Conservation and Climate Change

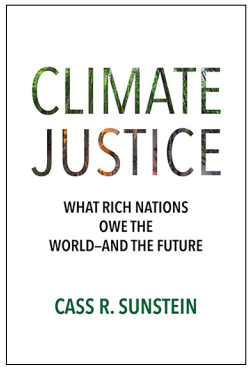
Climate Justice: What Rich Nations Owe the World—and the Future

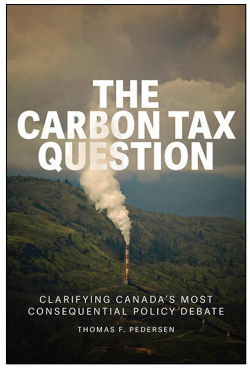
By Cass R. Sunstein. 2025. MIT Press. 216 pages, 39.95 CAD, Hardcover. Also available as an E-book.

The Carbon Tax Question: Clarifying Canada's Most Consequential Policy Debate

By Thomas F. Pedersen. 2024. Harbour Publishing. 264 pages, 26.95 CAD, Paper. Also available as an E-book.

Policy fairness is the underlying theme in two recent publications about climate change and government responses to it. *Climate Justice* focusses on global responses, while *The Carbon Tax Question* compares Canadian (primarily British Columbia's revenue-neutral carbon tax) to Australian policies.





In *Climate Justice*, Cass Sunstein approaches the climate crisis and incumbent social costs through a variety of ethical perspectives. Beyond impacts of emissions nationally from local power generation, heating, transport, and agriculture, there are undeniable effects suffered by citizens worldwide now, but also implicating future generations. We are all affected by the climate crisis, and costs are not evenly distributed. Therefore, Sunstein asks: Who owes what to whom?

Determining which countries produce the most greenhouse gas (GHG) depends on how you measure GHG. Some countries currently produce more GHG than others (China being the worst culprit); others produce more per capita (including Middle Eastern oil-producing states, Australia, and Canada). Some have contributed the most historically. These include the United States, followed by China, the European Union, and Russia (pp. ix, 45; Evans 2021). Sunstein's assessment (pp. 58–59) seems to have left out several Middle Eastern petroleum-producing states, which are among the worst offenders, per capita (Tiseo 2025).

How Should Justice be Meted Out?

The countries most vulnerable to the high stress of climate damage include India, South Africa, and China (p. 49). If compensation is due, then there will also need to be broad international acceptance of a social cost of carbon (the monetary value of future health, agriculture, infrastructure, and ecosystem damages) and consequently a proportionate fee charged for a tonne of CO_2 emissions (past and present). Countries and their citizens will be impacted differently.

To calculate this, there are competing and overlapping frameworks. Welfarism prioritizes those at the bottom (Sunstein's preference), and there are also reciprocal and redistributive approaches. As *Climate Justice* shows in detail, a robust cost-benefit analysis has many challenges. Of the available models, many are flawed and none "say much about catastrophic outcomes, which is a quite serious gap" (p. 22). An understatement, for sure.

Sunstein leans towards using a global pricing system. We are all interconnected on a single planet, and emissions circle the globe; this justifies a "moral cosmopolitan" standpoint (pp. 25–28). However, there is no guarantee that a wealthy country's mitigation investments will be reciprocated. There will be free riders (the problem of the prisoner's dilemma) even when global leadership from one or more significant industrial countries can be influential (pp. 28–30). Punishing the worst culprits for historical or current harms is popular and seems "intuitively correct" but it is notoriously difficult to impose penalties on powerful countries (p. 52). Sunstein believes we still require a credible and binding international treaty and commitment to either an emissions tax or a cap-and-trade

system, both based on the 'polluter pays' principle (pp. 35–36). He thinks it will likely need to be market driven.

The Paris Agreement in 2015 was a good start, but it lacked a global price tag. And, absent an enforcement mechanism, what would be the point of agreeing to a maximum temperature target over pre-industrial levels?

No one should doubt the severity of the crisis we face, Sunstein writes, even if warming will provide some benefits for cold climates and might increase agricultural productivity (p. 55). Management of investments in a future liveable climate could help provide intergenerational justice (pp. 68–69, 126). Yet much of this can seem too little, too late (Hansen *et al.* 2025). Should we prioritize regulations over subsidies? Each decision will impact the survival of different populations and biological systems. A value of a statistical life (assessing the cost-benefit of a single death) sounds ghoulish, but it is a calculation used to determine investment choices (pp. 85–96). Sunstein asks, "How much would you be willing to pay to avoid a 1/100,000 risk of dying from extreme heat?" (p. 88). Resources are not unlimited.

Citizens can be nudged to make better choices through taxes, subsidies, and education (pp. 107–116). Choice engines dilute impulse buying and emphasize climate-based ethical decisions, such as when to buy that electric vehicle. But is the core problem really a shortage of consumer information, or is it politics?

The Carbon Tax Question by Thomas Pedersen is a primer on governance strategies in the pursuit of placing a price on carbon. Pedersen shows why the British Columbia (B.C.) model (a revenue-neutral carbon tax) was successful for a while, whereas the Australian effort (an emissions trading system, or ETS) mostly failed. Gordon Campbell, the premier of B.C. from 2002 to 2011, had significant advantages over Australian Labor Party prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard (pp. 108–109). Campbell, as a credible, environmentally-savvy conservative-leaning politician, didn't need to worry as much about a right-wing political backlash.

Pedersen escorts readers through a labyrinth of political manoeuvres and missteps in both countries. The politics often seem counter intuitive. It was a left-leaning New Democratic Party that wanted to 'Axe the Tax!' in B.C., and they later combined with the B.C. Greens to defeat the government's decarbonization project. It was Progressive Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney who opened the 1988 Toronto conference The Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security, which proposed a 20% global reduction in GHG emissions by 2005 (pp. 71–72). The Australian Liberals were staunchly fiscally conservative with a solid core of supporters denying that climate change is real.

In B.C., beginning in the mid-1990s, an infestation of Mountain Pine Beetle (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*) drove home the climate crisis message. Pedersen's account of the insect plague fills the first chapter of *The Carbon Tax Question*. Warmer temperatures negated a reliable annual cold snap that should have killed off pine beetle larvae before they accumulated sufficient glycerol to overwinter. As a result, the province's "forested heartland changed from a dappled green tapestry to a rust- and grey-stained canvas" and "massive swaths of trees were dead or dying as far as the eye could see" (p. 2). Trillions of beetles destroyed more than 190 000 km^2 of Ponderosa Pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) and Lodgepole Pine (*Pinus contorta*) in the B.C. Interior. Seven hundred and fifty million m^3 of wood was lost, valued at more than $100 billion CAD (pp. 4, 12). Not long after, boreal Jack Pine (*Pinus banksiana*) forests in Alberta were also casualties (p. 11). Everyone noticed, and the subject quickly became both an environmental and a political priority.

Tax Shifting

Because of this consensus, taxing carbon emissions did not initially become a poisoned policy chalice in B.C. It was broadly accepted as the legitimate cost a civilized society must pay for GHG pollution. British Columbia was on track to become the first jurisdiction in the world requiring 100% coal emission sequestration and zero natural gas flaring, among other decarbonization commitments. The tax shift plan was two-pronged. A gradual ramping up of fossil fuel taxes applied at the wholesale level would be compensated through progressive income tax reductions. It was a "template for the world", and it worked (p. 37). Every sales tax penny spent was returned, and after five years, fossil fuel consumption declined by 16% provincially, a rate that was significantly better than the rest of Canada, where it increased by 3% (p. 49).

Some critics emphasized that any single mitigation effort by B.C. on its own, however laudable, could only be a drop in the bucket of the global totals required. And any scheme that doesn't hurt—no pain, no gain—intuitively seems insufficient at addressing the problem at scale. This conundrum is further complicated because carbon tax policies looked different in 2008 than they do today, when tipping points and historic wildfires more conspicuously threaten the planet. Nevertheless, B.C. had the benefit of relying on hydropower for 92% of its electricity, whereas Australia was dependent on coal.

In Australia, as elsewhere, climate change has been observable in droughts, bushfires, and water shortages but also as a threat to its Great Barrier Reef. Labor Party prime ministers Bob Hawke (from 1983 to 1991) and Paul Keating (from 1991 to 1996), however, both resisted legislation that would cut carbon dioxide emissions at the expense of the economy (pp. 68–69, 73–75). John Howard, the Liberal prime minister from 1996 to 2007 and a self-described agnostic on global warming, would eventually acquiesce and promise to implement a program of emissions trading. But Rudd, as leader of the Labor Party, was next elected to govern with the support of the Australian Greens in 2007, and the Greens then opposed the ETS as insufficient.

The complicated infighting and posturing, known in Australia as the political "yo-yo years" (p. 99) and deftly exploited by the tabloid press, fills three interesting chapters in *The Carbon Tax Question*. In the end, to Pedersen's obvious annoyance, Australia's *Clean Energy Act* and ETS were axed in 2014, and the country's GHG emissions soon began to rise (p. 132).

Meanwhile, the Christy Clark Liberal government in B.C. (which governed from 2011 to 2017) supported pipelines for export of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). Clark argued that LNG could serve as a transitional fuel to replace coal in China and India, coincidently generating substantial revenue and creating thousands of provincial jobs. But although gas produces more energy per tonne of CO_2 released than coal, the fossil energy used to liquefy the gas significantly increases B.C. emissions (p. 160; Howarth 2024). Corporate interests also threatened to take their capital elsewhere if the pipelines were not built (pp. 169, 182).

The Clark government approved the expansion of the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline in 2017. It was purchased by Justin Trudeau's federal government the next year and eventually cost over $34 billion CAD to purchase and upgrade for operation in 2024. That energy conduit would triple the volume of oil pumped from Alberta to the Pacific coast (Williams 2024).

The hero of the B.C. carbon tax story in Pedersen's telling is unambiguously former premier Gordon Campbell. Ten years after he implemented the revenue-neutral tax, the federal Liberal government initiated its own national carbon pricing system. But as Pedersen shows, the Trudeau government would subsequently lose favour through ineffective public messaging despite 90% of fuel charges being returned to consumers (p. 200).

Eventually, a federal Conservative Party opposition led by Pierre Poilievre effectively swung its own 'Axe the Tax!' demolition ball, the same rhetoric delivered both by the Australian right and the B.C. social-democratic left. A new federal Liberal prime minister, Mark Carney, recognizing a political vulnerability, and despite the proven effectiveness of using a revenue-neutral strategy to change fuel consumption habits, cancelled the federal carbon tax (McCarthy 2025). He promised to replace it with a (less transparent) tax on large industrial emitters and a "green incentive" program (Zimonjic 2025).

In both *Climate Justice* and *The Carbon Tax Question*, the emphasis is on sharing the economic burdens (either globally or nationally) of rapidly rising global temperatures and climate disruptions. While tax shifting has the merit of more effectively compensating the most economically vulnerable, in each case study (Australia, Canada, and B.C.) the policy measures on offer eventually all failed. The term 'carbon tax' was toxic in the Australian free market culture and was also opportunistically exploited for partisan gain in Canada.

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ROBIN COLLINS
Ottawa, ON, Canada