

An Examination of the Framing of Climate Change by the Government of Canada, 2006–2016

Andrew Chater
Brescia University College

ABSTRACT

Background *How has the Government of Canada framed the issue of climate change in Canada's northern region during the last decade?*

Analysis *This article undertakes a discourse analysis of Canadian government speeches, statements, and reports relating to northern climate change since 2006. It argues that the rhetoric of the 2006–2015 Conservative government de-emphasized the impact of Arctic climate change on the people of the North. It stressed the threat to environmental security and nature.*

Conclusions and implications *This article contributes to literature that understands how governments frame issues, as well as literature that examines the framing of climate change and reviews of Canada's northern policy.*

Keywords *Canada; Government; Climate change; Framing*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Comment le gouvernement canadien a-t-il représenté le changement climatique dans le Grand Nord au cours des dix dernières années?*

Analyse *Cet article entreprend l'analyse d'énoncés, de discours et de rapports du gouvernement canadien depuis 2006 qui portent sur le changement climatique dans le Grand Nord. L'article soutient que le gouvernement conservateur de 2006-2015 s'est efforcé par sa rhétorique de minimiser l'impact du changement climatique dans l'Arctique sur les habitants du Nord canadien. À l'époque, le gouvernement mettait plutôt l'accent sur la sécurité environnementale et la nature.*

Conclusions et implications *Cet article est une contribution à la recherche sur la manière dont les gouvernements représentent les problèmes sociaux. En outre, il vient compléter la recherche portant sur le cadrage du changement climatique et sur les politiques canadiennes à l'égard du Grand Nord.*

Mots clés *Canada; Gouvernement; Changement climatique; Cadrage*

Andrew Chater is a Fellow at the Polar Research and Policy Initiative and Assistant Professor in the School of Humanities at Brescia University College, London, ON. Email: achater@uwo.ca.

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Introduction

How do governments frame climate change in the Arctic region? The facts of Arctic climate change are quite common knowledge: temperatures have increased about two degrees in the last fifty years (Fungal & Prowse, 2007); the region will continue to warm; the area of Arctic ice has fallen one-fifth since 1979 (as cited by Coates, Lackenbauer, Morrison, & Poelzer, 2008); and recent years have seen the hottest temperatures on record (Arctic Council, 2005; CBC News, 2010a; 2010b; 2011). Yet, despite the basic reality of the situation, there is significant leeway in how the issue is framed. Is the focus the fact that climate change threatens northern citizens, forcing hundreds to relocate as communities flood (Griffiths, 2007) and endangering traditional hunting lifestyles (Bone, 2008)? On the other hand, is the focus potential economic opportunity, as construction will become easier due to melting permafrost, which could spur investment in northern infrastructure (Bone, 2008)? This research examines the option the Government of Canada has employed vis-à-vis global warming. How has the Government of Canada framed the issue of climate change in Canada's northern region during the last decade?

This article argues that the rhetoric of the 2006–2015 Conservative government de-emphasized the impact of Arctic climate change on the people of the North. It stressed the threat to environmental security and nature. This article uses frame theory and undertakes a discourse analysis of Canadian government speeches, statements, and reports relating to northern climate change since 2006. That year serves as the baseline because the Conservative Party, under socially and fiscally right-wing leader Stephen Harper, won the federal election in January 2006, ending nearly 13 years of rule by the Liberal Party. This article also reviews statements by the successive Liberal government under Justin Trudeau, which won the October 2015 national election, to introduce a comparative element to the analysis.

Since 2006, the Government of Canada has framed Arctic climate change in four different ways. First, it openly acknowledged the threat that climate change poses to human populations in the North. Second, in 2009, it began discussing human security less. Third, not long after, it did not mention the impact of climate change on people. Fourth, it emphasized the impact of climate change on human populations after Justin Trudeau became the prime minister in November 2015. The first section of this article overviews frame theory, as well as existing literature, while the second discusses the method employed in this analysis. The third section reviews the evolution of the discourse on climate change in Northern Canada since 2006, when the Conservative Party of Canada ended a long period of Liberal rule.

This research contributes to literature on framing in three ways. First, it presents a case study of how governments frame climate change and shows that the Government of Canada has shifted its rhetorical strategy to de-emphasize the human element of Arctic warming in favour of a focus on the environment. In this article, strategy refers to deliberate action undertaken to achieve a goal or aim. In this case, the Government of Canada downplayed the human element of climate change to de-emphasize the urgency of the issue. In doing so, it engaged in second-level agenda setting (i.e., shaping the way people interpret issues). A great deal of current literature

examines the framing of climate change by the media, rather than the government (see, for example, Good, 2008). Yet, much literature sees governments as privileged framers. Second, this research demonstrates one rhetorical strategy that climate change sceptics may employ to downplay the issue. A quintessential tactic used by political actors to reduce the possibility of action on climate change is to deny that climate change is happening, or to deny that humans cause it. Previous research shows that conservative political parties have tended to deny the severity of climate change, its existence, or origins. Liberal political parties tend to emphasize the importance of the issue. This analysis shows that another tactic could be used to minimize the relationship between humans and climate change. Third, this research contributes to literature that attempts to understand the significance of Canada's overall northern strategy. Some literature argues that the strategy under the Conservative government was modest in intention or ignored the environment. This analysis shows some intention on behalf of the government.

Theory and literature

This research employs frame theory to understand how discourse from the Government of Canada portrays climate change in the Arctic region. Discourse refers to “an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena” (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 175). An actor presents discourse in its verbal and written statements. According to frame theory, the meaning associated with discourse is “not a function of content differences but of differences in the modes of presentation” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 9). Framing “is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized ... can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). There is more than one way to understand a set of facts; the discourse employed can affect how issues are understood and the relationship between truths (Lakoff, 2010). Overall, “broadly speaking, framing refers to how information and messages—such as media stories, political arguments and policy positions—are defined, constructed and presented in order to have certain impacts rather than others” (Friedman, 2005, p. 1). Frames can have first-level agenda-setting effects (i.e., “telling readers what to think about” [Cohen, 1963, p. 13, as cited in Scheufele, 2000, p. 304]), agenda-building effects (i.e., creating issues [Cobb & Elder, 1971, as cited in Scheufele, 2000]), or second-level agenda-setting effects (i.e., influencing people how to think about issues [Ghanem, 1997]). Some scholars criticize that frame theory assumes people are mostly passive in their acquisition of knowledge (Pinker & Lakoff, 2007). Nonetheless, frame theory is important because it acknowledges that the way actors communicate information is important.

This article contributes to frame theory on climate change in that it presents a case study of how governments portray the issue. A lot of current literature on the framing of climate change examines media (see, for example, Good, 2008, as well as Antilla, 2005; Anderson, 2009; Carvalho & Burgess, 2005; Shehata & Hopmann, 2012; Trumbo, 1996). It finds that framing the issue in terms of the human impact is more likely to spur action than framing it around environmental issues. A study in the United Kingdom found that people support strong policy on climate change when the media present it in terms of the impact on people and the economy, rather than the

impact on the environment and ecosystem (Lockwood, 2011). Media researcher Matthew Nisbet (2009) identifies eight climate change frames typically found in media, four of which discourage action on the issue (economic development and competitiveness, scientific and technical uncertainty, runaway science/fatalism, and conflict/strategy/special interests). Research suggests that the government responds to issues framed by the media (Baum & Potter, 2008; Hudson, 2005; Wood & Peake, 1998). The media is a major actor in framing.

Current literature argues that governments have unique framing interests, separate from those of the media. Policy-studies literature identifies that the government's role is active, such as conservative political parties that have a reputation for using frames to mobilize to stop climate change action (McCright & Dunlop, 2003). As outlined by Nisbet (2009), it might be expected that a conservative party disinterested in climate change would appeal to a potential loss of competitiveness as a result of taking climate action; emphasize scientific uncertainty; suggest that action on climate change is impossible; or argue that special interests, such as environmental groups, have a sinister agenda in promoting action on climate change. Donald Trump, the current Republican president of the United States, for example, has said that climate change is an "expensive hoax" (Cillizza, 2017), clearly portraying scientific uncertainty. In withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, President Trump (2017) said, "The agreement is less about the climate and more about other countries gaining a financial advantage over the United States," appealing to a competitiveness frame (n.p.). A study by Eero Palmujoki (2010) finds that international institutions, such as the United Nations, emphasize economics in climate change rhetoric. Governments are particularly important in frame building, as they define the range of possible policy responses to a given issue and can control information flow (Lim & Seo, 2009). Governments can withhold or manipulate information to make a given policy preference more likely. The media cannot dictate policy and can only work with information they uncover. Regional, territorial, or provincial governments can engage in framing; however, no level of government has more presence and authority than a national government, by virtue of its size. The discourse that governments put forward to frame issues can come in the form of oral statements, speeches, or formal policy documents. It includes government strategy, which refers both to action taken to achieve specific aims and the articulation of those aims. This research proposes that a) governments can be important actors in the framing of climate change and b) an addition to Nisbet's (2009) climate changes frames could be the minimization of the relationship between humans and climate, which is especially useful to conservative politicians. On the issue of northern climate change, the Conservative Party of Canada downplays the relationship between humans and the environment, which research demonstrates reduces support for action on climate change.

This article also contributes to literature that seeks to understand the 2009 document *Canada's Northern Strategy* (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009), which was the key policy outlining the government's plans for Northern Canada and climate change. The *Northern Strategy* constitutes a government strategy, as it was the articulation of a set of aims

vis-à-vis Canada's North. The overall goal was to set out priorities to address a number of issues in Canada's northern region. Writers criticized that it offered little new, instead summarizing past government promises (see, for example, CBC News, 2009; Hafterdorn, 2009). Others, such as political scientist Heather Smith (2009), argue the document places too much emphasis on security issues and is "blind to the realities of climate change" (pp. 931–932). Smith (2009) writes, "Sometimes the impact of climate change is mentioned as a challenge facing the Arctic, or, as in the case of the *Northern Strategy*, climate change is given a passing scientific reference" (pp. 931–932). This article argues that *Northern Strategy* (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009) signals a new and significant rhetorical shift in the government's statements on climate change. One of the subtle goals of the Government of Canada was to downplay action on climate change, and this report plays a key role in government messaging around global warming. The document illustrates a key rhetorical strategy used by the Government of Canada.

Methods

This article undertakes the qualitative discourse analysis of a single case study of government rhetoric. It examines climate change in one particular region (the Arctic) because doing so allows for a nuanced understanding of framing. In addition, the Arctic was a particular foreign policy focus of the Conservative government. A single case study has limited applicability to other cases; however, case studies contribute to a larger universe of cases and allow for in-depth study. The goal of discourse analysis is to "understand how people use language to create and enact identities and activities" (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1373). It examines "how individuals accomplish personal, social, and political projects through language" (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1373). It involves "tracing the historical evolution of language practices" (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1373). This research examines the development of discourse on Canada's Arctic strategy.

The data comes from all speeches, statements, press releases, and documents that relate to the government's overarching policy on climate change in Northern Canada since 2006. This era encompasses the Conservative government of Stephen Harper, but also early statements by his successor Justin Trudeau and the Liberal government. The researcher searched the relevant government department websites and digital archives (namely Global Affairs Canada, Environment Canada, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Affairs,¹ and Natural Resources Canada), as well as the Government of Canada's news archive website and a general search on Google. The government also created a digital media room for documents relating to Canada's northern strategy, which was also examined. In total, 19 major documents about climate change and the Arctic are the focus of this analysis. These include two international declarations, four speeches by politicians, two statements in international institutions, two research reports, five Web pages, three official policy documents, and one press release. This data collection ensured access to all major declarations by the Government of Canada. A small number of documents ensure that an in-depth analysis is possible and does not necessitate the need for discourse analysis software or a quantitative evaluation of a large number of sources. The most important documents were *Canada's Northern*

Strategy (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009) and *Achievements Under Canada's Northern Strategy* (Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, 2011) because they represent cumulative, official summations of government policy. Thus, these documents receive the greatest analysis in the results section. A review of secondary literature, such as news articles, also took place and contributed insights. These were namely government comments that did not result in a formal document release. However, such statements are not summarized in the overall analysis.

This article undertakes rhetorical/critical discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is the study of the use of discourse. Critical discourse analysis examines the political realities and power implications of the way language frames issues (see Hogan, 2013). The major texts and descriptions of northern climate change from government documents were examined. Descriptions of climate change and the major consequences of the issue were noted. More specifically, this study looks for a) whether the statements described climate change as a real, pressing issue or a disputed, low-priority issue and b) whether the statements framed climate change as an issue impacting natural environments or human populations. Statements that discussed climate change as a serious, pressing issue were hand coded "yes;" statements that avoided this discussion were coded "no." Statements that mentioned the impact of climate change on humans were coded "yes," "no," or "somewhat." ("Somewhat" refers to statements that are debatable in depicting the impact of climate change on human populations.) A downside to this method is that it is not possible to definitively trace the rationale behind a certain rhetorical strategy, only to discuss its possible implications.

Two hypotheses are necessary in the analysis. Overall, conservative parties are often antagonistic toward action on climate change; therefore, a hypothesis is:

The Conservative Party of Canada will not consistently mention that climate change is a real and pressing issue in its discourse.

It might also be expected that conservative parties will downplay the significance of climate change; thus, a hypothesis is:

The Conservative Party of Canada will avoid references to the impact of climate change on human populations in its discourse.

Research has demonstrated that people are supportive of action on climate change when there is an explicit link between the issue and human populations. These hypotheses allow an overall analysis of the results in this article.

Results

Prior to forming its first government, the Conservative Party of Canada raised doubt that climate change was real (typical of many conservative parties), before embracing scientific consensus. A pre-cursor to the current Conservative Party of Canada was the Canadian Alliance, which denied that climate change is real. In 2002, it declared climate change is "based on tentative and contradictory scientific evidence" (Sanger & Saul, 2008, p. 281). The rhetoric softened after the right-wing Canadian Alliance Party and the centre-right Progressive Conservative Party merged to create the Conservative Party. Stephen Harper became the leader, taking over from generally farther right-wing

politician Stockwell Day. In 2004, the party promised that, “[a] Conservative government will implement a ‘made-in-Canada’ plan focused on ensuring generations enjoy clear air, clean water, clean land, and clean energy here in Canada” (Sanger & Saul, 2008, p. 282). It is logical that a political party seeking to win power would promise action on climate change; public support for action on the issue is high in Canada, at more than three-quarters of the population (McCarthy, 2011). There is also support for action among northern citizens and Indigenous leadership (see, for example, Watt-Cloutier, 2006). The Conservative government was not necessarily a foe of action on climate change, as is the reputation of the conservative movement generally.

The first two major statements by the Harper government emphasized that climate change is real and will have consequences for people living in northern areas. In 2007, after work initiated by previous Liberal politicians, the Government of Canada released *From Impacts to Adaptations* (Fungal, & Prowse, 2007), which is a synthesis report that stated climate change is real, caused by humans, and has an impact on people around the world. It compiles scientific consensus on climate change, standing contrary to earlier statements from the Canadian Alliance that the science on climate change is “tentative and contradictory” (Sanger & Saul, 2008, p. 281). *From Impacts to Adaptations* reports that temperatures in Canada’s North could increase up to six degrees in the next 100 years. It argues that “stress on populations of iconic wildlife species, such as the polar bear, at the southern limit of their distribution will continue as a result of changes to critical sea-ice habitat” (Fungal, & Prowse, 2007, p. 59) due to climate change in the North. The report clearly ties the consequences of these environmental issues to human security. It says this change will negatively influence northern residents because “where these stresses affect economically or culturally important species, they will have significant impacts on people and regional economies” (Fungal, & Prowse, 2007, p. 59). It says that:

Young and elderly Aboriginal residents, in particular those pursuing aspects of traditional and subsistence-based ways of life in more remote communities, are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change in the North. ... However, enhanced economic opportunities may provide significant benefits to communities, making the net impacts on human and institutional vulnerability difficult to predict. (Fungal, & Prowse, 2007, p. 60).

This categorization is present in the second government statement on climate change. In May 2008, the Government of Canada and four Arctic states (Norway, Russia, Denmark, and the United States) signed *The Ilulissat Declaration* (Arctic Ocean Conference, 2008), which recognizes the impact of climate change. It says, “Climate change and the melting of ice will have a potential impact on vulnerable ecosystems, the livelihoods of local inhabitants and Indigenous communities, and the potential exploitation of natural resources” (Arctic Ocean Conference, 2008, p. 1). The Conservative government linked climate change to human security in its first statements about the issue.

The next four government statements maintained that climate change is real and pressing, but mentioned human populations less. First, the Government of Canada released a document outlining a broad northern strategy in November 2008; it mentioned

the need to combat climate change “to protect our environmental heritage in the North” (Government of Canada, 2008, n.p.) but did not mention northern residents specifically. Second, Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon (2009c) mentioned human populations in a March 2009 speech in Montréal, saying that “we recognize that climate change is having a disproportionate impact on the North and its inhabitants, although experts do not agree on the pace of this dramatic change” (n.p.). Third, Cannon (2009a) gave another speech during April in Washington, DC, in which he said, “We recognize that climate change is having a disproportionate impact on the Arctic,” avoiding a direct reference to Arctic inhabitants (n.p.). Fourth, in July 2009, Cannon (2009b) released a statement that said, “In the North, climate change, melting ice and rising contamination levels result from activities that take place thousands of kilometres away from the region but still have a disproportionate impact on its environment” (n.p.), but again did not mention Arctic inhabitants specifically. Especially after March 2009, representatives of the Government of Canada failed to acknowledge the impact of climate change on residents of the North consistently (see Table 1).

Table 1: Government of Canada statements, 2008–2009

Date	Statement	Mentions severity of climate change	Mentions impact on Arctic inhabitants or human populations
Late 2007	<i>From Impacts to Adaptation</i> report	Yes	Yes
May 28, 2008	<i>The Ilulissat Declaration</i>	Yes	Yes
Nov. 3, 2008	Fact Sheet: Northern Strategy	Yes	No
Mar. 27, 2009	Minister of Foreign Affairs Speech	Yes	Yes
Apr. 6, 2009	Minister of Foreign Affairs Speech	Yes	No
Jul. 26, 2009	Minister of Foreign Affairs Speech	Yes	No
Jul. 26, 2009	<i>Northern Strategy</i> policy document	Yes	Somewhat
Late 2009	<i>True North</i>	Yes	Yes

Statements from July 2009 until 2016 emphasize the severity of climate change, but they do not mention the impact on human populations. The most important of these is Canada’s *Northern Strategy* (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009). It is a dedicated government policy designed to outline priorities in the region and provide a consolidated plan. It recognizes the link between climate change and northern residents in two ways. First, the strategy recognizes the expertise of northerners, and that it is important to consult with Arctic residents in any discussion of their region and its future. Second, it mentions that climate change will have effects on northern residents in that it says, “The effects of environmental change, such as shifting and melting permafrost, melting glaciers, shrinking ocean ice and a shortened season for ice roads could have significant cultural and economic consequences for the people of the North and the entire nation”

(Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009, p. 8). It does not indicate whether climate change will be positive or negative for northern residents, only that there will be “consequences.” However, there is no mention of northern residents in the section on climate change. The emphasis is on the impact that warming will have on the northern ecosphere. It says, “The North also has fragile and unique ecosystems which are being negatively affected by the impacts of climate change” (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009, p. 24). It goes on, “Canada is committed to helping ensure these ecosystems are safeguarded for future generations” (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009, p. 24). Canada’s *Northern Strategy* (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009) separates the impact of climate change on the environment from its impact on human populations. It discusses the importance of protecting Canada’s environment without explicitly explaining the reasons why.

A frame present in the Government of Canada’s *Northern Strategy* is that the North is ripe for economic growth because of environmental change. This frame is present in three ways. First, it emphasizes that it is imperative to rectify social issues to avoid inhibiting economic growth. According to the *Northern Strategy*, “From the development of world-class diamond mines and massive oil and gas reserves, to the growth of commercial fisheries, to a thriving tourism industry that attracts visitors from around the globe, the enormous economic potential of the North is being unlocked” (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009, p. 5). The strategy elaborates, “Areas that require urgent attention — such as infrastructure, housing and education — are being addressed to help ensure Northerners are positioned to seize these unprecedented opportunities” (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009, p. 5). Various government reports also emphasize that there are significant challenges to Northern Canada posed by lack of adequate infrastructure (see, for example, National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, 2009). Second, the *Northern Strategy* (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009) discusses some negative consequences of climate change, but it confines such discussions to the economic realm, such as difficulty accessing resources due to shifting environments. Third, it suggests there is an economic benefit to protecting the North’s environment, relating to tourism. It says, “Visitors from every corner of the globe are drawn to Canada’s North because of its spectacular scenery, unique fish and wildlife and unequalled opportunities to explore its Arctic wilderness” (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009, p. 24). The *Northern Strategy* downplays frames around climate change negatively affecting northern residents, elaborating potential environmental consequences and opportunities.

The next five policy and statements by the Government of Canada make no mention of the impact of climate change on northern residents, though they portray climate change seriously. They focus almost exclusively on damage to wildlife and nature

(Cannon, 2010; Government of Canada, 2010a; Government of Canada, 2010c; Government of Canada, 2010d). One exception is the climate change section on the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs' (2010) website. It says,

Studies reveal that Aboriginal people, people who live in the North and other people whose incomes rely on the land, water and other natural resources, are more affected by climate change. For this reason, the current and future effects of climate change must be closely monitored and addressed in Aboriginal and northern communities in order to increase their resilience and adaptive capacities to the changing climate. (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2010, n. p.)

However, the next paragraph focuses on the contribution that northern residents make to climate change. It says,

Due to their cold, northern locations, many northern and Aboriginal communities are high consumers of energy, which can contribute to climate change due to greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, many northern and Aboriginal communities are looking for ways to reduce their energy consumption and develop clean, renewable forms of energy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that lead to climate change. (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2010 n. p.)

Another potential frame is that the contribution of northern residents to climate change is negligible. The total population of all three Canadian northern territories is only about 107,000 people. Most of the pollution that causes northern climate change comes from other regions. Such statements do not acknowledge the responsibility that people in the rest of the world have for climate change in the North and the impact of climate change on northern residents.

After 2010, the government emphasized action on climate change, as opposed to merely highlighting the importance of the problem, as seen in two major policy announcements. First, in 2010, the Government of Canada released emissions reductions targets (not specifically linked to the North), designed to mitigate and slow climate change. The Government of Canada proclaimed (2010b) that, "Our government has inscribed in the Copenhagen Accord an economy-wide emissions reduction target for 2020 of seventeen per cent below 2005 levels" (n.p.). Second, the Government of Canada (2015) announced a more ambitious target in 2015, pledging to reduce emissions by 30 percent below 2005 levels before 2030. Many researchers agree that Canada has done little to reach these goals and government action on climate change is not serious (Drexhage & Murphy, 2010; Sears, 2010; Smith, 2009). For example, in 2012, the Government of Canada shuttered an Environment Canada research group devoted to climate change adaptation (Nikiforuk, 2013). The Government of Canada emphasized its action on climate change after 2010.

Government documents continued to downplay the relationship between climate change and humans in Northern Canada, specifically in the major 2011 follow-up to Canada's *Northern Strategy* (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009), entitled *Achievements Under*

Canada's Northern Strategy (Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, 2011). It is a list of action by the Government of Canada to implement the *Northern Strategy*. The document contributed to climate framing in three ways. First, the section on the environment does not contain substantive information about Canada's action on northern climate change, further downplaying the issue. Under the pillar "protecting our environmental heritage" (Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, 2011, pp. 7–8), the report emphasizes the creation of protected environmental areas, namely the Nahanni National Park Reserve, Lancaster Sound, and the Tarium Niryutait Marine Protected Area. Second, the document emphasizes the high-energy consumption in Canada's North rather than southern Canadian climate change activities. It says, "Budget 2011 announced \$8 million over two years for ecoENERGY for Aboriginal and Northern Communities Program, which will promote the development of clean energy technologies in Aboriginal and northern communities" (Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, 2011, p. 8). Third, the document does not address climate change exclusively, but mentions other environmental issues, emphasizing crisis prevention, security issues, and the importance of multilateralism. For example, the Government of Canada invested \$60 million to fight against shipping pollution. In addition, the Government of Canada invested \$68 million to clean up contaminated sites. The volume of government statements on northern climate change slowed after this point, with no major documents from 2012 to 2014.

Canada became the chair of the Arctic Council in 2013, which saw three statements on climate change; in these statements, the Government of Canada emphasized economics, but it mentioned the human impact of climate change more than in the past. The council is an international institution consisting of all of the countries with Arctic territory. It completes research on environmental issues, especially climate change. One might expect a greater mention of human populations after 2013, when Canada appointed Leona Aglukkaq as minister of the environment. She is Inuit and was born in Inuvik, Northwest Territories. Her family were seal hunters in the Northwest Territories (Querengesser, 2009). The first statement she made at the Arctic Council's meeting in May 2013 emphasized economic opportunities in the Arctic rather than climate change or its human impact. She said, "The time has come to embrace the Arctic and realize the tremendous potential and opportunities it has to offer for all of us" (CBC News, 2013, n.p.). She said, "With the help of our Arctic Council partners, we will focus on creating economic development and sustainable northern communities" (CBC News, 2013, n.p.). Second, the Government of Canada released a set of council priorities in 2013 that did not emphasize action on climate change or its human impact. It said it would develop "responsible Arctic resource development," "safe Arctic shipping," and "sustainable communities" (Government of Canada, 2013, n.p.). The government also said it would take "action to prevent oil pollution," and establish "guidelines for sustainable tourism and cruise-ship operations" (Government of Canada, 2013, n.p.). It would address "short-lived climate pollutants" and encourage climate change adaptation (Government of Canada, 2013, n.p.).

Nonetheless, in her third statement, at an international meeting of the 19th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate

Change in Warsaw, Poland, in November 2013, Aglukkaq mentioned the human element of climate change. She said,

As an Inuk from Canada's North, I come from a culture whose relationship with the land and water is an important part of our identity and everyday lives. We understand how essential it is to safeguard the quality of our air, water and natural environment. And we know that economic growth and environmental stewardship must go hand in hand." (Environment Canada, 2013, n.p.)

However, she also mentioned economics: "Canada is taking a leadership role in international climate change efforts by focusing on delivering significant environmental and economic benefits for all Canadians" (Environment Canada, 2013, [n.p.]). The Government of Canada under Leona Aglukkaq mentioned the impact of climate change more than in recent history, but nonetheless emphasized the economic opportunities that climate change will create (see Table 2).

Table 2: Government of Canada statements, 2010-2016

Date	Statement	Mentions severity of climate change	Mentions impact on Arctic inhabitants or human populations
Aug. 20, 2010	Minister of Foreign Affairs Speech	Yes	No
Jun. 9, 2010	<i>Canada's Action on Climate Change</i>	Yes	No
Oct. 18, 2010	<i>Mission of Canada to the European Union website</i>	Yes	No
Nov. 26, 2010	Fact Sheet	Yes	No
Nov. 27, 2010	<i>Environment and Natural Resources website</i>	Yes	Somewhat
Jul. 10, 2010	<i>Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy</i>	Yes	No
Late 2011	<i>Achievements Under Canada's Northern Strategy</i>	Yes	No
May 2013	<i>Development for the People of the North</i>	Yes	Somewhat
Nov. 20, 2013	Statement to UNFCC	Yes	Yes
May 15, 2015	<i>2030 Emissions Target</i>	Yes	No
Mar. 26, 2016	U.S.-Canada Joint Statement	Yes	Yes

There has been a clear discourse shift in recent years; the Government of Canada emphasized the impact of climate change on human populations after the Liberal Party won the October 2015 election. In March 2016, Trudeau, along with United States President Barack Obama, released the *U.S.-Canada Joint Statement on Climate, Energy and Arctic Leadership*. It clearly links climate change and human populations when it says, "We commit to defining new approaches and exchanging best practices to

strengthen the resilience of Arctic communities and continuing to support the well-being of Arctic residents, in particular respecting the rights and territory of Indigenous peoples” (The Government of Canada and the Government of the United States, 2016, n.p.). Overall, these statements link climate change to human health specifically by emphasizing that it is important to address the issue to help human populations, as opposed to protecting wildlife. This signals a shift in government rhetoric.

Analysis and conclusions

This article performed a discourse analysis of government statements on climate change between 2006 and 2016, examining 19 major documents in all. Overall, all of the government statements under the Conservative government mentioned climate change (18 out of 18 documents). Thus, it is possible to reject the first hypothesis: the Conservative Party of Canada will not consistently mention that climate change is a real and pressing issue in climate change discourse. The Conservative government clearly accepted that climate change is a real and pressing issue. Five of 18 statements clearly mention the impact of climate change on human populations. In addition, references to climate change and the negative impacts it will have on human populations are rare after July 2009. Thus, it is possible to mostly accept the second hypothesis: the Conservative Party of Canada will avoid references to the impact of climate change on human populations in climate change discourse. Conservative party discourse emphasized that climate change will have negative impacts on wildlife and nature, as opposed to human populations. It emphasized the contribution of the North to climate change and adaptation. There has been a clear change under the new Liberal government, as its major statement on Arctic climate change emphasized the impact of the issue on human populations. It seems reasonable to assume that the change in rhetoric after July 2009 was deliberate on the part of the Conservative government. It also seems reasonable to assume that the Liberal government will continue with its current rhetorical strategy for the near future. Without interviews and confirmation from government officials, it cannot be said definitively that Conservative action was deliberate. Overall, two frames substituted for actual human communities and their wellbeing: that climate change endangers environmental heritage (11 statements) or that climate change presents economic opportunities (6 statements). The government’s action on mitigation is weak, and rhetoric on adaptation focuses on the North’s role in climate change. The economic frame is somewhat consistent with Nisbet’s (2009) frames of climate denial. In this case, the Government of Canada is, in essence, making action on climate change less likely while simultaneously acknowledging that it is an issue.

Returning to literature on framing, this article provides a case that shows governments can be important actors in framing climate change. Framing “is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized ... can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The government engages in second-level agenda setting, framing how people should think about issues (Ghanem, 1997). The Government of Canada has variously described climate change as an issue that “will have significant impacts on people and regional economies” (Fungal & Prowse, 2007, p. 59) to an issue that leads to negative consequences for “fragile and unique ecosystems” (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister

Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009, p. 24). This article finds a frame that governments can use to reduce the likelihood of action on climate change. It could be effective for conservative political parties that have a reputation for acting to reduce the possibility of addressing climate change. Research has found that framing issues around the human consequences of climate change is more likely to elicit support for action (Lockwood, 2011). As Nisbet (2009) outlines, it might be expected that forces hostile to climate change frame the issue around scientific uncertainty, economic competitiveness, the difficulty of action, or special interests. The majority of government documents released between 2005 and 2016 (13 out of 19) did not clearly mention the link between climate change and human security. Canada's *Northern Strategy* (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009) was an important document because it signalled a shift in government rhetoric toward the impact of climate change on the environment, as opposed to people. Thus, a potential strategy among conservatives to reduce the likelihood of action on climate change could be to emphasize the impact that climate change will have on wildlife, such as polar bears and birds, or natural environments, such as flora and fauna, as opposed to human populations. An emphasis on human populations might mention economic difficulties, destruction of infrastructure, or flooding.

This research presents one case of government framing, contributing to the universe of cases that understands how governments respond to issues. It examines how a conservative government generally hostile to climate change frames climate change while in government, as well as how a liberal government frames the issue. Future research could consider whether this pattern holds for other conservative political parties.

Why did the Conservative government respond to climate change in this way? Other governments were less subtle. The government of George W. Bush instructed government scientists to emphasize uncertainty in climate change research and policy statements (Union of Concerned Scientists' Scientific Integrity Program, 2004). One possibility has to do with public opinion. In 2007 and 2008, more than 60 percent of Canadians believed climate change was real and caused by humans, compared to less than half of Americans (as described in a poll summarized in Anita Pugliese & Julie Ray, 2009). Commentators in Canada such as Paul Wells (2013) and John Ibbitson (2015) argue that a key to the Conservative government's success was to avoid sweeping change in government policy that could raise controversy and alienate voters. De-emphasizing the human element of climate change presents an opportunity to change the urgency of action on climate change without denying the issue, which could alienate Canadian voters.

A criticism of this work might be whether describing that climate change will affect the "environment" really excludes human impacts. After all, humans live in the environment. It is important to avoid the assumption that people passively consume discourse; one could derive a concern about the threats of climate change to people from the *Northern Strategy* (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009). Yet, it is important to be explicit about the nature of threats from global warming. When a government document describes that climate change threatens the ecosystem, people are more likely to picture

serene Arctic environments, perhaps with a polar bear ambling across frozen tundra. It would be more unlikely that someone would picture flooding Inuit communities or snowmobiles returning empty after a hunt. The *Northern Strategy* (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Minister Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, 2009) does not include pictures of people in its section on climate change. The focus is clearly snow, ice, tundra, and water. Focusing on the environment and failing to mention people explicitly makes action on climate change less likely. Deliberate or not, the government's rhetoric on climate change between 2006 and 2015 made action less likely.

Note

1. This department is now called Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, though its mandate and purpose are the same as during the period of this study.

Websites

Canada's Northern Strategy, <http://www.northernstrategy.gc.ca/index-eng.asp>
 Environment and Climate Change Canada, <https://www.ec.gc.ca/?lang=En>
 Global Affairs Canada, <http://www.international.gc.ca/international/index.aspx?lang=eng>
 Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100010002/1100100010021>
 Library and Archives Canada, <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/archives-web-government/Pages/web-archives.aspx>
 Natural Resources Canada, <https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/home>

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