	Rarely
Compliance claims	Frequently	Frequently
Competing priorities (economy vs. environment)	Frequently	Occasionally
Appeals to nationalism	Frequently	Frequently
Exporting the problem	Frequently	Frequently
Controlling the research message	Rarely	Frequently
Use of shifting numerical targets	Rarely	Frequently

ences we observe are related to the evolution of both climate change politics and the tactics of anti-reflexivity. There is also some evidence of Canadian conservatives learning directly from their Australian counterparts. We know, for instance, that in the early years of the Harper government there was a profound admiration of Howard's accomplishments, and that the Canadian Conservative Party had studied and borrowed several key policy ideas from Australia's Liberal Party.²⁷ Howard was the first foreign head of state to visit Canada after Harper's election in 2006, and was issued a rare invitation to speak to the Canadian Parliament. The comparison, therefore, ought to be considered as an investigation of the range of potential and evolving strategies for anti-reflexivity rather than a rigorous analysis of differences between the two cases.

The main findings from our comparison are summarized in Table 1. As mentioned, our research involved analysis of policy statements and other communications across all years of the respective administrations (until the time of writing in October 2011). This allows us to provide a rough measure of the intensity of the various strategies. For example, if a strategy is consistently identifiable across time and in a variety of contexts, we label it as "frequent." Strategies that are inconsistently used or emerge only under certain circumstances are labeled as "occasional," and strategies for which there is little evidence are classified as "rare." We describe each of the strategies in turn.

Skepticism and Denial

One of the most straightforward anti-reflexive activities involves public statements of skepticism or denial of the existence or severity of anthropogenic climate change. In Australia, multiple members of the Howard government spoke publicly of their skepticism and denial of the consensus position of the IPCC. While many of these statements date to the late 1990s, research by Macintosh

27. Howard's political apprentice, *National Post*, June 28, 2007.

found ample evidence of public statements of skepticism in the later years of the administration.²⁸ For instance, in 2007 Government members of a key climate change committee wrote that “the evidence that human beings are changing the global climate is certainly not compelling. . . . Climate change is a natural phenomenon that has always been with us, and always will be. Whether human activities are disturbing the climate in dangerous ways has yet to be proven.”²⁹ There are also more subtle comments from Howard himself in 2006: “I accept the broad theory of climate change [but] I am skeptical about a lot of the more gloomy predictions.”³⁰

In Canada, by contrast, there has been very little public talk of skepticism or denial from the Harper government. While several current senior members of government had spoken out prior to taking office in 2006 (including Harper himself, who called climate change a “hypothesis” in 2002), this talk all but ceased in the years following. In the very few instances when skepticism has been publicly articulated (as in a newspaper letter by former Defense Minister Maxime Bernier in 2010), it has been immediately disavowed by the prime minister’s office.³¹ Since assuming office, the Harper government has moved to centralize communications on most policy issues (a point we return to below), which suggests that the aversion to public statements of skepticism is intentional and a strong contrast to the Howard government.

Compliance Claims

Compliance claims have played an important role in the communications strategies of both administrations, although the Harper government takes these rhetorically much further than did Howard. Officials from the Howard government repeatedly stated that Australia was on track to meet its Kyoto target, even after refusing to ratify the agreement.³² These claims, which technically had more to do with land use reforms than emissions reductions, were frequently framed in nationalist terms: “Australia has shown strong leadership on greenhouse through its own actions, and is on track to meet its Kyoto target of 108 percent of 1990 emission levels by 2008–12.”³³

The Harper government has been less restrained in its claims-making. While compliance claims did not play a big role in the Government’s first major policy action (the *Clean Air Act* of 2006), since 2007 nearly all speeches, press releases, and policy documents have used compliance claims, as well as language and metaphors borrowed from the environmentalist movement. For in-

28. Macintosh 2008, 61–62.

29. Macintosh 2008, 61.

30. Howes and Dedekorkut-Howes 2010, 2.

31. Siding with skeptics, Conservative MP decries climate-change ‘alarmism.’ *Canadian Press*, February 24, 2010.

32. Barnsley 2006, 402.

33. Australia 2004, 24.

stance, at a policy announcement in 2007, then-Environment Minister John Baird stated that “Canada needs to do a U-turn, because we are going in the wrong direction. . . . Canadians want action, they want it now and our government is delivering.”³⁴ A year later, then-Environment Minister Jim Prentice stated in a speech: “We must pour every effort into safeguarding all aspects of our environment . . . against a great force whose might carries with it consequences of potentially devastating proportions: climate change.”³⁵

Competing Priorities (Economy vs. Environment)

The Howard government in Australia made the conflict between economy and environment a centerpiece of its climate change communications strategy. As noted earlier, both Australia and Canada have resource- and export-dependent economies that contribute to their high per capita GHG emissions. There is also substantial evidence that both governments have enjoyed a close relationship with powerful fossil fuel industries, notably coal in Australia and oil and gas in Canada.³⁶ The Howard government did not shy away from this fact, and frequently used the prospect of “a national economic disaster” to justify its refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.³⁷ More precisely, Howard and his ministers frequently framed the Australian economy as too carbon-dependent to take strong climate action. Pearse quotes the Prime Minister from a 2006 press conference:

I am . . . determin[ed] to protect the industries of this country that give us a natural competitive advantage. . . . I believe in the coal industry and I believe in preserving the competitive advantage we now have and that is why we didn't sign Kyoto, because Kyoto could well have put us at a competitive disadvantage.³⁸

This line of reasoning is also found in a number of government policy statements, including *Securing Australia's Energy Future* (2004), which argues:

Australia will not impose significant new economy-wide costs, such as emissions trading, in its greenhouse response at this stage. Such action is premature, in the absence of effective longer-term global action on climate change, and given Australia is on track to meet its Kyoto 108-percent target. Pursuing this path in advance of an effective global response would harm Australia's competitiveness and growth with no certain global climate change benefits.³⁹

The Harper government, in contrast, has for the most part refrained from using economic arguments as a justification for inaction on climate change.

34. Canada 2007a.

35. Prentice 2008.

36. Pearse 2007; and Paehlke 2008.

37. Lawrence 2009, 283–284.

38. Pearse 2007, 138.

39. Australia 2004, 25.

This does not mean that economic arguments are not used at all. As we will discuss below, the economy looms large in the Harper government's strategy of "exporting the problem," specifically by tying Canadian action to (future) US policy. But, as noted by Gelbspan, officials from the Harper government appear to be drawing on recognized US Republican Party strategies of avoiding the economy versus environment dichotomy while stressing incremental, "sensible," and "balanced" approaches to the problem.⁴⁰ Macdonald points to an important exception, during the Parliamentary debates surrounding Bill C-288, which was introduced by the opposition to force the government to meet its obligations under the Kyoto Protocol.⁴¹ Given that the Harper Government was in a minority position at the time, then-Environment Minister John Baird fell back on arguments about an economic doomsday scenario, arguing that passage of the bill would, among other things, cost the country 275,000 jobs and lower household incomes by thousands of dollars.⁴² In our view, however, the main difference between the two countries is that in Australia such arguments were offensive (meant to establish a position), while in Canada they were defensive and used only as a last resort, thus making it doubtful that this was an integral part of a planned anti-reflexivity strategy: *The Climate Change Accountability Act* was ultimately passed by the following Parliament (as Bill C-311) but rejected by the Conservative-dominated Senate in 2010.

Appeals to Nationalism

Throughout its mandate, the Howard government used nationalism as a means of justifying its decision-making on climate change. Stevenson argues that from its election in 1996, the Howard administration "rejected the conception of Australia as a middle power and the commitment to multilateralism which this entailed," preferring instead a strategy of negotiating advantageous bilateral arrangements on the international stage.⁴³ Several authors have argued that this approach contributed to Australia's founding role in the "Kyoto alternative" scheme, the Asia Pacific Partnership, which we discuss in a later section.⁴⁴ Nationalism in this case was also used as a frame for dismissing international criticisms that did not respect Australia's "specific circumstances" (particularly its energy economy).⁴⁵ Even in the later years of his government, one of Howard's main criticisms of international agreements and ideas was that they were "European." Speaking in the House of Representatives about the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change in 2007, Howard argued that "Stern is not the biblical scholar of climate change that is posited by [the opposition]. Stern has

40. Gelbspan 2006; see Prentice 2008.

41. Macdonald 2008, 231.

42. Canada 2007b, 2.

43. Stevenson 2009, 174.

44. E.g., Lawrence 2009.

45. Australia 1997, 3.

written from the perspective of an Englishman, from the European circumstance and from the European point of view."⁴⁶ On the Kyoto Protocol that same year: "The Kyoto model [that is] top-down, prescriptive, legalistic and Eurocentric, simply won't fly in [this] region."⁴⁷

The Harper government has also used nationalism liberally, albeit somewhat inconsistently. Policy documents from 2006 and 2007 make frequent anti-Kyoto references to the need to develop a "made in Canada climate change program."⁴⁸ However, the made-in-Canada approach is now rarely mentioned following the 2008 decision to tie Canadian policy to as-yet unknown measures in the US (see below). This is, in a sense, an anti-nationalist stance that critics have been quick to seize upon.⁴⁹ A more consistent nationalist narrative has been to label Canada as "an emerging energy superpower."⁵⁰ Following criticism, this was quickly amended to "clean energy superpower"—a term that now appears in many climate change-related communications, particularly those that emphasize technological development, such as carbon capture and storage, or economic measures such as subsidies to biofuel producers.⁵¹

Exporting the Problem

Exporting the problem has been one of the most evident strategies for anti-reflexivity in both countries, although it has been pursued in different ways. The Howard government repeatedly stated that global warming was not primarily an Australian problem, but one for the developing world. For example, *Securing Australia's Energy Future* argues:

Although Australian greenhouse gas emissions are about 1.6 per cent of world emissions and are too small for Australia to make a difference on its own, Australia is committed to pursuing an effective global response to climate change. To be effective, a global response must encompass the world's largest emitters . . . and include a pathway for addressing developing countries, whose emissions will soon overtake those of industrialized countries.⁵²

Lawrence argues that this logic, which was also espoused by the US Bush administration, led directly to the founding of the Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate (APP) in 2005.⁵³ The APP (defunct as of April 2011) was a voluntary scheme originally involving the US, Australia, Japan, China, India, and South Korea (Canada joined in 2007) aimed primarily at economic development and technology transfer via public-private partnerships. It

46. Macintosh 2008, 67.

47. Howard Calls for New Climate Change Consensus, *ABC News*, June 7, 2007.

48. Canada 2006, 16.

49. Feds Have Yet to Pass any Climate Change Legislation, *Hill Times*, December 14, 2009.

50. Way 2011.

51. Tories Invested More Than \$10 billion to Reduce GHGs, *Hill Times*, August 16, 2010.

52. Australia 2004, 25.

53. Lawrence 2009, 285.

had no formal emissions reduction goals, and focused on cleaner growth in developing nations.

The Harper government shares this interpretation of climate responsibility, but has not articulated it publicly with as much candor.⁵⁴ For Canada, the primary means of exporting the problem has been to peg future climate change policy to as-yet unknown US policy. This strategy began to emerge in 2008, after the government's two previous policy actions (*Clean Air Act* and *Turning the Corner*) were met with broad public skepticism. The election of President Obama in the US also provided an opportunity for the Harper government to reorient climate policy toward an explicitly continentalist approach. This shift, which Hoberg describes as a "remarkable abrogation of sovereignty,"⁵⁵ is justified primarily using economic arguments: "Canada has been working with the United States to align our strategies and work together to develop realistic targets and goals. Given the highly integrated nature of our economies, it is important to ensure that our principles, policies, regulations and standards are aligned with those of our largest trader [*sic*] partner."⁵⁶ In practice, however, this "wait and see" approach has translated into almost complete inaction in policy terms.⁵⁷

Controlling the Research Message

Climate change is one of the most science-intensive environmental problems in the world today, and scientific research has played a major role in communicating climate change issues to the public. In the United States, the anti-reflexivity movement has turned to minority-view contrarian scientists to justify their positions.⁵⁸ This has not been the case in Australia and Canada, however, despite the availability of home-grown contrarian voices⁵⁹—likely due to the broad political support for climate change action in both countries discussed previously.

Both Australia and Canada have sought to use research funding to claim that they are acting on climate change, while in fact subsidizing key industries. For instance, the Howard government established research programs aimed at technology development for fossil fuel industries, while the Harper government has sponsored research into carbon capture and storage for Alberta's oil sands projects.⁶⁰ However, the Harper administration has gone much further than the Howard government in actively trying to control research *messages* about climate change.⁶¹ Upon taking office in 2006, the Harper government eliminated or scaled back funding for several national networks for climate science, includ-

54. Won't repeat Kyoto Error: PM, *Toronto Star*, November 25, 2007.

55. Hoberg 2010, 1.

56. Canada 2010.

57. National Round Table on Environment and Economy 2011, 38.

58. McCright and Dunlap 2003.

59. Hoggan 2008.

60. Christoff 2005, 30.

61. Cf. Hamilton and Maddison 2007, 63.

ing the Canadian Climate Impacts and Adaptations Research Network, which was closed and its website emptied of all reports and publications.⁶² In 2007, the government also implemented a “Media Relations” policy at the Ministry of Environment that forbids scientists from communicating directly with the media and requires that they answer questions in writing that are vetted by senior managers prior to release.⁶³ This “message molding” appears to apply to all climate-related science generated by government employees, even studies of historical climate events and changes unrelated to current experiences.⁶⁴

Shifting Numerical Targets

While Australia’s Kyoto target played a significant role in the communications strategy of the Howard government, the situation in Canada has been markedly different. In this case, the government has endorsed a series of targets that are each based on different base and target years (the universal base year for Kyoto is 1990, and the target 2008–2012). The aforementioned *Clean Air Act* released in 2006 made the first major leap in recalibrating targets. First, it reset the base year to 2006 and the target years to 2020 and 2050. Second, it reoriented the targets to deal with *intensity* of emissions rather than *total* emissions—meaning that total emissions could in fact rise depending on economic growth, although the government claimed that overall reductions of 20 percent would occur by 2020.⁶⁵ While the Prime Minister stood by these targets following the Copenhagen Accord negotiations in December 2009 they were changed again in early 2010, this time for a 17 percent reduction by 2020 in total emissions from 2005 levels, while the year 2050 was dropped from most government communications. One definitive consequence of the shifting numbers is a dilution of Canada’s commitment to emissions reductions. Table 2 outlines the tangible but hidden differences among these targets.⁶⁶

One of the more subtle effects of these changes, however, is that they create the illusion of action, or at least of commitment to future action. Jaccard et al. go so far as to describe emissions targets as “meaningless by themselves and often a red herring. Some environmentalists have applauded politicians for setting aggressive [but non-binding] targets for GHG reduction (called “stretch targets” or “aspirational targets”) and the media tends to focus on these. As a consequence, many politicians select ambitious targets even while their actual policies have negligible likelihood of achieving them.”⁶⁷

62. Canadian Climate Impacts and Adaptations Research Network (C-CIARN) 2011. See Cuddy 2010, for a review of programs affected.

63. Cuddy 2010, 22.

64. O’Hara 2010.

65. Canada 2007c, 7.

66. Adapted from Weaver 2011, 97–98.

67. Jaccard et al. 2008, 1.

Table 2
Shifting Numerical Targets in Canada

<i>Commitment/Policy</i>	<i>Official Base and Target Years</i>	<i>Pledged Reduction</i>	<i>Pledged Reduction Relative to 1990</i>
Kyoto Protocol (1997)	1990 (base) 2008–2012 (target)	6%	6% below 1990 by 2008–2012
Clean Air Act (2006) & Turning the Corner (2007)	2006 (base) 2020 (target) 2050 (target)	20%	3% below 1990 by 2020
Turning the Corner (revised) (2010)	2005 (base) 2020 (target)	17%	2.5% above 1990 by 2020

Discussion

As mentioned earlier, our comparison is meant to be exploratory—to examine the range of anti-reflexive actions in the two countries rather than rigorously compare their political cultures or experiences with the climate change issue. One of the benefits of this approach is that we get a sense of the *complexity* and *adaptiveness* of anti-reflexivity strategies. To date, most studies of anti-reflexivity have focused on what we would call “negation techniques”—forms of denial, undermining, and counter-claim that are intended to weaken the consensus position or its advocates. We find substantial evidence of this strategy, particularly within the Howard government in Australia. However, we also find evidence of “affirmation techniques” that involve explicit acceptance of the consensus position, followed by concerted attempts to control what precisely acceptance means. This is about more than giving lip service to the issue, but manipulating how climate change and climate change policy are presented to the public.

Overall, our analysis suggests that both governments experimented with different tactics but ultimately adopted strategies that involved communicating both rejection *and* acceptance of pro-mitigation ideas and language. The Howard government in Australia tended more towards rejection, but frequently used compliance claims to communicate acceptance in principle of the need for GHG reductions. The nationalist frame provided a bridge between the two, as the Australian government was essentially claiming that the international community did not recognize Australia’s special circumstances. In Canada, the Harper government has rhetorically tended more towards acceptance. The prime minister and cabinet ministers routinely wax eloquent on the severity of the problem and need for urgent action. Rejection in this case has been more subtle than in Australia, expressed through the adoption of intensity-based targets rather than real ones, opposition to legislation to meet Kyoto obligations, and especially in the abandonment of national responsibility to reduce GHGs (a pillar of Kyoto) and adopting the wait-and-see approach vis-à-vis the US.

We suggest that the acceptance-rejection approach is politically effective for three reasons. First, it masks the ideological motivations of the anti-reflexive movement by recasting these as apolitical pragmatic decisions. By accepting the consensus position on climate change, governments free themselves from having to argue against it, and can instead focus on why it is imprudent to act decisively. In Howard's Australia, the pragmatic discourse was dominated by economic arguments, buttressed by frequent talk of job losses and the need to maintain competitive advantage. As mentioned, the Harper government has avoided the "priorities" argument whenever possible, instead stressing that "[we need] to ensure the effectiveness of our approach . . . [by] protecting the environment and aligning with the United States."⁶⁸ In both cases, though, the logical outcome is inaction.

Second, the acceptance-rejection approach is effective because of its lack of clarity, which makes it highly conducive to the construction of ignorance amongst the general public. As discussed earlier, ignorance is not used here pejoratively, nor as the opposite of knowledge. Rather, the sociology of ignorance stresses the role of "not knowing" in constituting knowledge. As argued by scholars such as Smithson and Gross, the drive for perfect knowledge can be paralyzing, thus we need ignorance in order to perform personal, institutional, and political tasks.⁶⁹ The construction of ignorance is most advanced in Harper's Canada. Here, there have been substantial efforts to centralize and control the research message about climate change by closing down or diminishing funding to independent research networks and instituting highly restrictive media policies on government scientists and agencies. At the same time, the Harper government has deployed shifting numerical targets that sound good but "are meaningless by themselves."⁷⁰ These targets are frequently referenced in political communications alongside claims that the government is proceeding on a "sector by sector basis" by, for instance, adopting existing US vehicle emissions standards and subsidizing biofuels.⁷¹ These small shifts in targets and regulations create a kind of "policy noise" that can only be decoded by investing time and effort in researching how these compare to prior commitments and international standards (see Table 2). We suggest that policy noise is effective because it helps create the "trust bridge" between knowledge and ignorance described by Gross.⁷² Specifically, policy noise creates signals that look like action, and thus create a comfort with "not knowing" the particulars of these actions. This is far less jarring than the denialism that appeared regularly in Australia during the Howard administration (and in the US under Bush). Sociologically speaking, this is not about the complacency of the general public, but rather an inten-

68. Canada 2011.

69. Smithson 1985; Gross 2007.

70. Jaccard et al. 2008, 1.

71. Canada 2010.

72. Gross 2007, 746.

tional political strategy to harness the role of ignorance in people's economy of attention.⁷³

Third, the acceptance-rejection approach is likely effective because of the unique character of the climate change issue. Recent research has shown that individual people resist some of the key facts and projections about climate change because they are potentially so dire.⁷⁴ According to Hamilton, most people do not deny climate change, but instead look for ways to "de-problematize" it so that the scale seems smaller or the impacts less severe.⁷⁵ In the words of Norgaard, "people want to protect themselves a little bit" from the emotions of guilt, shame, and fear that are implied in much climate change talk.⁷⁶ This, we suggest, is the particular genius of the anti-reflexive stance adopted by the Harper government. If, as this research suggests, many people are willing to be ignorant of certain aspects of the climate change issue as a means of self-protection, then the acceptance-rejection approach provides enough rhetorical comfort to soothe those who are concerned about climate change but unwilling to get deeply involved in the issue.

Conclusion

The cases of Australia and Canada are significant because their conservative-minded governments have acted against public opinion in situations where, unlike in the US, climate change is not a highly polarizing issue. Against this backdrop, we find that anti-reflexivity is a complex and evolving movement that involves a more active role for government and more subtle political strategies than generally assumed. Our suggestion that the Howard and Harper governments used both negation and affirmation techniques to establish an "acceptance-rejection approach" reflects these findings.

One of the lessons to be drawn from our study is that the anti-reflexivity movement is adaptable and learning. Many of the differences that we identify between the Howard and Harper governments are likely due more to the passage of time than national or political factors. The Howard and Harper governments overlapped briefly (in 2006 and 2007), but for the most part they have ruled at different times. As mentioned earlier, we know that core members of the Harper government admired Howard and studied his electoral strategies. In a sense, then, the Australia-Canada comparison should be read as an evolution in anti-reflexive experimentation. The Australian government's use of skepticism and denial, along with its focus on prioritizing the economy, can be understood as a phase of early experimentation (even though both of these narratives continued through 2007) that were abandoned by Canadian Conservatives once they assumed office. The more recent innovations surround controlling the re-

73. Ungar 2008, 321.

74. Norgaard 2006.

75. Hamilton 2010, 5.

76. Norgaard 2006, 372.

search and scientific message, and the production of “policy noise” via frequent empty announcements of targets and small policies that may only be loosely related to climate change issues. We have argued that these latter innovations have been particularly effective because they both reinforce “not knowing” by obfuscating and masking the real consequences of policy decisions, and create comfort with it by playing to people’s emotional aversion to knowledge about climate change responsibility and impacts.

Finally, our analysis shows that governments are not just the target of anti-reflexive mobilization—they can also be its author. This goes beyond just catering to entrenched corporate interests (as both Howard and Harper have done) but actively engaging in consciousness-lowering to blunt the potentially transformative effects of the climate change problem. These activities will likely have long-term consequences. In Australia, the Liberal Party, now in opposition, continues to use the same strategies—focusing its communications on the economic costs of mitigation—to criticize new initiatives from the Labor Party.⁷⁷ In Canada, the dismantling of climate research and tying of emissions policy to US standards are likely to have effects far outliving the current government. On a broader scale, these cases suggest that while the role of think tanks, media, and corporate alliances are important in promoting non-action, state activities are still paramount. The Howard and Harper administrations have used the legislative, communicative, and administrative powers of government to advance and legitimize multi-dimensional anti-reflexivity strategies that have not evaporated (or will not, in PM Harper’s case) at the end of their mandates.

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77. Tranter 2011, 79.

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