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Continually, the media have reported claims by provincial governments that provinces are not bound by any international convention to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Provinces often rely on a 1937 Supreme Court case in which B.C. and Ontario argued that they were not bound by an international labour convention signed and ratified by the federal government. That case, however, turned on the fact that the provinces had not been consulted.

In the case of climate change, the provinces were not only consulted but also instrumental in advocating the ratification of the Framework Convention on Climate Change. The federal government signed the Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on the Environment held in Rio.

At a meeting of provincial resource ministers in Whitehorse on Sept. 21, 1992, the Canadian Council of Energy Ministers wrote to the federal government expressing their support for ratification of the convention, and in Aylmer, in November 1992, the provincial environment ministers supported the federal government's ratification of the convention. On Dec. 4, the federal government, with the full support of the provinces, ratified the convention.

The Climate Change Convention came into force in the spring of 1993. Under the convention, the signatories were bound to invoke the precautionary principle -- "to anticipate, prevent, or minimize the causes of climate change."

In addition, under the convention a commitment was made to reduce greenhouse gas production to 1990 levels and "return by the end of the present decade to earlier levels of anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. The commitment made by all governments was to reduce emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000.

Currently, it is estimated that Canada is now about 15 per cent above 1990 levels. This increase has come after a prolonged campaign by the fossil-fuel industry.

Over the years, the fossil-fuel industry has also contracted several scientists who, through questioning the urgency of climate change, have attempted to undermine the widespread agreement of the international Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and thus have obfuscated any resolve to seriously address the climate change issue.

In June, 1997, at the "Rio +5" United Nations Conference in New York, the Energy Caucus (a Non-Governmental Organization) called for at least a 20 per cent reduction from 1990 levels of greenhouse gases by 2000

Under the Framework Convention on Climate Change, there was an obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to conserve carbon sinks; these recommendations included reducing dependency on fossil fuels and increasing the production of safe and environmentally sound alternative energy sources.

Unfortunately, subsequent government/industry discussions about climate change have become focused more on how Canada could continue current greenhouse gas emissions, and could embark upon schemes that would counter Canada's fossil fuel overconsumption.

There was increased discussion about reopening civil nuclear facilities, about increasing the sale of CANDU reactors, about embarking on emissions trading, or about buying far-off carbon sinks so as to justify Canada's continued reliance on fossil fuels.

Clearly, the campaign by the fossil-fuel industry has successfully undermined the Climate Change Convention. Nevertheless, Canadian governments are bound by this and convention should begin to embark on a minimum upon the following actions:

1. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions

- Establish and enforce a national dedicated program for energy conservation and efficiency, and end all subsidies to the fossil fuel and nuclear energy industries.
- Transfer all energy-directed funding into renewable energies that are ecologically safe and sound.
- Phase out the use of fossil fuels and nuclear energy, and prohibit all new drilling, including offshore drilling.
- Establish extensive networks of alternative environmentally safe and sound means of transportation, including rail, and ensure that all new urban and rural constructions be founded on environmentally sound principles.
- Phase out immediately the use of the pesticides that contribute to climate change and promote organic agriculture.

2. Conserving carbon sinks

- Preserve and enhance sinks (forests and bogs), in particular, preserve original growth and conservation corridors.
- Include private land under the Forest Act, ban all forest practices that reduce carbon sinks, and end the export of raw logs.
- Encourage reforestation and restoration of damaged forest ecosystems.