

Results of Alberta vote could drive last nail in coffin of Trudeau's national climate-change framework

[By Chantal Hébert, columnist, *Toronto Star*, Apr 15, 2019](#)

MONTREAL—Of the premiers of the four larger provinces who signed off on Justin Trudeau's climate-change framework three year ago, only [Rachel Notley](#) is left.

That makes her the second most prominent Canadian political leader — after the prime minister — to support the notion that it is desirable to strike a balance between [pipeline building](#) and carbon pricing. If, as the pre-election polls predict, she is defeated in the April 16 [Alberta election](#), the result will drive yet another nail in the coffin of Trudeau's defunct national climate-change consensus.

But the election of a Conservative Alberta government led by Jason Kenney [United Conservative Party] would not bring a polarized Canadian political class any closer to a resolution on the issue. It would mostly make contrary positions even more irreconcilable.

Because regime change in the provinces caused the unravelling of Trudeau's grand energy/environment bargain, its fate has often been compared to Brian Mulroney's failed constitutional reconciliation attempts. In fact, the former Tory prime minister had more provincial allies left at the end of the divisive [Meech Lake \[constitutional amendment\] round](#) in 1990 than Trudeau can now count on to continue to advance his two-pronged pipeline/carbon-pricing policy.

If anything, the House of Commons is even more deeply divided than at the time of the constitutional wars, with positions on both sides of the debate more entrenched. The NDP, the Greens and the Bloc Québécois would nix any future pipeline proposal. The Conservatives have never seen a pipeline project they did not want to support.

One election promise Trudeau has kept is the commitment to gather the premiers at least once a year. They last met in Montreal in December. That means there will be no first ministers' conference until after the October federal election. By then, a different prime minister could be in office. But whoever wins the Oct. 21 federal vote will find the same unbridgeable gap between the two camps.

Not only is there little or no common ground between the pipeline-averse governments of British Columbia and Quebec in one corner and the anti-carbon-pricing cohort in the other, but bridge-builders are increasingly in short supply at the federal-provincial table.

As a last resort, Trudeau has been advancing his carbon-pricing policy through unilateral action. His government has imposed a federal carbon tax on provinces such as Ontario that have opted out the national framework. And it has kept the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion alive over the objections of B.C.'s current government.

On both fronts, the prime minister has been implementing what he and his advisers considered improbable, worse-case scenarios as recently as two years ago. The backup plan of a federal carbon tax with assorted individual rebates was conceived with only a few isolated provincial outliers in mind. Approving the Trans Mountain expansion initially seemed like taking the path of least resistance to deliver more oil to tidewater.

Instead, the process has earned Trudeau the enmity of a majority of his provincial partners. On both sides of the divide, provinces have been taking the federal government to court.

B.C. is awaiting the decision of its top court in a reference that seeks to have the province's power to limit the amount of crude oil and gas that transits through its territory affirmed.

The Ontario government opened the latest front in the legal battle against the federal carbon tax in the Court of Appeal on Monday.

Trudeau's name has become dirt in many Alberta and Saskatchewan pro-pipeline quarters. At the same time, he has been vilified in almost as many pro-environment quarters for keeping the Trans Mountain expansion alive by purchasing the pipeline.

But here's the rub: the intense political polarization that has over the past three years come to attend the pipeline-versus-carbon-pricing debate — complete in the case of Ontario with over-the-top predictions of a recession caused by the federal carbon tax — has essentially been driven from the top down rather than from the ground up. To this day, polls suggest a plurality of Canadians support both the efforts to get more Alberta oil to markets and the bid to ensure carbon pollution is priced and taxed.

While more and more politicians have deserted the middle ground, voters have not always followed suit. If anything, the decisively pro-pipeline agenda Conservative Party of Canada leader Andrew Scheer and his provincial allies in Alberta and elsewhere have in mind stands to be a harder sell than Trudeau's mixed approach.

That could start not at the premiers' table but right in the House of Commons. With less than 200 days to go to the federal election, polls show that neither of the two main contenders has a governing majority in the bag.

It is hard to see how a minority Conservative government could find enough opposition support to deliver on either its commitment to dismantle Trudeau's carbon-pricing policy or its promise to implement a more aggressive pro-pipeline agenda.