

## The Ecopolitics Podcast - S01E05: Environmental Political History in Canada

<https://www.ecopoliticspodcast.ca/episode-5-environmental-political-history-in-canada/>

Hosts: Peter Andrée (Carleton University) and Ryan Katz-Rosene (University of Ottawa)

Guest: Robert Paehlke (Trent University)

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*From ecopolitical history to tips on environmental activism techniques, this episode is the perfect primer on ecopolitics in Canada. Guided by the seasoned Robert Paehlke – one of the founding voices in the field of environmental politics – we discuss the environmental movement, and the ways in which the movement has changed over the past five decades.*

### Episode 5: Environmental Political History in Canada

**Robert Paehlke:** I had a group of students in the early mid seventies and they decided they needed summer jobs. And there was no such thing as a blue box yet. What the students wanted to do was get trucks and go around and pick it up, something the cities weren't doing at the time. And they went to the city of Peterborough. And asked if they would help them. And they said, Well, I don't think you can convince people to sort their garbage. And the students up and leafleted people's houses. And they did sort their garbage. They did very well. Whole truckloads were avoiding landfills. And very shortly, a year or two after that, I think it was in Kitchener, the first blue boxes came out and then it really caught on. So, I mean, that changed how industries operated. Everything didn't have to come fresh from the forest or fresh from a mine. It could be recreated from things we've already used.

[00:01:09] **Peter Andrée:** Welcome to the Ecopolitics Podcast. This podcast series tackles some of the big questions in the field of environmental politics for university students in Canada. I'm Peter Andrée from Carleton University. And my cohost for the show is Ryan Katz-Rosene from the University of Ottawa. How's it going, Ryan?

[00:01:27] **Ryan Katz-Rosene:** I'm good, thanks Peter. And I'm happy to be joining this conversation with the great Bob Paehlke.

[00:01:33] **Peter Andrée:** Okay, well, let me introduce Bob then. In this episode, we'll be speaking with Robert Paehlke, Professor Emeritus at Trent University, where he taught environmental politics and policy for 35 years. I'm not going to list all his books and accolades as we would need a whole show for that alone, but suffice it to say, Bob is one of Canada's most respected and most seasoned voices in the field of environmental politics. It's not an exaggeration to say he played an important role in founding

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this field, both in Canada and internationally. And that's why we have him here as our guest on our show, examining the history of environmental politics in Canada.

[00:02:10] So any historical narrative has to start somewhere. And as we've discussed in other episodes in this series, each narrative has its own positionality. So to start off this discussion, we're going to go back to the late sixties and early seventies and hear about the origin of Bob's journey into eco politics. Let me welcome you to the show, Bob.

[00:02:29] **Robert Paehlke:** Hi, Peter. How have you been?

[00:02:31] **Peter André:** I've had a great summer and I'm really looking forward to this conversation. You and I haven't spoken for a few years, so I'm really looking forward to talking with you and Ryan today.

[00:02:40] **Ryan Katz-Rosene:** So Bob, I'm going to jump in here. As Peter said, we'd like to start off by taking a bit of a trip down memory lane. So you have been following and actively a part of the environmental movement in Canada since you came to this country from the United States in the late 1960s. And I believe you started at Trent University in 1970s. So that's 50 years ago. How would you characterize the environmental movement in Canada at that time?

[00:03:13] **Robert Paehlke:** It goes way, way back to when I was a grad student at UBC, from 67 to the 70s. So this I'm sort of going to characterize the time late sixties, very early seventies. And that was, the activism was very dynamic. A lot of people were interested all of a sudden, even though previously there's a long history of conservation, wilderness protection, creation of national parks dating back to the 19th century.

[00:03:46] But the newness was that the focus was much more on urban issues, air and water pollution, smog, great lakes, and from '72 or so on, resource depletion and a series of oil price crises that made people wonder if they could afford to drive anymore. So it was a very dynamic time. The media focused on it. Every major paper had an environmental journalist on the beat and I guess, I mean, that captures the time and it was pretty hard not to think about it. And as I was just starting out teaching, within two or three years, students were asking that there be courses on such things. So we created them. In Trent in the early seventies. And there were all kinds of new institutions were created elsewhere - York University, and virtually all universities within about 10 years. And the Environmental Protection Agency

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in the U.S. was created in 1969, Environment Canada, 1971. So there were new institutions created everywhere.

[00:05:08] Meanwhile, lots of other people had doubts about cities, and industrial society, and went back to the land. Hippies and Toronto suddenly moved to Barry's Bay and grew vegetables. Anyway, that I hope captures it.

[00:05:24] **Ryan Katz-Rosene:** That definitely does capture it. And maybe if I could just ask a quick followup Bob, would you say there was a particular Canadian flavour to the environmental movement at that time that distinguished it from the environmental movement in the United States, or would you say it was more sort of a variation on a similar theme?

[00:05:46] **Robert Paehlke:** I think the resource depletion side of it really came home in Canada because we're an, even more then, we're a resource producing country, logging, pulp and paper, mining. We still are to a great extent, energy production, all of those things were, you know, were an even bigger focus here, because that's what our industry was, even more so then than now.

[00:06:16] **Peter Andr e:** And so, Bob, how would you say the environmental movement has evolved or changed from the sixties to today? You know, has the composition or priorities of that movement changed in your view?

[00:06:27] **Robert Paehlke:** I think the priorities have changed a lot. That sort of back-to-the-land spirit shifted because there was a greater acceptance of urban life because it was - people figured out that an urban life was less energy intensive per person and less resource intensive per person. Homes are smaller in cities, you share walls and ceilings and floors, so the heating amount is less. I think that made a big difference and you can walk and cycle and use transit, which isn't an option and Barry's Bay. You're not going to cycle to Sudbury, you know, to get your groceries. So I think that that shift was quite significant. And more so that the sort of anti industry reaction of early environmentalism, because industry polluted, shifted to more, a desire to have new industries that kind of began with Amory Lovins, who said, you know, we can't deplete all energy sources, we need to find new ones. So-called soft energy path. Renewables. And we're still working on that, in a much greater rate. Early environmentalism was mostly focused on local issues, the polluting factory in your town or in your neighbourhood. And it moved towards it the global perspective over time - acid rain, climate change, ozone depletion, that kind of global issue things that could only be resolved globally.

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[00:08:15] And the other dimension that was added in was environmental justice. That began in the eighties. Fellow named Robert Bullard, I had the pleasure of meeting once or twice, from Texas. Basically did studies finding that in Black and native communities, they were much more likely to have hazardous waste treatment plants sited or hazardous waste dumps or pollution, the pollution levels were higher. He was an environmental sociologist that measured all these things, and it ultimately led, I think it was the early nineties, to legislation on environmental justice and something that's still going on quite thoroughly now.

[00:09:06] **Peter André:** I'm glad you brought that up. We are going to complement our discussion with you with a whole episode that talks about environmental justice and environmental racism. And so the students will definitely be hearing more about that. Just to follow up on what you've just been talking about. I wonder if you can tell me a bit about how effective you think the environment movement as a social movement has been in its calls for change. And maybe we can think about that on three different levels. In terms of how people live their lives and think about themselves in relation to the environment, how industries behave, and then what governments do or don't do.

[00:09:46] **Robert Paehlke:** Yeah. How do personal lives, how have they been affected? One is, I mean, there's been a wide acceptance of using less, recycling, et cetera. That's a shift in how we live our everyday lives, but there's much, much more than that, and it really gives a sign of how much things have changed. To be a vegetarian back in those days, in 1970 was very, very unusual. To demand to get organic produce was seen as really weird. It was just unusual. You know, some farmer's markets would feature it, but the big supermarkets barely knew what you were talking about. And that's, those are big changes. So anyway, that's the personal lives dimension of things.

[00:10:43] **Peter André:** And if I can just follow up in there, Bob, because you're making it sound like everything has gone in the right direction. And so just to be the devil's advocate here, you know, I think people are taking way more plane rides than they ever did then. And the net environmental impact of a plane ride, probably you know, will make up for a lot of cycling trips at that person might even make to work. So I suspect, but you would know the data on this, that our net per capita consumption of goods and energy has continued to go up despite, you know, statements that people make that they want to see a green environment.

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[00:11:27] **Robert Paehlke:** I think that's probably true. Energy use is still going up, although it has slowed in recent years, but yes, more people fly. Airplanes far more than in the seventies. But it's still a majority of people almost never get on a plane, I mean globally, for sure. But even in Canada, a majority. And it's not for environmental reasons.

[00:11:58] **Peter Andréé:** Well, and I guess the other dimension here, you've mentioned the, say the shift to more organics visible in supermarkets. And you mentioned the recycling. All of that was only possible with industry also getting on board. So you can have individuals who might believe the world should be different, but then you also need industry and government. So maybe we should just turn to, What impact do you think that movements had on how industry operates in Canada?

[00:12:25] **Robert Paehlke:** It's got two dimensions. One is, I think you could characterize small businesses as including quite a large number now, especially in the last 10 to 20 years, of green entrepreneurs, people who grow local organic food, create sustainable products, solar panels, install solar panels, low carbon building materials, embedded carbon building materials as well.

[00:12:56] Even vintage goods store, so-called former secondhand stores, have an environmental virtuous side and they people who run those businesses pretty much always think of them in those terms. So I think that's a big change. And some large corporations, by no means all of them, have grown up around it. I mean, Tesla is one of the biggest corporations in the world and they make electric cars and solar roof tiles and various other basically green products and other car companies are following suit. Some, I think it's Volkswagen, intended to make nothing but electric vehicles in five or 10 years. Um, BMW gives you a coupon. If you buy an electric BMW for a mere \$90,000, you get a coupon that gets you to \$5000 or \$10,000 off on a solar panels installed on your roof. So some big corporations are trying, is what I'm saying, and I think some of them are created for that reason. There's still, of course, a whole long list of mostly resource sector companies that haven't exactly caught onto this, and resist every step of the way making big changes.

[00:14:23] **Peter Andréé:** You know, some of our listeners won't have been born until the 2000s. And so they might look at industry and say, well, they're still causing so much so many problems for the environment, say climate change and other problems. And The story you're telling shows just how far the movement has come and how much change has been made. But for those industries that you're also talking about that are laggards, you know, it feels like, it seems that that's the space for the state, right.

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To to pick up on environmental values and either regulate or incentivize some of those brown industries to become greener. And I just wonder what, looking back, what effect do you feel this movement has had on the state and what governments do and don't do.

[00:15:10] **Robert Paehlke:** I think we had a great deal of influence, even in the seventies, all kinds of new legislation and whole series of air and water pollution regulations were put in place. And for the most part industries went along with it. And I think it was probably because those rules were negotiated with those industries. What can you do, and what can't you do. And it was kind of a compromise kind of thing. Governments didn't move easily to encouraging a post-carbon economy. I mean it has recently, but it took a long time to get beyond just kind of negotiated middle of the road regulations and not take steps towards building a different kind of economy more aggressively.

[00:16:04] But I do see signs that - saw them in 2008 when a lot of governments built their 2008 post recession recovery around green industries as the industries of the future. And I think that made a big difference in the creation of companies like Tesla and others, those that produce solar and wind. I mean, wind energy is now, you know, produces more energy than coal in most countries including Canada. So those are pretty big changes and those are the kinds of changes that I could see coming for the post COVID recovery, when there's going to be millions, still, of unemployed Canadians and failed small businesses are almost inevitable. Government's going to have to stimulate that. And there are some signs of the Canadian government intends to do that. They've brought back Mark Carney from Britain who favours these things.

[00:17:09] **Ryan Katz-Rosene:** Are you infavourr of a Green New Deal, Bob?

[00:17:12] **Robert Paehlke:** Yes. Yes. I'm quite comfortable with that. I mean, it's an American expression.

[00:17:18] **Ryan Katz-Rosene:** And can you tell us a bit about what that looks like in your view?

[00:17:24] **Robert Paehlke:** I think Biden's kind of bought into it in the U.S. Under persuasion from Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren and others on the kind of left of the democratic party. I mean, I think what it's about is creating a whole series of jobs. I mean, even if it's not economic to produce solar panels in the U.S. or Canada - though I think it could be, if it were relatively automated - you're still going to have to install them on the roofs as you have and in the fields that you have in the the country you're

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in and near to where the point of use is. So there's a lot of jobs in that and in renovating houses to be more energy efficient, that's what I see a green new deal doing. It also works well in the countryside because that's where, you know, you've got room to put in windmills. You're not going to put windmills in downtown Toronto. You're going to put them in a field somewhere and you can still have agriculture around them. That's the way I imagine a green new deal taking place and it would create jobs for quite a long, long time.

[00:18:42] **Ryan Katz-Rosene:** Well, that's interesting, and I think you know, we see the discussion around the green new deal tied in to questions around just transition. So we have jobs, but we also have a discussion of justice. And, you know, you had mentioned environmental justice earlier and Robert Bullard's work. And maybe that's an opportunity to come back to a theme that I wanted to ask you about, which is pretty central to the study of environmental politics, particularly here in Canada. And that is colonialism and neocolonialism. So as you know, this was a country born from the occupation and theft of Indigenous land. And you know, we've heard from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that this was a form of cultural genocide. And we have seen sometimes in Canada's political history synergies and shared interests between white settler environmentalists and Indigenous rights movements at times. And perhaps some of the more notable coalitions are, you know, movements to protect land from logging and development in the seventies and eighties. But of course those alliances have been tested and in some instances, environmentalism itself has been accused or the environmental movement has been accused of taking on a neo-colonial character. So I guess I'm wondering if you can comment on the evolving relationship between the environmental movement and the movement to advance Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous rights in Canada. Is this a solid alliance in the Canadian political arena or does that relationship have further room to grow?

[00:20:40] **Robert Paehlke:** I think it has room to grow and it goes way back. I mean, I tried to remember as far back as I could, it would be the late sixties, mercury from pulp and paper plants and Grassy Narrows were addressed by both environmental activists and Native communities all through Northern Ontario and elsewhere in Canada.

[00:21:07] I remember just an incident. I was traveling with the Royal commission. We went to Red Lake Ontario, which is well North of Thunder Bay. And driving along the road with a window open, you could smell this horrible smell as you went over a creek. And we then went to hearings for the Royal Commission. And there were people from the company. Claiming that it's just all these people from

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Toronto who come up here and notice pollution. It's really not that polluted and everything is fine. I thought, Oh my God, this is a strange world where we're living in, but I mean, there was unity among Native community at Red Lake and us environmental activists from the big city down there.

[00:21:59] And there's other examples of clear cutting the area around Temagami, led by Gary Potts, the chief in the area, opposition to the James Bay power dams was Native-led. Got built anyway. But I mean, there has been a unity between the two groups on most issues most of the time.

[00:22:28] And if you sort of look to the future, I mean, there is a risk of disagreement. I know on some of the pipelines currently being put in, some Native communities see it as a possible source of income, either because they get income because it's their land, or because they get income from the jobs that we've installed the pipelines. So there could be a falling out there, but on the other side, there could be enormous unity around renewable energy, around water quality, around energy efficiency, conversions of housing. Housing is a crucial issue in Native, First Nations communities. And that's something that both sides would be in favour of, especially because the alternative is schlepping large amounts of fossil fuels up there to run a heating system. I've seen studies and experiments with growing local food in the far north, even in the Yukon, but for the most part, say in Northern Ontario, Northern Saskatchewan, and so forth with experimental tech about growing it down below the frost line, even into say, you'd never grow it in February in Northern Ontario, but you could grow it in late November, early December. Grow fresh vegetables, that kind of thing. And so there are groups that are experimenting with this, and I think it has a lot of potential.

[00:24:00] **Ryan Katz-Rosene:** That's interesting. So it sounds like, well, the future is unwritten, but there are opportunities for, you know, a robust relationship to continue between sort of the environmental movement and Indigenous rights and reconciliation movement. So that maybe ties into the next question I have for you, which is about how environmentalists advocate for change. So you have been an environmentalist advocating for change for many decades. And I'm curious to hear from you about, you know, what you've learned about how this process can occur. What are some ways that environmental advocates can achieve meaningful change? What are some tips from the trade?

[00:24:53] **Robert Paehlke:** Just a few, a couple things I thought of - environmental progress works best when it focuses on all levels of government, you know, not just going after the feds or the provinces, but going from the local all the way to national and international. And because some of the time, some of



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them are going to be on side when others of them aren't going to be on side. And you have to be politically sophisticated about where you put your energy at any given time. And if all levels of government had gone bad at the same time, which is unusual, thank goodness. But you can take an old institutions approach. You know, go, as we talked about corporations before or small businesses, they can be influenced by their employees. They can be influenced by investors. They can be influenced by customers, you know, go into the local supermarket and say, Oh, I can't shop here anymore. You don't have X. That kind of approach. So you're looking at trying to influence other institutions or the institution you're in - a university. Get a change in curriculum. I'm very keen on having environmental journalism as a major.

[00:26:24] **Peter André**: If I can just pick up on that, Bob, clearly communicating the message of the environmental movement has been important for the movement to have an impact over these last 50 years. And it's been a big part of your work. You were the founding editor of Alternatives Journal. I wonder if you can tell us a bit about how the environmental movement has tried to get its message across over the years, and what you perceive as the effectiveness or the strengths or limitations of that approach.

[00:26:51] **Robert Paehlke**: Why don't I try a couple of recent things that I've seen happen that worked. The Fridays for the Future has had an enormous influence. I mean, I've followed it quite closely because my son and my six year old granddaughter and her mom were all involved in the early days with a half a dozen people in Toronto before anyone had heard of Greta Thunberg, they leafleted various places. And eventually got it to the point where they were, they put paid ads on every TTC train for a month, which I believe cost \$12,000, which they raised on a GoFundMe page. And to the point where Fridays for the future turned out 40,000 people for demonstrations. I don't think there's been a demonstration like that for a very long time. And then COVID came along and pretty much ended large crowd kind of events, but they will be back and I think they made a difference. And I think that's the important thing. Find new and creative ways to communicate, to raise attention to a particular issue. I mean, climate change became very much the visible issue, the dominant issue in the environmental movement for the last two, three, four years. And I think it ultimately make a considerable difference.

[00:28:40] One other way to communicate that I've found useful personally is to make everyday life habit changes, but to do it very visibly and do it kind of proudly. And I have an electric car, sort of practicing what I preach, and I had the the charger put on the side of the house right near where

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everyone walks by. And visibly plug it in. And I get a lot of people stopping and chatting - neighbours. How does it work? What does it cost, etc. And I say, I have solar panels and they produce enough not only for the house, but the car for about eight months of the year. And they're all quite interested. And I know three or four people who found me and asked questions about the car and either bought that one or more recent model of something else. So, I mean, it can be done about all kinds of other things, not just sort of, rich people's consumption. But with regard to things like travel. I mean, everyone gets asked all the time, Oh, where are you going this winter? Or where are you going this summer? Where are you going through your summer vacations? All before COVID, and I take that to be temporary, and I think the answer is, Well, I don't travel as much. I find I can do really nice things, not so far from home. And you can get into discussions that way. And I think that actually really works as a means of sort of personal communication with people you know already, your neighbours or even your relatives. Anyway, I just throw that out as a different way to communicate.

[00:30:38] **Peter Andrée:** Those are great examples about the impact that we have immediately in our social spheres, in our neighbourhoods. Do you have any last thoughts to share with our listeners on the history of environmental politics in Canada since the sixties? What's your big picture look back?

[00:30:56] **Robert Paehlke:** Two or three things I thought of about that. And one of the ones that's really stuck with me from way back, sort of five years after I started teaching these kinds of things. One student told me that, Some people call your course "Gloom and Doom 310", and I realized that the emphasis was on informing people what the problem was, what pollution does, how people are affected by it, how it's bad for your health, and, you know. But I switched the emphasis - you still have to alert people to what are the real issues and what are not so serious issues, but the focus became on solutions rather than problems.

[00:31:44] How do you fix it? I mean, how do you change minds and how do you do it? What do you, what needs to be done and how can it be done and what are the economic and effects of doing that? And I think also people are mindful. Young people, especially in universities, they're trying to make career choices. What are they going to do with their lives? And I think that's a way of communicating. Get them to get a sense of, well, what's coming down the road. I mean, I would guess action on climate change for the next 10, 20 or 30 years is there, I mean, it's anything from building renovation to change to diets to a wide array of things that will have to change. And, you know, you think about what you're gonna do for a living. You think about it in those terms. Because I think most young people want to do

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something positive environmentally with their lives. And I think there's lots of ways to do that. And it can be in almost any industry. It could be in banking, making decisions about who business you're going to loan money to. It could be in any field.

[00:33:02] Anyway. The other thing is sort of I thought slight warning that I, I didn't discuss it much, but I've written about it - about waves of environmentalism, the sixties and seventies was one positive wave. The bridge between the eighties and nineties was another positive, enthusiastic wave, but then there's a lull and there's going, I think there'll always be ups and downs. So you've got to think about those and be prepared for them and don't think we've all lost it in the world's going to come to an end if we're in a five year lull in environmental action.

[00:33:40] **Peter André:** Well, one of the things I appreciate about this interview, Bob, is that you bring a long time horizon to your memories and your perspective on this movement. And for example, talking about these waves of environmentalism over time and how, you know, there can be a lot of action on the part of individuals being concerned and newspapers talking about and governments responding, industry's responding. And then you might have periods where it feels like there's a bit of regression or retrenchment or not much progress. And then it comes again. And I think that kind of perspective is so useful for the listeners to this show who don't have that a long time horizon to really see how much has changed over the last 50 years.

[00:34:27] I also really appreciate - I was going to ask you a question about what brings you hope, but the last responses that you were giving were really talking about, you know, how you, in your own teaching, you switched from talking about the problem to say Let's really focus on the solutions and talking about the career opportunities that are ahead, for you know, in a more sustainable and just worlds, there's going to be jobs. And there are jobs today and there'll be more jobs in the future. And so I really appreciate that optimism. What brings you so much hope, Bob?

[00:35:02] **Robert Paehlke:** I suppose I'm prone to being doubtful about the future at times. And then you just say, Why go on that way? Because you can see the 50 years that it does get better.

[00:35:16] I mean, I look at what's going on in the United States these days, where I was born and it's terrifying, but I don't think it's necessarily permanent. Cause there have been cycles. I mean, Ronald Reagan famously said, Seen one redwood, seen 'em all. So he was in favour of leaving one redwood up. I mean, that kind of anti-environmental attitude was there, and it rolled a lot of things back just as we've

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done a few times here in Canada in the nineties, it didn't look all that good environmentally. But it has turned around a couple of times since. So I think that's where the optimism comes from. You just, you know, maybe you take a rest for a while and rethink how you communicate. And I'm just enormously encouraged by how many young people have come out on climate marches all of last year. It was led by high school students.

[00:36:28] **Peter André:** Well, like I say, I think you've given us a lot of perspective today and I appreciate the optimistic tone that you're leaving. And as you say, while you might sometimes be pessimistic, if you look back at this history, the data shows us that there's a lot of reasons for hope. So we should probably wrap it up there. And I want to thank you Bob so much for your time and sharing your thoughts and wisdom with us today.

[00:36:56] That's it for this episode of the Ecopolitics Podcast. Don't forget to check out our other episodes in the series at [ecopoliticspodcast.ca](http://ecopoliticspodcast.ca), or give us a shout on Twitter at our handle [@ecopoliticsP](https://twitter.com/ecopoliticsP). And thank you once again to Bob for joining us today, and to our audience for tuning in, and to Ryan as my cohost. And we will look forward to presenting another episode to you soon.