

Federal party positions:

Should new nuclear reactors be part of a climate action plan?

By [SUSAN O'DONNELL AND GORDON EDWARDS](#), The Hill Times, September 15, 2021

On Sept. 20, one of the two largest Canadian political parties is likely to win the election. Both are supporting new nuclear infrastructure development. The victor will oversee a fund with up to \$8-billion of our tax dollars available to help private-sector nuclear companies, originating mainly in the U.S. and the U.K., to develop their nuclear prototypes in Canada.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh, Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet and Green Party Leader Annamie Paul. *The Hill Times* photographs by Andrew Meade and Sam Garcia

To date, 120 civil society, public interest and Indigenous groups across Canada have endorsed a statement on the Canadian Environmental Law Association website, calling SMNRs “[dirty, dangerous distractions](#)” from the urgent need to fight climate change now, without further delay. The NGO statement quotes the [2020 World Nuclear Industry Status Report](#) conclusion that developing new nuclear energy production is too slow to address the climate crisis, and much more expensive, compared to renewable energy and energy efficiency.

Each new reactor design proposed in Canada (all of them quite different from each other) will require billions of dollars to engineer and build. Given the scarcity of private-sector

investors willing to put money into these risky technology ventures, the industry proponents are pushing for public funding. To date, the federal government has given more than \$70-million in grants to foreign-based nuclear companies with branch plants in Ontario and New Brunswick.

These gifts come from the Innovation, Science and Economic Development (ISED) department. At a recent nuclear-industry-sponsored [event](#), a senior federal government official said the government recently topped up an ISED funding envelope, the “Net Zero Accelerator” fund, that now sits at \$8-billion, and that he looked forward to seeing future announcements through that funding envelope that will support the future of nuclear in Canada.

In recent years, highly destructive weather-related events have made it abundantly clear that climate change is accelerating, and action is needed now. The next decade is critical, with no time left for inaction or delay. The winning party in the upcoming federal election will be poised to shape energy policy for years. So, what are the federal political parties saying about nuclear subsidies in their proposed climate action plans?

- The **Liberal** government has been aggressively promoting SMNRs since 2016, even though nuclear was not mentioned in the party's 2019 election platform. Indeed, nuclear remains absent from the 2021 Liberal Party platform and its plan for “A Cleaner, Greener, Future.” The document does mention the Liberal government's creation of the Net Zero Accelerator fund as a key initiative to fight climate change, without specifying that that fund's \$8-billion is being proffered to the nuclear industry for new reactor development. Although building and deploying SMNRs is a central plank in the Liberal party's climate plan, you would never know it from their platform document.
- The **Conservative Party** platform clearly states that new nuclear reactors are part of their “Detailed Plan to Fight Climate Change.” Far from hiding it, nuclear energy is mentioned five times in the context of climate action. The document promises to make \$5-billion available for a range of technologies including small modular nuclear reactors. Unlike the Liberals, the Conservatives are open about their support for the nuclear industry and its claims about SMNRs and climate action.
- The **New Democratic Party** platform is vague. Nuclear energy is not mentioned. “Net zero technology” has become a government buzzword for nuclear, although of course other technologies also fall under this label. “Net Zero” is mentioned 15 times in the NDP platform document without defining the technologies involved. The NDP has been weak on opposing new nuclear development. Richard Cannings, the NDP natural resources critic, issued a media release in late 2020 pointing out that renewable technologies are cheaper, safer and will be available quicker than nuclear, but without any party statement clearly defining the NDP's position concerning funding for new nuclear developments.

- The **Bloc Québécois** is strongly against federal funding for new nuclear reactors. Quebec does not have an operational nuclear power plant after shutting down its only operating CANDU reactor almost 10 years ago. In the past year, BQ MPs have issued several media releases with statements opposing SMNRs and the party's opposition is clear in its platform document: "The Bloc Québécois will oppose nuclear development, including small modular reactors, and any risk for Quebec from nuclear waste contamination from projects such as the Chalk River dump on the Ottawa River" [translation].
- The **Green Party** policy book includes a clear statement against funding for new nuclear development and the party platform is also clear: "Institute a ban on further development of nuclear power in Canada." In late 2020, the federal Green caucus issued a statement that SMNRs have no place in a plan to mitigate climate change and that the government should stop funding the nuclear industry and redirect funding to smarter energy investments. Last week Annamie Paul the party leader made a [statement](#) to the media ruling out nuclear energy as part of the Green climate action plan because, in part, nuclear would be too slow to be part of the immediate need for climate action.

The [research is clear](#) that SMNRs are unproven, non-renewable, expensive, and prone to long delays and large cost over-runs. Per dollar invested, energy efficiency measures can reduce many times more greenhouse gases than any supply option, and renewable energy technologies such as wind power and solar photovoltaics can be installed in a single season.

In 1993, the report of the Canadian Senate Committee on Greenhouse Gas Emission Reductions (COGGER) detailed numerous strategies for combating climate change. New nuclear reactors were not even mentioned in their report, for the simple reason that new nuclear is too low down on the list of priorities. Even 28 years ago, nuclear was too slow, and too expensive, to give it pride of place.

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Many of the 120 civil society, public interest and Indigenous groups opposed to federal funding for new nuclear reactors will be participating in Global Day of Climate Action rallies planned across Canada four days after the federal election. Clearly, the struggle to define the role of nuclear energy in a truly effective climate action strategy for Canada is far from over.

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