



# ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP IN CANADA'S PARLIAMENT:

*Realities, Opportunities & Constraints*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The need for environmental leaders in politics takes on new urgency in the aftermath of a global pandemic and another year of record-breaking natural disasters. GreenPAC, a nonpartisan nonprofit, has helped elect environmental leaders in Canada since 2016. But even with passionate environmental champions in office, progress has been hard won and the pace of change inadequate to address the magnitude of current crises.

In order to better understand the experience of environmental leaders in politics from the inside, **GreenPAC's Parliamentary Interns for the Environment** interviewed eighteen current and former Members of Parliament (MPs), each of whom has been recognized and endorsed by GreenPAC as environmental champions. These interviewees came from across the country and from the Liberal, Conservative, NDP and Green parties. Our goal was to acquire a clearer picture of the space and opportunities for environmental leadership in Parliament, how best to support environmental leaders in office, and how a new generation of advocates might learn from past victories and setbacks. This report is a culmination of that research, with key takeaways summarized below.

Our findings support much of what is already known to experienced political observers regarding the constraints of party discipline on individual MPs. However, they also shed new light on the interplay between politics and the environment specifically. This research has implications for new or aspiring Parliamentarians who hope to lead environmental change in office, and offers unique insights to anyone interested in advancing a more sustainable, equitable Canada.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 01 We asked: *"Tell us about your greatest environmental success as a Member of Parliament."*

#### We learned:

- **Conservation and the creation of protected areas** was a recurring theme across party lines
- Most victories were **project-specific** as opposed to systems-oriented
- Outside of cabinet, opportunities exist through **Private Members Business** – even when bills fail
- Private Members Bills are a risky and imperfect vehicle for change

### 02 We asked: *"Tell us how you achieved your greatest environmental success as an MP."*

#### We learned:

- **Collaboration, preparation, grassroots support** and **making "the right ask"** were key ingredients for success

### 03 We asked: *"What were the biggest obstacles to environmental leadership you encountered in the House of Commons, and did any barriers come as a real surprise?"*

#### We learned:

- Parliamentary processes can **delay, dilute and derail environmental initiatives**
- **Toxic partisanship**, amplified on the environment, creates hostility and antagonism

- **Party discipline** was one of most unexpected barriers to environmental leadership and pervasive across Parliamentary activities (and parties)
- **Industry influence, low levels of scientific literacy and discrimination** are all barriers encountered by environmental leaders in office

#### 04 We asked: *“What do you think it takes for an MP to be an effective environmental leader in office?”*

##### We learned:

- **Ability to collaborate, persistence and strong goal setting skills** were all widely associated with effective environmental leadership
- Other answers included **empathy, emotional intelligence** and **science-based decision making**
- What constitutes “effective environmental leadership” likely depends on the observer (and their party affiliation)
- For some, effective environmental leadership is **predicated on systems change**

#### 05 We asked: *“Are there any changes you think we need to the Parliamentary system for more successful environmental leadership?”*

##### We learned:

- A majority of interviewees felt **changes to the Parliamentary system were needed** to strengthen environmental leadership in politics
- Improving the strength of Canada’s democracy was seen as necessary for, and inseparable from, environmental leadership, with strong calls for **electoral reform** and cross-party support for **reducing party discipline**

## CONCLUSIONS

- **Navigating the narrow paths to environmental success in Canadian politics takes skilled leadership and an understanding of the significant obstacles that exist for MPs**
- **Emerging environmental leaders inside and outside politics can utilize the insights from this report to be more effective and prepared advocates**
- **The challenges highlighted in this report show a need to continue supporting environmental leaders in politics, but accelerating large-scale change may require “doing politics differently”**

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# INTRODUCTION

Environmental crises like climate change and biodiversity loss constitute profound threats to human and planetary health, and in recent years, these issues have gained new prominence during elections<sup>1</sup>. Yet in Canada, government progress in tackling these crises has been criticized as inadequate, evidenced among other things by a failure to meet climate targets and overshadowed by the threat of rollbacks as governing parties change.

GreenPAC, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization, was founded in 2015 with a mission to build environmental leadership in Canadian politics. It does this by helping increase the level of environmental literacy among decision-makers, by supporting current and future environmental leadership through its Parliamentary Internship for the Environment program, and by identifying and endorsing election candidates who are proven environmental champions. To date, more than 60 GreenPAC endorsees have been elected and taken their fights for the environment to Parliament Hill or their respective provincial legislatures.

We know that electing environmental champions as Members of Parliament (MPs) is essential to implementing the solutions we need to tackle environmental crises with the urgency required. But far less is known about the experience of environmental champions after they are elected. Where do they find opportunities? How do they push for change? What obstacles have they encountered as MPs and what were their biggest learning curves? What, if anything, do they think needs to change about Parliament to improve environmental outcomes?

This report, the product of research conducted by GreenPAC's Parliamentary Interns for the Environment, is intended to shed light on these questions. Our objectives for doing so are three-fold. First, while an abundance of research exists on "the democratic deficit" and on various facets of the MP experience in Canada<sup>2</sup>, very little considers what these mean for environmental outcomes specifically. We

hope to spark new conversations across disciplines and interest areas. Second, by gaining a deeper understanding of what environmental champions experience in Parliament, we may find or inspire better ways to support them and increase their effectiveness as change-makers. Lastly, this research offers valuable insights for the emerging generation of environmental champions. It is our hope that this work will help to prepare new or aspiring MPs, and the advocates who engage with them, in recognizing opportunities, navigating obstacles, and ultimately leading the way towards a healthy, sustainable future.

# METHODOLOGY

To explore this topic, GreenPAC conducted interviews with 18 current and former MPs who had been endorsed by GreenPAC as environmental leaders in the 2015 and 2019 federal elections. Interviewees came from six provinces and from the Conservative, Liberal, NDP and Green parties. Interviewees included women, BIPOC, urban and rural MPs. Collectively, interviewees held a range of roles and portfolios; we spoke to current and former backbenchers, Cabinet Ministers, Parliamentary Secretaries, party critics and committee members.

As their experience in public office was central to our research, we did not interview GreenPAC endorsees who were elected for the first time to the House of Commons in the 2019 election. We did, however, seek interviews with former MPs who were endorsed but unsuccessful in re-election bids.

The majority of interviews took place between November 2019 and June 2020 and were conducted in English and French by GreenPAC Parliamentary Interns. To encourage candid responses, all interviewees were granted confidentiality, though interviews were recorded with permission for transcription and analysis purposes<sup>3</sup> with identifying information redacted. Given the limited number and public nature of GreenPAC endorsements, **this report omits any detailed breakdown of interviewees by region, party, time in office or other potentially identifying factors.**

Each interviewee was asked a set of questions related to their experience as an environmental champion in the House of Commons (see Appendix I), including:

- Their most significant environmental achievement as a Member of Parliament and how they achieved it
- Barriers they encountered to environmental leadership in the House of Commons

- What it takes to be an “effective environmental leader” in the House of Commons
- What changes, if any, could improve environmental leadership in the House of Commons
- How the environment stacked/stacks up as a priority for the interviewees’ constituents and colleagues in caucus<sup>4</sup>

Our questions were intended to provide interviewees with enough flexibility to reflect on any facets of their experience they deemed relevant while still providing us with insights into broader challenges or opportunities for environmental leaders in Parliament.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify recurring or noteworthy themes (qualitative content analysis). Novel answers were also recorded. Where interviewees veered off the interview structure, we analyzed their responses in the context of the most thematically relevant question(s), or if necessary, created a new column in our spreadsheet for later consideration. All findings were reviewed by a GreenPAC staff member with primary research experience.

The disruptions caused by COVID-19 delayed the production of this report. As many interviews were conducted just before or in the early days of the pandemic – and as there has been a federal election since – we have only included findings that we are confident remain relevant today and going forward.



# WHAT WE LEARNED

## I. WHAT ENVIRONMENTAL VICTORIES IN PARLIAMENT LOOK LIKE

**We asked: “Tell us about your greatest success related to the environment as a Member of Parliament.”**

### BIG TAKEAWAYS:

- **Conservation and the creation of protected areas** was a recurring theme across party lines
- Most victories were **project-specific** as opposed to systems-oriented
- Outside of cabinet, opportunities exist through **Private Members Business** – even when bills fail
- Private Members Bills are a risky and imperfect vehicle for change

In describing their most significant environmental achievements as Members of Parliament, interviewees told us about victories ranging from the creation of new national parks, to driving policy or regulatory change, to leading bold cross-government initiatives. Topics spanned species at risk and Indigenous-led conservation to plastic pollution and carbon pricing.

For approximately half of interviewees, their greatest environmental victories in the House of Commons came through **Private Members Business** (Box 1). Even knowing that most interviewees lacked opportunities in cabinet, this surprised us because Private Members Bills (PMBs) overwhelmingly fail in becoming law<sup>5</sup>.

### BOX 1: PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

**Private Members' Business** refers to legislation and motions put forward by individual Members of the House of Commons who are not part of cabinet.

Interestingly, interviewees found tangible victories even when the bills or motions they brought forward were unsuccessful in getting passed. One interviewee, for instance, described their conservation-related PMB being defeated in the House of Commons but generating enough momentum for similar bills to be introduced later by other parties, and eventually, adopted in government policy. Another told us about their experience putting forward a PMB despite knowing it lacked the votes to pass: *“I said, ‘well, I’ll just put it forward anyways and use it as an example of what I think should be done.’ And I guess [the government] thought ‘we better do something,’ [because] a couple weeks later they phoned me and said, ‘okay, we’ll just fix that in regulation and policy’ [rather than going through the process of legislative change].”*

In short, we heard that MPs can successfully use Private Members Business to raise awareness on an issue and generate support for change, even though the desired change may come through a lengthy or roundabout process. However, interviewees added cautions about this approach, such as: *“The pitfall I have learned, historically, that MPs fall into with Private Members’ Business is, they have this great idea. They believe in their hearts they have a great idea and just [...] show up on the floor of the House of Commons and hope everyone else thinks it is a great idea too, without doing the rigor of [...] developing champions and supporters along the way.”* Another remarked: *“[Some PMBs may], over time, get picked up by MPs who are in government and [folded into policy], usually, in my experience, watered down.”* More insights on the limitations of PMB are captured in Section III (Barriers to Environmental Leadership in Parliament).

In sharing their greatest environmental victories with us, most interviewees focused on concrete outcomes (though two referred to less measurable impacts, such as increasing the knowledge of climate science among MPs). Among the former, conservation was

## BOX 2: A NOTE ON BUDGETS

In discussing environmental victories in the House of Commons, one interviewee offered this insight for future champions: *If you want a law to be implemented well, if you want good climate programs, you need a budget... The federal government is the only level that can really open up the wallet and say, "We are going to spend." I think anyone interested in the environment, in the political aspects of it, needs to focus every year on the budget cycle.*

a recurring theme, more specifically, the creation of national parks or protected areas. Three interviewees, including two with cabinet experience, identified their leadership in creating a new park or protected area as their greatest environmental achievement in office; a fourth cited their role in securing funding for protected areas. These interviewees represented three different parties and vastly different parts of the country. This caught our attention as, encouragingly, it suggests there is widespread support for the critical task of protecting natural areas. However, it also left us apprehensive, because many pressing environmental crises cannot be addressed through conservation alone. In fact, of all the victories we heard about, most were "project-specific" (i.e. focused on a specific habitat or species); **only a select few constituted more "systemic" shifts** (i.e. implementing a national price on carbon, changing decision-making structures, etc). We note this not to disparage endorsees in any way – many told us about their efforts to introduce sweeping initiatives that did *not* end as victories – but rather, to illuminate the constraints that even the most ardent environmental champions face in office.

## II. HOW ENVIRONMENTAL VICTORIES HAPPENED

**We asked: "Tell us how you achieved your greatest success related to the environment as a Member of Parliament."**

### BIG TAKEAWAYS:

- **Collaboration, preparation, grassroots support and making "the right ask"** were key ingredients for success

To learn more about how environmental victories happen in Parliament, we asked interviewees to describe how they achieved the successes discussed in Section I. Despite the range of victories mentioned, four factors emerged as crucial to success: collaboration, preparation, grassroots support and making "the right ask." While these components are themselves not surprising, interviewees offered new insights into their significance and application in the Parliamentary context.

**Collaboration** was the most frequently cited element of success, raised by more than half of interviewees. Of these, eight emphasized collaborating with other Members of Parliament, five with allies in the nonprofit and/or the scientific community, and four with other levels of government. Relationships with Senators, civil servants, international peers and Indigenous leaders came up much less frequently.

### BOX 3: IMPLICIT, FORGOTTEN OR SOMETHING ELSE?

Fewer than five interviewees spoke in any meaningful way about engaging or collaborating with Indigenous communities for environmental leadership. In most interviews, the words "Indigenous" or "First Nations" were not found at all.



On collaborating with other MPs, four interviewees stressed the importance of working across party lines, often finding value in setting aside partisan agendas and focusing on common ground. More than once, we heard that successful collaboration with other MPs was hard-won, requiring a surprising investment of time and effort:

*[I went] door by door to different MP offices and got them to sign on.*

*I lobbied hard and spent thousands of dollars taking [members of the then-governing party] out to lunch, supper, beers, scotch, wine... and talking to them.*

Collaboration with environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS), the scientific community and/or other levels of government related closely to a second recurring component of success: **preparation**. Here, we heard about the considerable work – sometimes years' worth – that took place *before* interviewees advanced their goals in Parliament, such as research, stakeholder engagement and public outreach. For instance, one interviewee credited the extensive work done by a ENGO partner as essential to the passing of their Parliamentary motion to ban a harmful pollutant. In this case, the nonprofit did what the interviewee called “the heavy lifting” of navigating the science, mobilizing the public, and securing industry buy-in *before* the MP even drafted the motion. Another interviewee, speaking about the creation of a national park, described strategically engaging local leaders prior to approaching federal ministers: *“The [point] of the story is that there was a lot of legwork... that legwork involved getting all these stakeholders on board and presenting to the federal government essentially a nice, potential solution on a silver platter that they could easily say yes to. So, as a result, there is now [amount redacted] set aside for the establishment of this national park.”*

The third ingredient for success – **grassroots support** – was cited by one-third of interviewees, who shared examples of using petitions, celebrity endorsements, media outreach and allies on the ground to raise awareness on a given issue. In turn, this generated public pressure on the government to

act. As one interviewee told us: *“We made it a dinner table conversation for Canadians across the country.”* Another stated, *“By going public with that ... I made it easy for the government to do the right thing.”*

On this topic, another interesting insight was that building grassroots support – including targeted campaigns at certain ridings – was helpful to secure buy-in from MPs who are not necessarily in government but still vote on bills in the House of Commons. One interviewee summarized the importance of this as follows:

*[Of course, most MPs will say] we all want to do something about it. But in the end, are they going to vote for it? If they haven't heard from their constituents, it's pretty easy not to... [Getting constituents to phone or e-mail or write to their MP], those things are important. [MPs like] a political win... If [they know they are] getting calls or emails over [an issue] or [if their staff tells them it's a hot topic], then they'll think 'I better vote for it.'*

The fourth theme that emerged in our analysis of how victories happened was **“make the right ask.”** According to interviewees, the “right ask” is one that is focused, specific and clearly communicated: *“You've got to be very specific [about what] your political goal or win looks like, so that [other] politicians know exactly what you're talking about.”* *It also means an ask that is strategically framed; interviewees highlighted the value in shaping asks as “political wins,” or at least, ensuring they are do not fall into the territory of political footballs: “[To pass my motion], I made sure that our team didn't go down that stupid partisan route and write something that had a poison pill in it that the other parties couldn't vote for.”*

### III. BARRIERS TO ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP

*We asked: "What were the biggest obstacles to environmental leadership you encountered in the House of Commons? Were there any barriers that came as a real surprise or that you did not foresee when you started as a Member of Parliament?"*

#### BIG TAKEAWAYS:

- Parliamentary processes can **delay, dilute and derail environmental initiatives**
- **High level of party discipline** was among the most surprising barrier encountered and pervasive across parties and all aspects of Parliamentary work
- **Toxic partisanship** creates a hostile and antagonistic workplace and is amplified on environmental issues in particular
- Other barriers to environmental leadership include the **disproportionate influence of industry, low levels of scientific literacy in Parliament, and discrimination**

Interviewees told us about inspiring and hard-won victories for the environment, but they also shared stories of heartbreaking defeats. More than once, we heard of bills or amendments being "killed," "watered down" or outright ignored, stymying progress on pivotal issues like freshwater protection and Indigenous rights. For some interviewees, these experiences disillusioned them to politics; for others, observing similar defeats had been part of their impetus to enter politics in the first place.

Of the barriers encountered by environmental leaders in Parliament, some related to formal institutions and structures, while others reflected more pervasive societal problems and inequities. Three major barriers were cited by more than one-third of interviewees and across party lines: **the processes and structures of Parliament, party discipline** and **toxic partisanship**. Other barriers that came up less frequently but were still striking included the **disproportionate influence and impact of industry lobby** and **gender**

**discrimination**. We discuss each of these in more detail below.

#### Parliament: A Sluggish, Muddled Beast

The sluggish, winding nature of Parliamentary processes, coupled with its limited mechanisms for accountability, was raised as a barrier to environmental leadership in nearly half the interviews. Interviewees described a narrow path for environmental victories, which one endorsee likened to the huge, coordinated effort required to move a piano through a tight window. Another walked us through the lengthy process involved, noting the many points at which environmental legislation could be stalled or derailed:

*If you have a [Private Members Bill], it takes literally two or three years to get through Parliament. Government bills can move through a bit quicker if they want them to, but you know when something has to be debated, well, first off it has to get on the order paper, and then it gets debated and then it has to be passed in second reading and go to committee, and then there are committee meetings and then there are summer breaks, and then it comes back at report stage and there's another vote and then a third reading and another vote and then it goes to the Senate and it can just literally die a long-lingering death in the Senate. So that's just one of the biggest obstacles, that long time period it takes [for things] to happen... People wonder why we can't just do something in a week and you [can] if you have to – it's amazing what we've done in [the first month with COVID-19] when we're faced with a real crisis and everyone agrees it's a crisis. But failing that, things just take a long, long time.*

The process for advancing change through Private Members Bills (PMBs), we heard, is further limited by the lottery system that determines whose PMBs can be tabled when, as well as the limited time allocated each week for their consideration.

#### BOX 4: SLOW AND STILL IN A HURRY?

While several interviewees remarked upon Parliament's overall slow pace of progress, one interviewee drew our attention to points of the process too often rushed: *"[In Parliamentary Standing Committees], there is no opportunity to actually have a dialogue. You have the witnesses and you get your four and a half minutes. It's frustrating for the witnesses as well... The process [needs to] support the substance."*

Along with its sluggish nature, some interviewees from smaller parties also pointed to a lack of accountability mechanisms within Parliament to ensure that governments – regardless of administration – follow through on environmental commitments<sup>6</sup>. Here, interviewees who had served through multiple Parliaments and different ruling parties expressed surprise and dismay that federal leaders could demonstrate a "lack of sincerity" and that motions and legislation passed in Parliament could be "completely ignored" by those in power.

#### Toxic Partisanship & Environmental Progress

We were not surprised that high levels of partisanship in Canada's Parliament was identified as a barrier to environmental leadership; however, we were struck by MPs' observations of the severity of it. One-third of interviewees considered partisanship among the largest barriers they encountered to environmental leadership in the House of Commons, and more than two-thirds identified it in some way as problematic. For six interviewees, the degree of toxic partisanship had been among their most jolting discoveries upon taking office.

While no interviewee explicitly defined "partisanship," it was constructed across responses as **resistance by MPs to engage collaboratively, or even constructively, with members of other parties**. As one interviewee put it: *"people are in their camp and they are not willing to*

*get out."* Another told us: *"Good ideas often flounder because of authorship rather than the idea itself."*

Interviewees described partisanship as creating an "antagonistic" and "extremely difficult" working environment, made worse by the fact that disagreements rarely appeared to come from a place of good faith: *"There are politicians who are partisan and you disagree [with them] from a policy perspective. Often, it wasn't that. It was just political scoring."* Among the more troubling examples we heard were instances of partisanship playing out in personal attacks and procedural obstruction, such as deliberately using stall tactics in committee work.

**"My greatest contribution [to the environment] was unfortunately not achieved because of the partisan nature of Parliament."**

On environmental issues (especially climate change), partisanship seemed to reach new extremes. Interviewees repeatedly expressed disappointment that something as foundational as a healthy environment could be treated – regardless of specific policies – as a political football. One interviewee told us that even getting consensus on the need to balance economic goals with environmental sustainability often spiralled into a partisan debate. Another voiced dismay on politicians using the environment as a wedge issue at election time: *"It was a bit of a surprise that [the Conservatives under Stephen Harper] would use weakening environmental safety nets as a strategy and a vote getter. To me, it's not a right or a left wing issue."*

This latter sentiment – a desire to reach beyond partisanship for environmental progress – was a recurring theme: *"I really wish climate change wasn't a partisan issue. I mean, having a discussion about what tools work and different ways to do it, that's okay, but it was very politicized, very charged, very negative, and it was very personal."*

### BOX 5: THE “UNTHINKING ASPECTS OF PARTISANSHIP”

One interviewee offered this more detailed reflection on partisanship:

*“I was surprised by the unthinking aspects of partisanship... There’s a lot [of pressure] on MPs to be right, to not flip flop.... [but] there were moments in committee where we had a really compelling witness, and you could see [in other MPs] that even if their mind was blown, they wouldn’t allow themselves that vulnerability of exploring a new issue from a perspective [beyond] their party line.”*

### Party Discipline: The Unexpected Barrier

Party discipline – the high level of control exercised by party leaders and their offices over individual MPs – was identified as a barrier to environmental leadership in Parliament by nearly forty percent of interviewees, and repeatedly, as one of the most surprising for endorsees upon taking office:

*I never thought that [a political party] was such a hierarchical, top-down, military style organization... the system was designed to be quite the opposite, to be bottom-up, right? MPs were designed to be the ones to elect their leaders, elect the caucus’ leadership, [and] the caucus’ leadership were in turn accountable to MPs. But the whole system has been inverted.*

According to interviewees and confirmed by research elsewhere, party discipline in Canada is extreme, pervasive across all aspects of Parliamentary work and limiting MPs in everything from how they communicate with constituents to how they vote on legislation. (In fact, studies<sup>7</sup> done elsewhere show that MPs in Canada vote with their party more than ninety-nine percent of the time). Interviewees explained to us that party discipline is enforced through the leader’s control over privileges, resources and appointments to

coveted positions – incentives one interviewee called “the perks, the pay and the illusions of power”<sup>8</sup> – with consequences for breaking rank. Such consequences included revoked appointments, ostracization (“[they were] telling me to sit down and shut up and be quiet in a corner”), and even threats over nomination races: “[the party leadership] told me if I didn’t vote the way they wanted one hundred percent of the time, I would not be allowed to run [during the next election] and that would be the end of my political career.” We heard troubling examples of party discipline in **all national parties except the Greens**.

On environmental leadership specifically, interviewees highlighted several ways in which party discipline is problematic. First and foremost, it was tied to glaring instances of **stymied environmental leadership**. One interviewee, for example, shared how their bipartisan work on the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development was quashed, under pressure from the PMO, by the Committee’s Liberal majority. Another lamented how the All-Party Climate Caucus, formed by MPs to find solutions to climate change across party lines, “wasn’t strong enough to override [the will of party leaders] in terms of how MPs voted.” Multiple interviewees described environmental bills passing in the House of Commons only to be defeated by “whipped” Conservative votes in the Senate: “I had the dubious honour of having the only bill in the history of Canada passed in the House and killed in the Senate with no debate.” Particularly disappointing to us in this regard was the range of defeated initiatives – from climate action to local food to sustainable infrastructure. Even bills that received significant cross-party support in the House of Commons suffered this fate.

**“I believe that [party discipline] is one of the reasons that Canada, on the issue of climate change, is the worst laggard in the world.”**



We also heard about party discipline stifling environmental leadership *within* parties. For instance, one interviewee told us:

*There are a lot of [MPs] who would love to hold [their leader] to a more stringent standard on Paris targets, but not one of them dares to do that... Prime minister after prime minister can get away with making these lofty commitments on NATO, on climate change, and foreign aid and not deliver, because we have a legislature that is so whipped.*

At times, this dynamic seemed frustratingly counter-intuitive: *"Two-thirds of Canadians support climate [action], but you do not see that reflected in the House of Commons because party leaders in all four parties on the floor ... prevent them from speaking their minds and voting accordingly."* No better example of this came than from another interviewee's insights on the selection of party critics:

*[In some parties], if you don't have [the support of the] party's number one, you're not even allowed to speak out on an area that isn't your critic file. I've seen [knowledgeable environmental champions] pushed out of [environmental critic files] because [the party leadership] didn't want to hear any [disputes about the party's policy].*

### Other Challenges for Environmental Leaders in Parliament

Four of eighteen interviewees identified **the disproportionate power of industry** as a barrier to environmental leadership in Parliament. One interviewee remarked: *"there is a disproportionate weight that industry gets over the environment, so many times. It's almost inherently David and Goliath."* From another: *"there are strong lobbyists [and] when there is traction [on an environmental priority], they impede that traction."*

Two interviewees regarded fossil fuel interests as embedded within Parliament, with one calling them "entrenched" and a "deep state problem." Another expressed surprise at the extent to which MPs seem

to "internalize" industry concerns without question: *"it's almost as if some industries don't have to lobby because some MPs are doing it themselves... it's like we are big industry apologists."*

Interviewees also shared factors that exacerbate this imbalance, such as **low levels of climate literacy** in Parliament and **the limited capacity of MPs** and their offices. One interviewee summarized this dilemma neatly:

*There are strong lobbyists on Parliament Hill that are constantly pushing their agenda, and it is certainly not one that is favourable to the environment, and so, that is an obstacle. The strength of the lobby in Ottawa and I would say the [heavy] load that Members of Parliament and their small offices carry, when it comes to representing their constituents... It is hard to ensure that the environment gets the focus it needs.*

On a different theme, one exchange that struck us particularly hard pertained to **discrimination in Parliament**:

Interviewer: *"Were there any barriers that came as a real surprise or that you did not foresee when you started as a Member of Parliament?"*

Interviewee: *"Yes! Being a woman! ... People had ideas of what a leader looks like if you were a woman ... I've worked across many different pools, many different organizations. I've never had to deal with this. And that really was a surprise... It is insane how much misogyny there is layered on climate denialism."*

While only the subject of discrimination against women came up in interviews, we do not interpret this as meaning that sexism and misogyny are the only forms of discrimination experienced by environmental leaders in office. Not only is this topic deeply personal (and difficult to share during an interview), but leaders from the BIPOC, LGTBQ2S+ and other marginalized communities are significantly underrepresented in Parliament.

## IV. BEING AN EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL LEADER IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

We asked: “What do you think it takes for an MP to be an effective environmental leader in office?”

### BIG TAKEAWAYS:

- **Ability to collaborate** was the most commonly cited skill of effective environmental leaders in Parliament
- **Persistence** was the most commonly cited trait
- Other answers we heard included **goal setting skills, focus** and **empathy**
- What constitutes “effective environmental leadership” likely depends on the observer (and their party affiliation)
- For some, effective environmental leadership is **dependent upon systems change**

“Mak[e] sure that you understand that it takes time and constant persistence and us[e] all the tools in the toolbox to move things across the finish line.”

Not all leadership is equal in reach, and given the obstacles raised in the previous section, even the most ardent environmental champions can struggle to make an impact. For this reason, we asked interviewees about *effective* environmental leadership in Parliament, deliberately leaving “effective” and “environmental leadership” open to interpretation.

Interviewees overwhelmingly associated effective environmental leadership with certain skills or attributes, namely the **ability to collaborate, persistence, and strong goal setting skills**. Other interesting, but less frequently heard, answers are included in Box 6. On their own, these themes are

unsurprising against the backdrop of partisanship, Parliament’s slow pace of change, and the narrow paths for victories to occur; however, insights from interviewees brought the importance of these attributes into sharper focus. For instance, on the topic of collaboration, one interviewee shared an anecdote in which their friendship with an MP in a different party helped to overcome that party’s misgivings around efforts to ban a pervasive pollutant, adding: “Having a relationship means you can say, “Woah, we’re never going to see eye-to-eye on that, but why don’t we talk about this?” Regarding persistence – identified as crucial by one-fifth of interviewees and jumping to one-quarter when related traits like **commitment and determination** were included – we were reminded of the significant, at times discouraging, amount of time and effort behind many environmental victories:

*(Project name redacted) is a good example [of why you need to be persistent]. It was exhausting. It took many years to convince the government. There were many roadblocks along the way. Many vested interests who didn’t want to see it happen. It was a full-court press not just by me, but by other people involved in the effort to try to get this done ... You have to do your homework. You have to be prepared for a sustained effort over time and intensity.*

Responses to this question left us wondering more broadly about what constitutes environmental leadership and about any differing conceptions of environmental leadership that might exist. No interviewee defined “effective” or “environmental leader,” and largely absent from these discussions was the importance of different kinds of leadership. However, for a select few interviewees, effective environmental leadership in the House of Commons was informed **less by individual attributes and more by context**, such as being in a specific party or, most strikingly, as being impossible without systemic reform (see Section V for more on this). While our sample size was too small to draw conclusions from, we also saw **potential trends along party lines**, suggesting that perceptions about what it takes to be an effective environmental leader may differ between parties. For example, the importance of collaboration skills was most frequently cited by interviewees affiliated with the NDP. Liberal-affiliated interviews gave unique answers (those not echoed in other responses), such as empathy and positivity, at a higher



rate than others. (There was insufficient data for this question to look for trends among Conservative-affiliated and Green-affiliated interviewees). It would not surprise us if further research were to confirm that perceptions about what it takes to be an effective environmental leader in the House of Commons diverge along party lines, as the experiences of MPs in government, especially cabinet Ministers, would differ significantly from those in opposition.

#### **BOX 6: OTHER REFLECTIONS ON BEING AN EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP IN PARLIAMENT**

*"Empathy. I think it's easy to say, "this policy has got to be like that," but if you don't think about people and the impact that something is going to have on people, you're doing a disservice to Canadians, and it's also going to be much harder to keep the successes going in the longer term... This is something that people should reflect on [as environmental leaders]."*

*"You have to be prepared to **play hardball**."*

*"I think the effectiveness of an environmental leader is in their **emotional as well as intellectual appeal**, [not over-relying] on fear and recognition to make their case. Hope and understanding are a more nuanced argument but, I would argue, are more sustainable in the end, [otherwise] you might end up winning battles and losing wars."*

*"You have to **know what you want**. It can't be everything."*

*"You need to be **innovative**. So, you know, you are focused, you're clear and concise, and you're a good communicator. You've collaborated and built a team and, you know, maybe you still haven't got enough support. Well, now you have to be creative."*

## **V. CHANGING PARLIAMENT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP**

**We asked: "Are there any changes you think we need to the Parliamentary system for more successful environmental leadership?"**

### **BIG TAKEAWAYS:**

- Two-thirds of interviewees felt that **changes to the Parliamentary system were needed** to strengthen environmental leadership in politics
- For these respondents, **improving the quality of Canada's democracy was necessary for and inseparable from environmental leadership**
- **Strong calls for electoral reform** (proportional representation)
- Cross-party calls for **reducing party discipline**

Twelve out of eighteen interviewees told us that changes were needed to Canada's Parliamentary system to strengthen environmental leadership in politics. Three of eighteen said no, and the remainder did not answer equivocally either way.

**"The real barriers to environmental leadership rest in the distortions of democracy"**

Those in favour of change detailed several possible "improvements" to Parliament, from reforming committee structures to allowing Private Members Bills to bypass the Senate. Where the majority lingered, however, was on **broader changes to reduce democratic deficits in the current political system**. For instance, three interviewees (from three parties) wanted reforms to **limit the control of party leaders over individual MPs**. This did not surprise us given the critiques we heard earlier of party discipline and its negative impact on environmental leadership (see Section III), and interviewees were quick to add further

justifications for why lightening party discipline would benefit the environment:

*We'll get a greater diversity of voices on the House of Commons floor.*

*[The] iron-clad direction of leaders [drives people to the margins on issues like pipelines and carbon pricing]. Anything to reduce that would be extremely helpful, [because] the middle ground is where we save the world.*

*example, that was not the case ... I think in a minority government [things would] move much more quickly." For some, the need for PR was desperate: "Unless we get there, I don't have a lot of hope [on climate progress]."*

**"[What does it take for an MP to be effective environmental leader in office?] It takes a big brain, it takes backbone, but more importantly, it takes electoral reform."**

We heard even greater consensus on the **need for electoral reform**. Nearly half of those interviewees in favour of change were critical of the current "first-past-the-post" (FPTP) system, under which power flip-flops between two parties and victors can hold the majority of power with merely a third of the vote. These interviewees not only viewed FPTP as fundamentally undemocratic, but on the environment, as exacerbating existing barriers to progress: *"I have learned since becoming a Member of Parliament is that our voting system has informed and created a toxic partisan culture."*

The preferred alternative to FPTP was proportional representation (PR), which interviewees viewed as more likely to produce minority governments and force cooperation. Interestingly, they disputed the idea that majority governments produced by FPTP would allow for faster, more decisive action on issues like climate change than would an alternative system: *"One of the great myths of majority governments is that they can do things quickly and effectively and efficiently, and if the 42nd Parliament is an*

# CONCLUSION

What does all of this ultimately mean for the environment? For us, there are three important takeaways from this research. The first is that **we need environmental leaders in politics**. We need environmental champions across the political spectrum to navigate the complexities of Parliament; to develop and advance solutions grounded in science; to be smart, stubborn and assertive. We simply cannot make the progress we need without them.

The second takeaway is that by **utilizing these tools and insights, aspiring environmental leaders can be better prepared to champion environmental change in politics**. As we learned from interviewees, several barriers to environmental leadership in Parliament came as a surprise, and for some, were disillusioning. This research can shorten the learning curve for anyone taking office. Moreover, for environmental leaders *outside* of politics, this research offers a unique glimpse behind the curtain into the constraints and realities faced by MPs, in turn informing more effective collaboration or advocacy. After all, a recurring theme throughout this report was the importance of grassroots and ENGO allies to bring forward solutions and mobilize support.

Finally, as important as environmental leaders in politics are when it comes to driving change, it is also clear that **accelerating large-scale environmental progress may require Canada to “do politics differently.”** Whether this means changing the attitudes or environmental literacy of Parliamentarians, looking past partisanship and party confines, or even overhauling the system altogether, getting environmental leaders into office is only the first piece of the puzzle.

# APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

GreenPAC Parliamentary Interns conducted 30-45 minute interviews with sitting and former MPs who were endorsed by GreenPAC in the 2015 and/or 2019 federal election. GreenPAC endorsees who were not elected after their endorsement but who had previously served as an MP were included in the pool of contacts. Endorsees who had not served as an MP prior to the 2019 federal election were not included in this research.

Interviewees were asked the following questions, which they also received in writing in advance, along with a personalized question where time permitted.

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. Tell us about one of your greatest successes related to the environment while you were an MP and how you achieved it.
2. What are/were the biggest obstacles to environmental leadership that you encounter(ed) in the House of Commons?
3. Were there any barriers to environmental leadership in Parliament that came as a real surprise to you or that you did not foresee when you started?
4. What do you think it takes for an MP to be an effective environmental leader in office?
5. Are there any changes you think we need in the Parliamentary system to see more successful environmental leadership?
6. How does/did the environment stack up as a priority for your constituents and for your colleagues in caucus?
7. (Personalized question)

## NOTES:

The findings of question 1 were split into Sections I and II of the final report. Findings for questions 2 and 3 were combined in Section III due to significant overlap in content. For reasons explained in the Methodology section, the findings from question 6 were not included in this report.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 GreenPAC's 100 Debates on the Environment project during the federal election of 2019, for instance, resulted in 104 all-candidate debates and engaged more than 16,500 Canadians. Polls in the 2015, 2019 and 2021 elections also showed that environment and climate was consistently ranked as the number one or number two priority for voters.
- 2 See, for example, research from the Samara Centre for Democracy: <https://www.samaracanada.com/research>.
- 3 Where interviewees did not consent to being recorded, GreenPAC Interns took detailed notes.
- 4 Given that most interviews took place before the pandemic, we assume that responses to this question in particular are no longer relevant and have not included results in this report.
- 5 For example, in the 42nd Parliament (2015-2019), only ten of more than two hundred PMBs received Royal Assent and became law.
- 6 For example, according to [www.openparliament.ca](http://www.openparliament.ca), only ten of the more than two hundred PMBs introduced by MPs in the 42nd Parliament (2015-2019) received Royal Assent and became law.
- 7 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-report-finds-mps-vote-with-own-party-996-per-cent-of-the-time-warns/>
- 8 Key positions within the House of Commons, the party or on Parliamentary Committees may come with pay bumps and/or other perks, such as a private car and driver.



**ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP IN CANADA'S PARLIAMENT:**  
*Realities, Opportunities, and Restraints*

November 2021