



Which side are you on  
Mr. Guilbeault?

## Description

# Canada's new Environment Minister finds himself at the centre of multiple controversies

By Richard Swift

December 8, 2021

You wonder why he ever took the job. As Canada's new Environment Minister, **Stephen Guilbeault**, the MP from the Montreal riding of Laurier, finds himself at the centre of several storms of controversy both big and small. His "file," as the cognoscenti would have it, runs to everything from saving the Western Chorus Frog from road construction in the Montreal suburb of Longueuil to saving the human species from carbon-fuelled climate degradation. As a member of the cabinet of the **Liberal Party of Canada**, he is up against it big time.

Canada's Liberal Party, our "natural governing party" as the political scientist Reg Whitaker aptly called it, has always specialized in being all things to all people. But underlying the nods to Left and Right has always been an embracing of continuity and business-as-usual. This implies a commitment to a political economy of growth, whether it is the further development of petroleum infrastructure (read pipelines) or industrial development, including new roads and factories.

How the environment fits into this frame is often seen as an "obstacle" by the growth promoters in the business community and many of their advocates that sit around the cabinet table with Mr. Guilbeault. In these calculations, jobs and pay checks (and of course profits) traditionally weigh more heavily than considerations of habitat and green space. Whether this will change now that we humans have ourselves become an endangered species is a question that hangs in the air.

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It's not easy being an environmental activist these days. Indeed being an activist of any type is a challenge. You make up petitions, run educational campaigns, publish articles, organize demonstrations, even engage in



guerrilla theatre and civil disobedience. Meanwhile, those in power, if they notice at all, move at glacial speed to correct matters of severe and immediate urgency. Species-threatening climate degradation is of course the big example here.

Activist frustration mounts. You can hear it in the voices of the old (**David Suzuki**) and the young (**Greta Thunberg**). While activists are a stubborn lot – after all as the slogan goes “there is no planet B” – for some the immobility of the system and those that run it is proving just too much. Aside from giving up they then have two options: eco-terrorism or joining the political game. From the Unabomber Ted Kaczynski to a generation of sabotage activists inspired by Edward Abby’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, this form of activism involving everything from tree spiking to arson and other forms of equipment sabotage to save everything from whales to old-growth forest is difficult and of limited effectiveness.

You quickly get a very bad reputation from a media more committed to the rule of law than ecological sanity, at least when they seem to be in conflict. Terrorist is a very loose term covering a variety of sins. Just ask Suzuki. Recently, his frustration over Canadian government support for continuing to build oil infrastructure and subsidizing the petroleum industry boiled over as he worried out loud that people might start blowing up pipelines. The chorus of mainstream outrage made one worry that the venerable old guy might be dragged up before the International Court in the Hague on charges of crimes against humanity.

Fortunately, the sabotage option is very much the road less travelled for frustrated environmentalists – at least for now. The road more travelled (and certainly the more comfortable one) is trying to get inside the decision-making system to bend policy in a more environmentally favourable direction. However, given the urgency of the situation, it is not clear that this is a particularly successful approach either. The Green Parties that have sprung up have had some electoral success in the proportional electoral systems, sometimes being able to influence the coalition politics that characterize such systems. This has had some (but far from enough) effect on environmental policy in Scandinavia and Germany. But in the first-past-the-post electoral systems that characterize Canada and most of the rest of the English-speaking world the Greens have remained a voice in the wilderness.

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So the main way to get a “seat at the table” of decision-makers in a first-past-the-post electoral system is to join one of the established political parties and try and exercise what influence you can on your colleagues.

This takes us full circle back to Steven Guilbeault. He once climbed the CN Tower in Toronto in an act of dramatic guerrilla theatre to call attention to climate degradation. Guilbeault co-founded **Équiterre**, a Quebec-based environmental organization, and was the director of a provincial chapter of **Greenpeace**. He spoke out against pipeline projects, including the Trans Mountain pipeline currently owned by the Liberal Government. It is impossible to overstate the mire of contradictions in which he now finds himself as Canada’s new Minister of the Environment in Justin Trudeau’s recent post-election cabinet. He is now expected to be a “team player” and not disrupt the “progressive center” image of the Liberals by making intemperate remarks or proposals that might cast doubt on whether their plans to cut emissions thru carbon pricing are adequate despite consistently failing to meet their stated goals.

Guilbeault’s rise to power has been greeted with distinct skepticism, from green activist opinion, or back in Montreal where his embrace of the Liberals makes him in activists’ minds a “vendu” (that is a sellout). On the other side of the country, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney has raised the spectre that the new Environment Minister could presage a “radical agenda that would lead to mass unemployment.” Fair to say Guilbeault spent



most of his time responding to the latter view with his proclamation of loyalty to the Liberal program, re-assuring the petroleum sector that “I don’t have a secret agenda as environment minister”.

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So should we mark Guilbeault with a ‘c’ for courage or an ‘o’ for opportunism? The proof of the pudding is always in the eating, as the old saying goes. Fortunately, we have a local test of the steeliness of his ecological resolve right here in his hometown with the dust-up over the habitat known as the **Monarch fields** (vital habitat for the endangered Monarch Butterfly) on federal government land close to the Dorval Airport and whether it is preserved or turned over for industrial development. Since the spring, citizen activists and journalists have been raising alarm over airport leasing plans to turn the fields over to **Medicom** company to build a factory. They point out that despite there being many other appropriate alternative sites for the factory that would not endanger the struggling monarchs. Guilbeault has vacillated between refusing to protect these fields under the **Impact Assessment Act** while continuing to express “concern” over the project. A final decision has not been announced yet, at least publicly.

Is it fair to judge Guilbeault’s credibility on this one small project and a fight to preserve local green space? Indeed it is. If he cannot stand up to local industrial interests in Montreal and make common cause with fellow environmentalists to preserve green space in his hometown, how can we expect him to take on the giants of the carbon sector and save us from climate degradation? In addition, winning small fights, like the one over the Monarch fields, to preserve green spaces are the kinds of struggles being fought all around the world, and winning them is crucial to our species survival. The question now to ask Guilbeault is the one made famous by that great social justice troubadour Pete Seeger: *Which Side Are You On?*

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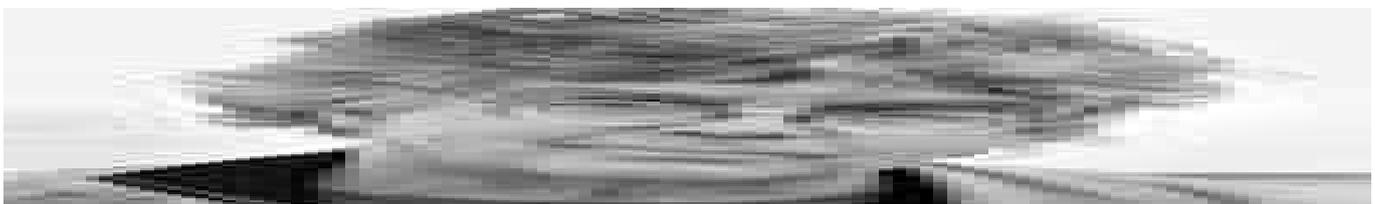
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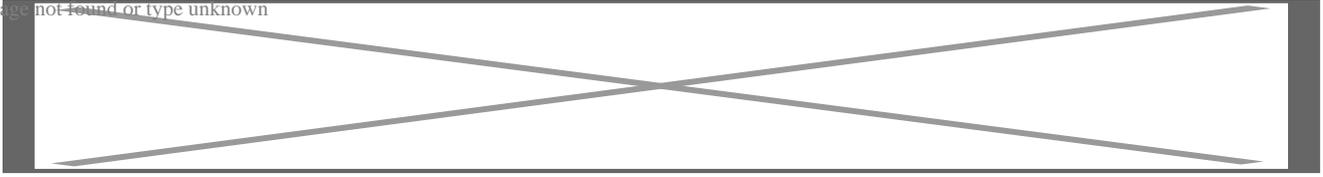
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### Date Created

December 2021