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An Environment Minister of another colour

Dion wants to transform his new portfolio into a forward-looking economic department, ALANNA MITCHELL writes

By ALANNA MITCHELL
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OTTAWA -- His office in the historic East Block of Parliament is bare -- not a single book on the shelves, not a painting on the walls, not even a potted plant -- but Canada's new Environment Minister, Stéphane Dion, is well stocked with plans to set an explicitly different course in his controversial portfolio.

Mr. Dion, famed for his years as intergovernmental affairs minister, handling the difficult national-unity file, is bent on transforming the environment dossier from the traditional tree-hugger's last stand into a forward-thinking economic portfolio that, he argues, must lie at the heart of Canada's future prosperity. Sources say he has already presented this to his cabinet colleagues.

The new direction is so dramatic that Mr. Dion acknowledged in an interview last week in his barren office that even a name change, from Environment to the Department of Sustainable Economy, is possible.

"The department is ready for that," he said.

It's an about-face from his predecessors and a frank repudiation of the reign of former environment minister David Anderson, a fierce environmentalist who prided himself on being a purist rather than a pragmatist.

Mr. Dion will only go so far as to say that he loves lakes and fishing. However, he is a former political science professor and academic who understands both global finance and the science of ecology.

And that has led him to the contention that Canada's prosperity will falter unless it reconciles its economic growth with the limits of its environment.

He acknowledges that this is a new concept for many Canadians. Economic success here has traditionally come from exploiting natural resources as quickly as possible. But he says it is imperative to change this.

Already, Canada lags behind most other industrialized countries on these fronts, according to a bruising report two weeks ago from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

"The idea of sustainable economy is taking us by surprise," Mr. Dion said. "We need to wake up and act rapidly."

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revolution. Ignoring the value of the environment will be like ignoring the value of the machinery and inventions of revolutions gone by.

"More and more, the countries that pollute the least are the most competitive," he said.

Still, he faces a skeptical opposition. Bob Mills, environment critic for the Conservative Party, said he has not yet spoken to Mr. Dion about the portfolio, but said the new vision could be a positive.

"It's probably a shift for the good as long as it's not a deception," Mr. Mills said.

And Jack Layton, leader of the New Democratic Party and its environment critic, said he likes Mr. Dion's pragmatism. But he said he's worried that it's just attractive language with no plan underneath.

"This is 20-year-old jargon we're hearing," he said, adding that the Liberal government has still not explained how the country can meet its Kyoto greenhouse-gas reduction targets even though that's the heart of the environment file.

Mr. Dion will say only that the trick to reducing emissions is to develop and implement the best industrial practices in the world, encourage consumers to make better choices and then see what emissions look like in 2012, when by law they must be roughly 20 per cent lower than they are today.

"Maybe we'll be surprised," Mr. Dion said, adding that the focus on computing megatonnes of carbon reductions needs to stop.

Sources say that Mr. Dion has tried to persuade his cabinet colleagues of the need to reposition Canada as a world leader in sustainable economy because the country has lost international credibility on the issue. (In the interview, he would applaud Canada only for gains in acid-rain control and helping to restore the ozone layer.)

The sources say he has presented the cabinet with a raft of economic facts.

For example, 13 major public pension plans representing more than \$800-billion (U.S.) have asked U.S. regulatory agencies to require corporations to disclose their calculations of how much global climate change might cost them.

The London-based Carbon Disclosure Project, representing 95 global institutional investors who hold assets worth \$10-trillion, is demanding that companies disclose their risks from carbon emissions.

Not only that, but, his argument goes, Canada will be shut out of important trade markets if it does not adhere to the new tougher rules about environmentally sustainable business that other countries demand.

A sign of how successfully Mr. Dion has sold this new vision is the unusually large attention his portfolio received in last week's Throne Speech. Mr. Dion said he was proud of this.

And he maintains that he has strong support from provincial counterparts and many cabinet colleagues. "They are full of goodwill." That includes Prime Minister Paul Martin, he said.

Mr. Dion is frank about the fact that the new-look environment portfolio could hardly be more different from the file under Mr. Anderson, who held the job longer than anyone else.

In fact, Mr. Dion said that he figured out his new direction by watching Mr. Anderson. Under Mr. Anderson, environment was in constant counterpoint to big-money areas such as finance, natural resources, trade and transportation.

"I saw David arguing with everybody," he said, adding, "I had the opportunity to admire the man but also [to] see that the situation was not optimal."

Mr. Anderson "won more battles than he lost," Mr. Dion said. But his style is different, he said. He wants to bring his skills as a political scientist to bear, coaxing people to rational decision-making just as he did in Intergovernmental Affairs.

And he's not about to talk about the new sustainable-economy initiatives he's been discussing with colleagues in other portfolios.

In the manner of a true political scientist, he will help craft them and then stand back while the other ministers announce them, he said. The biggest hint he gives is to say that "it's time to use the economic tools and financial policies."

Sources say that means tax incentives (for example on clean cars, energy-efficient homes and appliances), product standards on packaging and recycling, and labelling products that are ecologically efficient. As well, sources say it may mean tabling omnibus legislation that deals with all environmental issues.

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