

# Humans aren't as stupid as they seem — something else is blocking climate action

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For years, it was assumed the world wouldn't start seriously tackling climate change until we were directly confronted with its horrors — thereby revealing how truly reckless humans are.

But now that the world is engulfed in terrifying fires, heat domes, floods and droughts — yet still we don't act! — it's tempting to conclude humans aren't just reckless but utterly stupid, unable to stop ourselves from going over a cliff, even as the jagged rocks below come starkly into view.

But that would be unfair to humans.

Recent surveys show most Canadians — and most of the global population as well — understand we're in a climate emergency and must take immediate action to avoid disaster.



So humans grasp the danger and want to act, but there's something blocking us.

I don't think I'd be giving away the ending by pointing out that we're being blocked by the fossil fuel industry — probably the most powerful set of interests on earth.

Yet, in the midst of a Canadian federal election, that brutal political reality barely figures into the discussion.

For sure, there's talk about climate change — how low our emissions must go, how the parties' climate plans compare, etc. But rarely does such talk zero in on the corporate crowd that keeps real climate action off the agenda and even manages to push a "climate warrior" government to purchase an oil pipeline, enabling ever higher emissions.

This failure to shine a spotlight on the real force blocking climate progress leads to a sense of hopelessness. It feels like we're up against human stupidity when we're really up against a highly organized group of cunning and ruthless corporate barons with the biggest war-chest of all time and legions of political and business lackies working tirelessly on their behalf.

This problem of overwhelming corporate power — and its effective veto over key areas of public policy — isn't confined to the fossil fuel industry, but the stakes there are particularly high.

Curbing the power of corporations and those who own them — so we can have a future — should be our top priority. At the very least, it should be an election issue.

One reason it isn't is that the exercise of corporate power is hard to see.

Corporate interests have countless levers of influence, starting with their control over capital necessary for job creation, which gives them a powerful hand in negotiations with government. They also retain a vast army of lobbyists pushing for results. They influence politicians and civil servants by dangling the prospect of future high-paying jobs at their companies and on their boards. They often have personal access to political leaders through social connections and private clubs. And they contribute generously to political campaigns and leadership drives.

They also shape public opinion through their control of think tanks, trade and industrial groups, even university departments funded by billionaires. They retain clever consultants and advertisers to package their actions in a favourable light. And, of course, they own the mass media.

It's not surprising they've succeeded in rolling back legislation protecting workers' rights, diminishing the strength of labour — one of the few organized forces potentially capable of challenging their dominance.

So how to rein in this runaway corporate power?

The election promise that comes closest is the NDP's call for an annual net wealth tax of 1 per cent, applied exclusively to those with assets of more than \$10 million.

In addition to raising billions of dollars, the tax could target wealth concentration — particularly if it were designed more like the wealth taxes proposed by U.S. Senators Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, which impose higher rates on larger holdings, thereby enabling large fortunes to actually be reduced.

Almost a century ago, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis observed: "We can *have* democracy in this country, or we can *have* great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't *have both*."

That could be updated: "We can have a world that is livable for humans or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of the few; but we can't have both."

That's the real choice on the ballot on Sept. 20. The rest is just talky-talk.