

LES CAHIERS DE L'INSTITUT EDS

Representations and reasons underlying
the actions of former policy makers
on climate change

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| Summary

In order to understand the reasons for their actions (and in certain cases their lack of action), as well as the representations that underpin them, we interviewed twelve former ministers responsible for environmental issues. These ministers generally see the environment as a concrete issue, mainly of an economic nature, but, both in France and in the province of Quebec, we observed that their room for maneuver is quite narrow. They have all tried to do the best for the

protection of the environment and the well-being of their fellow citizens, but without disturbing too much their way of life or the established order, and while generally being very aware that the challenges to be met will very soon necessitate much more difficult decisions. Our results indicate that the perceived lack of citizen support for environmental action, particularly as concerns climate change, is one of the main barriers to action by ministers.

By Michel Pigeon

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| Introduction

Developed societies have a way of life that leads them, in a way, to live beyond their material, biological and ecological resources (Rockström et al., 2009). How did we get here? And above all, who should take care of this problem? It is easy to simply answer that it is the government officials, the elected officials. But this answer neglects in our opinion a very important element: society itself. In today's democratic societies, citizens are becoming better educated and informed, and demand to participate in major decisions, or at least to be consulted. In a context where some of these decisions may somewhat upset people's lifestyle and what citizens perceive as normal social behaviors, it is not surprising that environmental problems are far from always being the subject of the strong and radical actions that would be necessary (Baxter and Laffoley, 2016). On the other hand, it must be remembered that well-organized groups, particularly in certain industrial sectors such as oil and coal, have interests that go in the opposite direction, although it is interesting to note that, quite recently, many leaders of major industrial groups have recalled the need for the transition to renewable energy (Agence France-Presse, 2016).

Solutions to major environmental challenges are, on the whole, fairly well known. In particular, with regard to climate change, we must reduce energy consumption and make an energy transition, that is to say drastically reduce the use of fossil fuels and develop renewable energy sources, such as solar or wind. In these circumstances, it seemed to us useful and interesting to study and better understand why men and women politicians, who are responsible for the sustainable development of our society, and therefore the future of humanity, and who must promote the necessary changes, do not seem to be doing all that is necessary to tackle these great challenges.

This paper presents the results of a series of semi-directed interviews with twelve former environmental policy makers, both in the province of Quebec (8) and in France (4). These interviews were carried out with the aim, in particular, of understanding their assessment of the reasons why it was not possible for them to do more (real or apprehended barriers of a political or social nature, impossibility to convince citizens, etc.). The choice of Quebec and France was made for reasons of ease of access, the author being a former member of the Quebec National Assembly.

| Theoretical frame

Social and political context

We live at a time when the social bond is weakened. For Touraine (2013), the triumph of individualism and the globalization of the economy, which is now beyond the reach of social and political institutions, destroys the social fabric and the very idea of society. Moreover, as Beck (2009) has pointed out, we are no longer governed by the power of science and reason and the belief in progress. We have, Beck says, the duty to change the way our societies function in order to give citizens a bigger role. This starts with the right to information and the acceptance that science and technology have become political issues.

In liberal-style parliamentary democracies, as is the case in Quebec and Canada, it can be said that power is now, in a certain way, shared between men and women politicians who are elected and the many organizations and associations of workers, employers, concerned citizens, students, retirees and people from various social groups (Fung, 2003). In addition, these democracies are now plagued by a crisis of confidence, not only in governments, but also in all types of institutions and administrations.

The main hypothesis of our work is that political action in the field of the environment, and particularly with regard to the issue of climate change, is largely a function of the perception that elected representatives have of the values and of the social behavior of citizens. The term social acceptability is sometimes used to refer to this form of constraint on political action, although this notion has no precise definition, either in politics or in sociology. In fact, not only are long-term environmental problems not of great concern to citizens, but even those who say they are concerned often seem reluctant to accept the social changes that are needed.

Even when ecological sensitivity is developed within a social group, the link between values, attitudes, and behaviors is not simple and straightforward (Leiserowitz et al., 2006). First, values do not all have the same priority, and there may be conflicts in this regard, for example between the need for environmental action and the imperative of economic development. There are also often structural barriers, such as certain laws (and regulations), available technologies and infrastructure, social norms, and so on. Consumers do not act in isolation, but as members of a community (Bartiaux, 2012). There is interaction between technologies and infrastructures, norms and social conventions on comfort, convenience, cleanliness and practices considered adequate, normal and legitimate in the social group to which one belongs.

A little on the opposite side, Rhodes et al. (2014) found, based on the results of an internet survey of 475 British Columbians, that the majority of citizens are very poorly informed, but that this is not very important for their support of climate change public policy. The three main predictors of this support are the level of concern about the effects of climate change, confidence in university and IPCC scientists, and gender. Cost visibility is also an important factor.

One of the major difficulties that researchers have observed is that the public does not trust the government authorities regarding environmental issues, and that this particularly hampers its awareness of the problem of global warming (Peretti-Watel and Hammer, 2006). Citizens, however, trust scientists (at 90%, versus only 10% for the government, according to this survey), but they do not correctly understand, in particular, the greenhouse effect.

The results of another survey, conducted by Aklin and Urpelainen (2014), confirm that citizens almost spontaneously trust science, but that the dissent of a small number of scientists unfortunately raises significant doubts in the population and strongly decreases support for environmental policies. It is therefore necessary to inform them about science and its inevitable uncertainties. In addition, to motivate people to deal with climate change, positive values must be used. Fear does not work, as Smith and Leiserowitz (2014) explain.

For Steg (2016), different strategies can be used to promote environmentally-friendly behavior. She reminds us that financial incentives can have perverse effects, for example by giving the impression that one can buy the right to pollute and by activating selfish values. The establishment of facilitating conditions is important, but not always easy nor simple. Another strategy is to reduce the cognitive effort that people are not always willing to provide, for example by giving visual feedback. General information does not seem very useful. The influence of the social group can also play a role. But whatever happens, pro-environmental public policies must have the support of the public and appear just (fair) for all. Environmental justice and equality are therefore important values.

We did not find any publication directly related to ministerial action in the field of the environment. A research team at the *Université du Québec à Montréal* (UQAM), however, recently focused on the perceptions of elected officials concerning environmental issues (Gendron et al., 2013). The results indicate that most of them are aware that there is a problem of environmental degradation and that there are tensions between the economy and the environment. They believe, however, that it is possible to reconcile economic development (and profits) and environmental protection, and that this is primarily the responsibility of the government.

Interviews and method of analysis

To achieve our objectives, as we explained in the introduction, we chose to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews with twelve former environment ministers in the province of Quebec and in France. Since the most important environmental problems, and in particular climate change, did not really become political issues until the 1990s, the number of respondents who could be interviewed in Quebec was very limited, especially since the politicians who are still in office do not necessarily want to participate in this type of work. That is why we also contacted former environment ministers in France. In total, we interviewed eight persons in Quebec and four in France. Each of these persons was minister responsible for environmental issues (the exact titles vary, from Minister of the Environment, to Minister of Ecology, to Minister of Sustainable Development, etc.) for a period ranging from just under from one year to almost four years, from 1994 to 2014. For reasons of confidentiality, we simply numbered them from 1 to 12. Their main demographic, social and political characteristics are described in the following section.

The interviews ran from early November 2015 to the end of May 2016. Their duration ranged from forty minutes to almost two hours, averaging just over one hour. Each of them was recorded and then listened to carefully twice to draw all the elements considered relevant. We prepared for each of them a long written document containing all the information, which we then validated by a third listening.

The semi-structured interview method was the one that seemed most appropriate for both this type of respondent and the results we wanted to obtain. It is a method which is flexible enough to accommodate people who have strong, and very different, personalities, who have very different ways of doing things, and whose memories are in some cases very close, and in other cases are much more distant.

The interview grid consisted of five main components: the respondent's personal profile, political background, environmental background, ministerial work, and advice on how to address the key challenges we face, if we want to properly prepare the future of our societies. As regards ministerial work, we asked each respondent in particular about the successes they achieved, as well as their assessment of why it was not possible for them to do more.

Based on the method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis, with the aim of establishing a certain classification of information to facilitate processing, and after becoming familiar with the data, we identified, from the content of the twelve interviews, about twenty 'codes' or basic information elements that seemed relevant and important to us. We then carefully studied each interview, and for each of them, we determined the particular content of each basic information element (or 'code'). These elements are: the personality of each minister, his career, his aspirations, his reasons for action in the field of the environment, his representations of politics in the field of the environment, his representations of the environment (broadly defined), his view of climate change, his perception of the conditions and constraints related to social change, his opinion on the impact of lobbies, his opinion on the level of public awareness of environmental issues, his vision on education and communication, his experience with environmental groups, his main areas of work, his life course, the circumstances and reasons for his choice of political action, his opinion on other principles and findings that were raised and that we considered significant, the values of his family surroundings, the power he exercised and the barriers he encountered, his relations with his colleagues, his reflections on the future of society, and his vision of democracy.

Note: in this document, for reasons related to the required anonymity, no mention is made of the gender of the ministers interviewed.

| Presentation of the results

The former ministers

The former ministers we interviewed are mostly from the middle classes, with three being of popular origin and two coming from wealthier backgrounds. From a socio-demographic point of view, three were born during the war, five during the baby boom period, and four are from Generation X. With two exceptions, all of them have a university degree, most of them in law or human sciences.

When asked about their family values and how they were brought up, social engagement was the only value mentioned by a majority of respondents. The importance of education was emphasized five times, and the values of work, autonomy, freedom, honesty, openness and ambition were each mentioned by three persons or less.

Most of these former ministers became politically active right at the beginning of their adult lives. Only four began their political career at around 35-40 years of age without having previously been involved in any type of political activities. It may be noted that three of them (all French) first held office at the local level, and four had practically only occupied jobs related to politics before becoming Minister of the Environment. It can roughly be said that seven are located to the left of the political spectrum and five to the right.

Concerning how they became aware of environmental issues, their paths are quite varied. Some developed a form of link to nature from an early age. Others were struck by some form of agricultural or industrial pollution. Three explicitly mentioned the impact of the Bruntland Report in 1987 and the Rio Conference in 1992, and another mentioned major disasters such as Bhopal and Chernobyl. Some only became truly aware of these issues by becoming minister or as a locally elected official facing environmental problems. Two of the respondents can be described as being true environmentalists.

Aspirations and ambitions

Considering all the difficulties and constraints they face, it can be said that people who get involved in politics necessarily do so by choice, because they have aspirations and ambitions. No one becomes candidate at an election by chance ! What are these aspirations and ambitions, what lessons we can draw from the interviews we conducted with former environment ministers ?

In the first place, our data indicates that they were all driven by an ambition that can be described as positive: to be elected, and then to advance themselves by doing good work in the service of their fellow citizens. This is the essential element on which their political commitment is based. Only one of the respondents told us very explicitly that he had no real political ambition and that it was only the defense of his ideas that had guided him.

'Values that conditioned me at the time, they are the ones that have always been mine, that is to say, to give meaning to one's life through the service of others, [...] and the service of my country.' (M4)

It may be noted that four of our respondents come from families that can be described as highly politicized, which is clearly favorable to the development of a certain political ambition.

In western democratic societies, ministers are chosen by the president or the prime minister. He or she makes a selection based on a large number of criteria, most of which are political, and therefore not directly related to the personal interests or direct skills of those he appoints. With few exceptions, one does not choose to become the Minister of the Environment, which explains in large part why the majority of the environment ministers we interviewed are not environmentalists.

'And when we came to power, I was appointed Minister of the Environment outright, [...] it was about the last (possibility) I would have thought of.' (M10)

Secondly, some of them also pursued a form of ideal: for some, the sovereigntist ideal (in Quebec), and for a smaller number, the ideal of an ecologically responsible development of society.

Thirdly, although all respondents did their best to address the various environmental problems they faced, with few exceptions, all would have liked to do more, their ministerial experience, in particular, having made them more aware of these questions.

Representations

Environmental issues and climate change representations

A social representation is 'an organized set of information, opinions, attitudes and beliefs about a given object' (Abric, 2001). When the given object, here the environment, is understood in a very broad sense, it is not surprising that the representation is difficult to define precisely and that it is also relatively variable.

When someone becomes a minister, and more specifically a minister of the environment, it is first and foremost the tasks that must be accomplished that he or she immediately sees. The most frequent basic element of the interviews is therefore the concrete aspect of the environmental problems. There are a number of issues that need to be addressed, and that requires practical solutions that the minister needs to implement as quickly as possible. This is particularly the case, for example, with regard to the quality of water when endangered by agricultural pollution, an issue that almost all former ministers, if not all, have had to confront.

The environment is also, for several respondents, mainly an economic issue. Solutions to problems all have a cost that must be borne. The majority of the former ministers we met therefore saw themselves frequently as obstacles to their colleagues' projects. Some, however, have a much more positive view of environmental challenges. Thus, one of the interviewees sees very clearly in the environmental challenges an opportunity for development, innovation and employment that can only be profitable to our society in the long term.

The environment is for some, in addition, an important educational issue and a social issue (related to the values of the citizens and the type of society in which they want to live). Citizens accept the constraints imposed on them by law only if they understand the importance of the problem and the challenge it represents for the future. From this perspective,

the role of primary and secondary education (and also of government communication) is essential as an awareness tool.

The issue of fundamental rights, especially that of living in a healthy environment, has also been raised by a few. The environment considered as an asset to be protected, was only mentioned in a single interview.

If the environment is a technical issue, the more scientific challenge was only raised by four former ministers. Two also mentioned risk management as a central element of the role of the minister. The problem of urban planning was raised by many, but in France as in Quebec, this responsibility belongs to another governmental department. Finally, it can be noted that only one or two respondents see the environment as a fundamentally ideological issue, related to the link between man and nature.

We can conclude that the representation of the environment for former ministers is essentially of a concrete nature. As far as climate change is concerned, everyone (except one who sees it as an essentially ideological debate) also sees it as a very important problem, of a more economic than social nature, but one that will be very difficult to solve.

Representation of democracy and of the role of politicians regarding the environment and climate change

Without denying the importance of discussion and debate, the vast majority of the former ministers interviewed told us that democracy is above all for them a matter of representation. Politicians are elected (democratically), represent their fellow citizens and thereby become responsible for their well-being. They are thus responsible not only for developing and implementing solutions to collective problems, such as protecting the environment, but also responsible for convincing citizens of the correctness of their decisions. We need, said one respondent, competent, determined, and decisive politicians. This representation of democracy does not exclude respecting the citizens, listening to them, and wanting them to be, as one minister mentioned, educated, critical and mobilized. But the fundamental element remains what some have called 'leadership' and others political will.

Moreover, the persons we interviewed generally have a very high, and in a sense a very noble, view of the role of politicians, even though three of them indicated that short term and individual interests are often too important. The word altruism has even been used, in the context where good environmental decisions, and particularly concerning climate change, will often only bear fruit in the long run, and it will not be possible to use these decisions in the future as part of an election campaign to highlight the good work done by elected officials.

Representation of citizens

If former ministers have a rather high view of the role of politicians, their vision of citizens is often more down to earth, especially for those who are no longer active in politics. The majority considers that citizens are not very aware of environmental issues and further considers quite normal that the citizens seek their safety and comfort above all else. For almost all our respondents, citizens are sensitive to what affects them directly, such as the construction of a plant in their neighborhood, for instance, but have little concern for long term problems.

In the discussion about the future, *'We have lost the notion of a collective project, [...] people are very much bent on their personal well-being, hedonism, nobody wants to age'* (M3)

This representation is thus linked to that of the role of the politicians that we have just described, and which puts the main responsibility on the elected officials who must protect, as one of them said, the humble citizen. It is also linked, for some, to the question of education. Society needs the most educated citizens possible concerning the issues that are important for it. It finally reaches their vision of democracy, a democracy much more representative than participatory, even though formal processes and citizen consultation bodies exist, such as the Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement in Quebec.

Reasons

Ministers, as we have just seen, have aspirations and ambitions, as well as certain ways of understanding the environment, democracy and politics (especially in the environmental field). Before considering how the problems they worked on were determined, as well as what motivated them, we will briefly recall the work they did. All, even those who were in the job for only a year or a little less, have explained, with some pride or at least some sense of accomplishment, that they have acted with determination on a number of issues.

In the area of climate change, it should be noted, among other things, that France has voted an important energy transition law, and that Quebec has created a Green Fund and also implemented a system of capping and trading rights for GHG emissions. Other decisions related to environmental protection include many laws and policies, as well as several regulations, on the management of residual materials, on the quality and protection of water, in particular that of rivers threatened by agricultural or industrial pollution, and on the protection of certain natural areas. Regarding risk management, various decisions were taken, including laws on the control of pesticides and on industrial and natural risks. Lastly, there is the implementation of general strategies and the adoption of comprehensive laws concerning sustainable development.

Two main elements immediately emerge from our interviews concerning the choice of issues on which the ministers worked. On the one hand, there are the directives of the 'big boss', prime minister or president, and, on the other hand, the content of their political party platform. To these two elements can be added certain particular questions or issues which, at times, are the subject of debate in public opinion, and then become unavoidable.

Ministerial action is thus driven mainly by priorities and imperatives over which the minister has relatively little control. Moreover, the priorities that are determined by the political parties or the governments are themselves derived from the interactions and discussions that take place in public action networks, or in international fora (for major environmental issues such as climate change or the protection of biodiversity).

At another level, the interviews highlight the issues of work ethic and responsibility, i.e. the values that drive the ministers and originate from their education, as well as their personal ambition. In general, among our respondents, it was not the implementation of their ideas that motivated them, but their sense of responsibility. There is work to be done, so you have to do it, because that is why you are elected.

Regarding the minister's responsibility, *'If you do not want to act, or if you think you're going to displease, [...] it's either doing the job, or leaving the government'* (M5)

Their most important responsibility, as we have seen above, is the well-being and safety of their fellow citizens. They must be able to live in a healthy environment, and it is up to the elected officials to see to it. This conception of responsibility obviously does not exclude ambition, because doing a good job is one of the best ways (but not the only one) to make oneself known and to rise up in the hierarchy of government. It does not exclude for some a motivation a little more fundamental and ideological.

Constraints and conditions of ministerial action

The results that we have just described in the previous section may, at first glance, seem quite impressive. But the former ministers almost all indicated that they would have liked to do more, especially with regard to the great challenge of climate change, but also concerning pollution from agricultural sources and the protection of water and of certain natural areas. In addition to being strongly determined by government priorities and current problems, ministerial action is also strongly constrained by various conditions that we must understand. To do this, we must now explain the different elements that the interviews revealed in this regard.

We have already mentioned the importance of the limits to ministerial action that come from various actors and different political authorities. In this regard, it should be noted that the first actors with whom ministers interact are their colleagues in the Council of Ministers. On a regular basis, they must therefore negotiate with them because they have imperatives and economic development projects that often seem to conflict with environmental imperatives. A former minister even said that his colleagues saw ecology as an obstacle to progress.

In contrast, environment ministers are also frequently in contact with well-organized environmental groups who are trying to influence government action in a way that is more conducive to protecting the environment. The opinion of the former ministers about these organizations is divided. For some, they do an important job of raising the population's awareness of the major environmental issues and therefore play a positive role. For others, these groups are never satisfied with government action and play a somewhat negative role in refusing to recognize, as it were, the positive actions of governments and environment ministers.

Interest groups (or lobbies) are also important actors with whom a minister interacts fairly frequently. Contrary to what is sometimes conveyed in public opinion, most of the former ministers did not have too many difficulties with them and did not see them as systematic opponents of the protection of the environment. While they defend industrial interests, they are determined and educated interlocutors, but, especially when the stakes are clear and the political will strongly affirmed, they are generally ready to discuss and seek common ground rather than to provoke and live clashes. One of the respondents pointed out that, over the past twenty years, the largest GHG emission reductions in Quebec have been achieved in the industrial sector.

'The corporate groups [...] come to defend their interests, [...] most try to avoid clashes with the government, [...] there are a bunch of professionals, in quotation marks, behind that, so they cannot say too much follies' (M3)

But some of our respondents have a much less positive opinion. They said the minister should stand up to them very strongly, with the agriculture lobby often being explicitly mentioned as particularly strong and demanding, and sometimes relatively uncomfortable with environmental challenges.

On a daily basis, a minister works and prepares his files with the professionals and senior officials of his department. The consensus of our respondents in this regard is very broad. In France and Quebec, public servants are very competent and dedicated, and do not represent a hindrance to ministerial action in the field of the environment.

Citizens, as we have seen, are normally the prime concern of the minister because he is responsible for their safety and well-being in the environmental field. But citizens have a way of life, habits, ways of doing things, aspirations, needs, beliefs, opinions, representations, social behaviors, etc. The minister has to take that into account in his decisions and actions, and that is in a sense the heaviest, the most complex and the most difficult of the constraints he faces. This was not said in a very explicit way, but the whole of the remarks concerning ministerial action indicates it very clearly.

'People like speeches, but when the time comes to change their behavior, that's another story' (M9)

In the interviews, as we have already seen, the former ministers almost all indicated that citizens are relatively insensitive to long-term issues, but that they are very concerned about everything that affects their lives directly. It is therefore always difficult for a minister to propose a law or a regulation that restricts in some way the citizens' freedom of action and, above all, imposes economic constraints on them, especially when the problem is remote and when they have the impression that the burden is unequally distributed. The example of recycling was often cited in the interviews to indicate that behavior and habits could be changed, but that it took a long time (one generation in the case of recycling), and that the various measures should be put in place gradually to facilitate the adaptation of citizens.

Can we reconcile what we have just described with the feeling of the former ministers of having done their duty and having taken their responsibilities? We think so. Being a minister, as our personal experience has allowed us to verify, involves a considerable amount of work and very little free time. In these conditions, it is normal to have the 'duty accomplished' feeling, and all the more so that real progress, although insufficient, has been made in recent decades in the environmental field. We will see a little further on what, according to our respondents, remains to be done, how to do it, and even if it is possible to do so. But it remains that they do not see, even a posteriori, how they could have done much more, considering all the constraints and conditions that surround the action of a minister. In this regard, an additional element was highlighted by some of our respondents. This is the local administrative level, made up of mayors and various heads of local organizations. Because they are very close to citizens, their concerns are often similar.

We obtained from the former ministers very little feedback on the action and impact of the media. Some did tell us that the information conveyed by the media is not always that which allows citizens to make the most informed decisions.

The future

According to all of our respondents, with one exception, environmental challenges, particularly those related to climate change, are extremely important and worrying, and will require significant social, behavioral, and lifestyle changes. But the constraints to ministerial action in this area (which we have just described) are great. Social behaviors, in particular, change only slowly; it is easy to understand this if one tries to imagine, for instance, that the habit of eating meat could become subject to certain restrictions. It should not be forgotten that many stakeholders do not have an immediate interest in making things change. Finally, it can be recalled that the scientific consensus is that the use of fossil fuels will have to be stopped completely before the end of this century to limit the temperature rise to 2°C. Considering our current way of life, this is a considerable challenge. Let's examine now what our respondents suggest about this.

The most optimistic former ministers on this subject consider that financial incentives, especially eco-fiscal, are the main instruments to use. But they are all convinced that these incentives should not have a negative connotation. Thus, any particular tax to promote a certain type of behavior should be accompanied by a corresponding reduction of another type of levy so that the overall fiscal impact is neutral.

'Green taxation, it is a lever of incentive [...] provided of course that it is at a constant volume of taxation' (M6)

They are also convinced that we must offer citizens a positive vision, a 'tempting offer' said one of them, a vision of improved well-being, among other things through the creation of jobs thanks to the energy transition and the development of new forms of energy.

In this respect, the former ministers agree with the results of Smith and Leiserowitz (2014), which show that disaster discourse, or negative or fear-based speech, has no lasting impact on behavior. The human being naturally tends to drive away from his mind the distant difficulties on which he does not feel he can have a significant effect. In contrast, these same studies have shown that positive, hope-based discourses aimed at generating interest in environmental issues significantly increase citizens' support for policies to better protect the environment.

Three of our respondents are, however, downright pessimistic. They believe it will be extremely difficult to change the current individualistic way of life, to 'give up a way of life that makes us very individualistic' to quote one of them. A former minister even explained that citizens will only react if and when disaster strikes. For many respondents, 'climate refugees' will soon begin arriving in Europe or North America.

Unsurprisingly, all respondents consider that the main responsibility for climate change lies with the politicians who will have to convince, act, and, if necessary says one of them, to coerce.

'Or we have people who are politically competent, effective, and especially determined, and in which case we kick the anthill, because it will only happen like that, [...] in the environment, those who do not want to accept, we impose' (M5)

Solutions exist. All are convinced of it. But the difficulty is in implementation, because citizens must first be led to understand the need, and we must also propose solutions that are socially just. The first step, the first job of elected officials, is communication, which should allow, little

by little, to reach the majority of the population. Education also appears to many of the former ministers as a must. But if one of them pointed out how young people are now aware of the big environmental issues, through the action of schools, another said that this was insufficient and that the need to use incentives would remain.

Very few former ministers believe that innovation and technology are a very significant part of the solution to major environmental challenges. Only one was really optimistic about the contribution of science.

In summary, what is clear in the first place from our interviews regarding responses to major environmental challenges and climate change is the need for political will and leadership.

'A society needs leadership' (M9)

The politicians we interviewed are very aware of the immense responsibility of elected officials. Secondly, it is clear that the answers are mainly economic and social. It is first of all the behaviors that must change, and for that reason economic instruments have a big role to play, as well as, to a lesser extent, the work of education and communication and the setting up of other types of incentives such as enabling environments.

| Results analysis

For our respondents, the representative democratic system directly imposes on the elected officials the responsibility to take the decisions they consider necessary, and to explain them to the citizens. Their perception is that they have done their best to protect the environment and allow people to live in a healthy environment. They have made the compromises they felt were necessary, particularly with their ministerial colleagues, as well as with industry and agricultural stakeholders. With respect to long-term issues, such as climate change, they have not acted as strongly as would be required on the basis of the scientific consensus. On the one hand, they felt they did not have a strong enough support from the citizens who are generally unaware of these issues and whose habits and behavior they did not want to disturb too much. On the other hand, they faced the opposition of some of their fellow ministers, who had other priorities, and also of certain interest groups.

It is possible to build a diagram that allows to visualize all the actors with which the environment ministers interact (Figure 1). This shows the intensity of the frame inside which ministerial action in the field of the environment takes place, and leads us directly to the concept of public policy network in political sociology (Hassenteufel, 2008).

The public action network concept is based on a number of observations, the main ones being the following :

- Public action is a collective construction by interacting actors and the state no longer has the power to act autonomously.
- This collective construction results from conflicts between systems of belief or representation.
- The actors are mostly collective and defend economic interests, interests of power, and also interests related to values or identity.
- Interactions tend to become institutionalized and therefore impose constraints and ways of doing things to actors.
- The economic situation and the context (social, economic, political, etc.) have a great influence.

We can also add the following two observations concerning the political actors. First, political actors have a certain power that derives from their legitimacy as elected representatives who must defend the general interest, as well as from the executive and legislative positions they occupy. Second, there are three possible electoral logics. There is first the logic of the general interest ('good policy'), second the logic of the credit that one attributes to itself ('credit claiming') and third the logic of the blame that one seeks to avoid ('blame avoidance').

The diagram presented in Figure 1 confirms that (environmental) political action is a collective construction and that governments no longer act completely autonomously. Firstly, it is often the environmental groups that, with the help of the media and of the scientists concerned, draw the attention of elected representatives to environmental issues. This is particularly true with respect to major issues such as climate change that environmental groups have been instrumental in promoting. Secondly, the majority of our respondents confirmed, sometimes very explicitly, that citizens and organized groups (lobbies, environmental associations) were always consulted and generally participated in the discussion, for example during the public hearings on the environment in the province of Quebec.

The issue of conflicts between belief systems and representations was not found to be very important in the interviews we conducted. Environmental groups, particularly in Quebec, are generally perceived rather positively by those we interviewed, and their system of representations of environmental issues differs more in intensity than in substance from that of the environment ministers. In France, however, the situation is somewhat different. Economics and ecology tend to be more directly opposed, and the environmental struggle appears to be much harder.

In this collective construction that is public action, the actors, generally more collective than individual, defend not only economical interests and power, but also identity values and issues. This observation made by Hassenteufel (2008) does not emerge very clearly from our interviews with former ministers. Of course, economic issues are at the heart of environmental debates, but the question of power interests was not much raised in the interviews. However, it is even more surprising to note that the question of values, both for citizens and environmental groups, was also not explicitly addressed, except a few times, especially with regard to ministers personally.

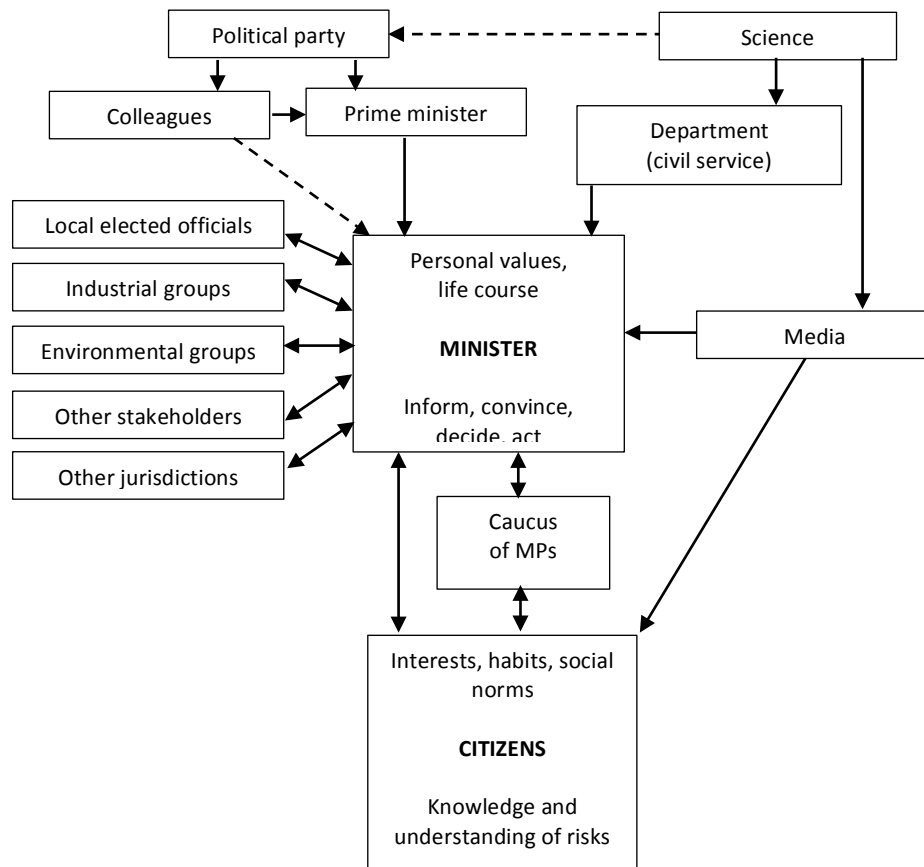
The Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement in Quebec is a very good example of the phenomenon of the institutionalization of the interactions between the collective actors that determine public policies. In addition, meetings of ministers with lobbies and organized groups are commonplace, and legislative mechanisms include an important consultation process. The comments of our respondents, without necessarily being very explicit, therefore clearly highlight this phenomenon of the institutionalization of interactions that are at the base of public action.

The particular power of the political actors (thanks to their legitimacy as elected representatives and their executive and legislative positions) is, according to our respondents, very real, but their opinion differs on the importance of this power. For four of them, it is weak and subject mainly to economic imperatives. For the other eight, it is very significant, although it is much more a power of leadership, and a power of influence, which involves consultations, negotiations and compromises.

As for the electoral logics, it should not be surprising that the former ministers placed more emphasis on the 'good policy' logic, even if social acceptability (and therefore the 'credit claiming' and 'blame avoidance' logics) plays a very significant role and strongly conditions public action. One of the respondents explained that long-term issues do not make it easy for elected officials to report on their good work. Another clearly stated that elected officials think too much about their re-election. However, on the whole, we can consider that all three logics apply, in proportions that are variable according to the circumstances, and that the well-being of the citizens is a basic concern of the ministers of the environment.

In summary, the results of our interviews tend to confirm the overall validity of the public policy network concept and certain elements that underpin it, in particular that public action is constructed by interacting collective actors, and that the state can no longer act alone, even in the field of environmental protection.

FIGURE 1. INTERACTIONIST DIAGRAM FOR POLITICAL DECISIONS CONCERNING CLIMATE CHANGE



| Summary and conclusion

The analysis of our results with the aid of certain elements of political sociology provides a better understanding of the main observations we have made concerning the action of former ministers of the environment. They have acted in what they felt was the best interests of their fellow citizens to enable them to live in a healthy environment, but they have generally made the compromises they considered necessary with the various stakeholders (pressure groups, colleagues, etc.), all by avoiding over-shaking people's lives, particularly with respect to climate change, a problem that seems to them to have little impact on the general population. Our results thus show that the perceived lack of citizen support

for environmental action, particularly as concerns climate change, is one of the main barriers to action by ministers, especially since governments no longer act totally autonomously and that politicians adopt behaviors that allow them to avoid displeasing voters. In a way, and as we have already pointed out, we can conclude overall that the conditions in which the environment ministers act in France and in Quebec leave them relatively little room for maneuver. The social structure, as shown in Figure 1, seems to be more important than the actors themselves feel.

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