Kent slams Global Legislators’ for ‘low blow’ report

Environment Minister Peter Kent is defending the federal government’s climate policy record following an international report singling out Canada as the only member country without comprehensive climate legislation in place.

Mr. Kent (Thornhill, Ont.) dismissed The Global Legislators’ Organisation’s (GLOBE) latest climate legislation study as a “low blow” for identifying Canada as the only country out of 33-member states to not have federal climate legislation in place.

“[W]e don’t need legislation when our regulatory process is working well. The organization looks back, clinging to Kyoto,” Mr. Kent said, referring to the Kyoto Protocol, which Canada withdrew from in 2011. “We certainly don’t criticize any countries that have decided to make a second commitment to Kyoto, but we’re much more focused on creating a climate change regime by 2015 that we will have in place and ratified by 2020 when Copenhagen finishes its phase.”

GLOBE, a London, England-based inter-parliamentary organization focused on common legislative responses to the major challenged of sustainable development, reported that all but one of its 33 members had made progress in 2012 towards implementing climate and energy conservation legislation. Member states include China, Mexico, Bangladesh, Russia, and the United States.

“[F]or the first time, one country—Canada—has regressed following its decision to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol and the subsequent repeal of its ‘flagship’ climate legislation, the Kyoto Implementation Act,” wrote former British Conservative MP and GLOBE President John Gummer.

The federal government repealed the Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act when it passed budget implementation Bill C-38 last June. The legislation, which was passed in 2007 by the opposition parties while the Conservatives held a minority government, required the Environment Minister to establish plans and regulations to meet Canada’s commitments under the Kyoto Protocol.

Under Kyoto, Canada was committed to reducing its emissions to six per cent below 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012. This would have required Canada to reduce its average annual carbon emissions to 556.5 megatonnes over that time. According to Environment Canada, annual carbon emissions reached 730 megatonnes in 2012.

Canada’s only existing international climate change commitment is the 2009 UNFCCC Copenhagen Accord. Under that agreement, the federal government is committed to reducing its emissions to 17 per cent below 2005 levels by 2020 to an annual output of 607 megatonnes.

Last summer, the federal government announced that it was halfway to meeting its Copenhagen commitment for 2020, but a June report by the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy credited provincial and territorial policies for 75 per cent of forecasted emissions reductions by 2020 and observed that further policies would be needed to reach the 2020 target.

The National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy was eliminated along with the Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act in Bill C-38.

“[UNFCCC Executive Secretary] Christiana Figueres was very direct in recognizing Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the U.S. as countries outside of Kyoto which are working productively to address climate change, so Canadians can be proud of what Canada is doing internationally, as well as at home,” Mr. Kent said in defence of Canada’s record on climate legislation.

According to the report by GLOBE International, Japan instituted a carbon tax in 2012, and U.S. legislators are commended for actively proposing legislation around energy conservation and renewables, although it notes that passing legislation through the U.S. Congress is “a time consuming and complex process” and legislation tends to be preoccupied with U.S. leadership in the renewable energy sector. New Zealand is not a GLOBE member.
Mr. Kent has touted the federal government’s sector by sector approach throughout his two years as Environment Minister. The approach has imposed fuel efficiency and emissions standards on a wide range of emitting sectors, including light and heavy duty vehicles, coal-fired electricity generation, and the commercial aviation sector.

The government continues to reject carbon taxation, which the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has advocated as a policy tool to curb carbon emissions and promote innovation in energy conservation and renewables.

The government has introduced regulations to cut emissions in the transportation sector—which accounted for nearly 25 per cent of Canada’s emissions profile in 2010. However, it has yet to introduce long-awaited regulations on the oil and gas sector, which is the second largest source of emissions, accounting for 22 per cent of total emissions in 2010.

Mr. Kent said that oil and gas regulations are in the works, and the government can meet its Copenhagen commitments through regulation, without hindering economic growth with a carbon tax.

“[W]e believe that certainly with regards to our Copenhagen targets, we can achieve those reductions tangibly through regulation,” he told The Hill Times. “We are well on the road in our negotiations and our working group with the oil and gas sector, and hope to have the Canada Gazette draft regs this year.”

While Mr. Kent has promised that the government will stay the course on sector by sector regulation and not impose carbon pricing, policy analysts say that there is room for improvement in federal climate policy.

Dave Sawyer, vice-president of climate, energy, and partnerships with the International Institute for Sustainable Development, said that there needed to be greater flexibility for companies to meet the regulatory standards.

“To the extent that you tell a firm to get reductions inside of their facility and how, the chances of getting it wrong are quite high,” Mr. Sawyer said. “Allowing compliance flexibility is a risk mitigation strategy around cost. What’s needed in these sector by sector regulations is to really think long and hard about how we expand the toolbox outside of requiring firms to make internal reductions.”

Marc Lee, a senior economist with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, said that carbon taxation was “pivotal” for encouraging reductions in fossil fuel consumption and generating revenues for energy efficient infrastructure and renewable energy deployment.

“The idea of having a sector-by-sector approach isn’t necessarily a bad thing—the fact is that they’re not actually pushing that hard,” Mr. Lee said. “They brought forward some proposals around coal-fired electricity and then backed off when companies complained. They’ve been taking a lot of credit for regulations and standards in the auto sector, but really what they’re doing is copying what the United States brought forward.”

cplecash@hilltimes.com
Twitter: @chrisplecash

The Hill Times