

THE CONVERSATION

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A woman drinks water in front of the ancient Parthenon Temple during a hot, windy day at Acropolis hill in Athens in July 2024. Record-breaking heat waves have become the norm across much of the world as a result of human caused climate change. (AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris)

A 'green new deal' is Canada's best hope of achieving a just carbon-zero transition

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The idea of a “green new deal” has gained considerable ground in recent years.

A modest version has been adopted by the European Union and various national governments in the Global South. The 2019 European Green Deal has been described as a “new growth strategy,” to build a resource-efficient yet competitive economy.

In the United States, a green new deal was attempted in 2019, but it ultimately failed in the face of Republican opposition and no meaningful progress has been made since.

In Canada, the conceptual and policy structure of a green new deal was laid out in the 2016 Leap Manifesto, with a focus on renewable energy, wealth distribution, Indigenous rights and building supportive social movements. However, the ambitions of the manifesto remain just that, and Canada currently has no green new deal in the books.

This must change if Canada hopes of achieving a truly just net-zero transition.

Competing visions

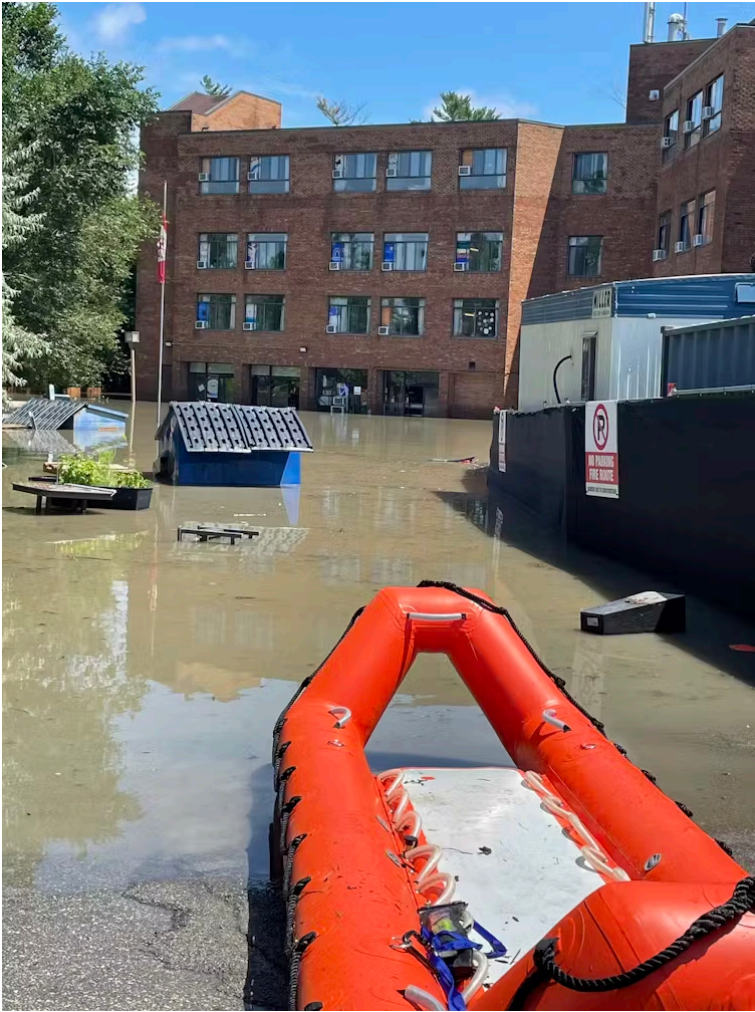
There are, broadly speaking, three major approaches for achieving net-zero: radical-reformism (green new deal), green growth (our current strategy) and so-called "degrowth."

Green growth is inadequate for a few key reasons. First, to achieve a prosperous world with net-zero emissions, green growth must attain absolute decoupling of growth from carbon dioxide emissions. This is unlikely in the short- to medium-term for all but a handful of richer countries.

Secondly, we can't simply convert our energy system from fossil fuels to green sources (solar, wind, hydro and nuclear), at the current level of consumption. To try to do so risks ecosystem damage, which must be factored into account.

The harsh reality is that reduced consumption remains the only real course of action. Battery-powered cars, yes, but also smaller and fewer cars.

Green growth is not meeting the climate/ecological challenge. Humanity has already crossed six of nine safe planetary boundaries and it is already too late to restrict global warming to 1.5 C, the lower ceiling proposed in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. We need to act decisively now.



Mississauga Fire and Emergency Services prepare to evacuate people from Tyndall nursing home following flooding caused by a torrential downpour on July 16, 2024. THE CANADIAN PRESS/HO - @MississaugaFES

Degrowth is seen by some as an alternative. Degrowth is a revolutionary idea that aims to do away with GDP and focus economic targets around meeting human needs. While the recommended measures would drastically lower emissions in the here and now, degrowth is just not politically or economically feasible. Degrowth identifies capitalism as the problem and calls for its transformation to “post-capitalism” or “post-growth.” The main problem is how to get there.

Geoengineering is also sometimes touted as a potential cure for our planetary woes. However, even if geoengineering works as planned — a very big “if” when many climate scientists dismiss it as “dangerous nonsense” — it is not a cure for global warming, but only a stop-gap measure, as carbon emissions will continue to grow.

Relying on technical fixes is a risky gamble. Yes, we must continue to invest heavily in promising technologies. A technological breakthrough may happen. But we can’t count on it.

We must not let our fate depend on a breakthrough that may never happen.

A green new deal

The case for a radical green new deal in Canada is compelling and straightforward. A green new deal could be more effective at delivering positive ecological change than green growth and would likely be more feasible in the short-term than a degrowth model.

Unlike green growth, which was developed by technocrats, and degrowth, which is largely an intellectual movement that grew out of university discourse, green new deals typically emerge out of activist and political networks. This origin is significant for two reasons. First, green new deals are typically developed by people who can be expected to have a rough idea of what might be politically feasible within their constituency.

Second, the green new deal is easy to comprehend. While engaging critically with green growth or degrowth requires post-graduate training, the radical green new deal is common sense.

The message is: we must rapidly make a green energy transition. This transition cannot happen unless people, including those employed in fossil fuel industries, see a better future at the end. Expansion of social protections and public services must therefore accompany ecological change.



A truck is seen driving through a forest fire.

Members of the New Jersey Forest Fire Service battle a forest fire in Tabernacle, N.J. in July 2024. (New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection via AP)

The better future entails equity, on a national basis, but also in the Global South, which is unfairly bearing some of the worst impacts of climate change. And, perhaps most difficult of all, the energy and materials consumption in richer economies must decline.

This green new deal could usher in radical change on a similar scale to the original “New Deal” introduced by U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s. The New Deal saved America from the Great Depression; the Green New Deal would be the first step in saving us all from ecological collapse.

Obstacles ahead

The political and attitudinal obstacles to achieving this extensive program are major. The current political polarization within countries makes the task even more challenging. With climate denialism remaining strong within many conservative movements, climate action has unfortunately become a culture wars issue to many — as witnessed at the recent Republican National Convention in Milwaukee, Wis.

Nevertheless, two points are worth emphasizing. The dominant green growth approach cannot save us. And the degrowth vision, though attractive, entails the improbable overturning of capitalism. The radical-reformist Green New Deal is a more viable approach to climate emergency than green growth, and more politically promising than degrowth.

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Something radical needs to be done, whether we like it or not. Modest policy measures, such as a carbon tax, might have sufficed if they had been adopted in the 1980s (when the science of climate change was already established). Reversing global warming at this late stage requires more extensive action. A green new deal could be just the kind of radical action needed to save us all.

There is no easy way out.