

Canada's onetime 'Green Jesus' okays oil megaproject

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OTTAWA — In 2002, Steven Guilbeault scaled the roof of the Alberta premier's home — uninvited — and installed two solar panels. It was part of a Greenpeace campaign to push the leader of the oil-rich province to reconsider his opposition to an international climate agreement.

Striking as that climb was, it was less dramatic than the one [Guilbeault](#) made the previous year, when he ascended more than 1,000 feet up Toronto's CN Tower to unfurl a banner labeling Canada and then-U.S. President George W. Bush as "climate killers."

Two decades later, the environmental activist has joined the government he once protested, as Canada's environment minister. And [Équiterre](#), the environmental group he co-founded, is [suing the government](#) over one of his decisions.

Hecklers, meanwhile, are using one of his best-known acts of civil disobedience against him.

"You're a climate criminal!" a protester [yelled](#) at a Montreal event in July. "That's how history will judge you."

Guilbeault, now 52, is under fire for his decision in April to greenlight the Bay du Nord deep-sea oil drilling project off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador, finding that it is "not likely to cause significant adverse environmental effects." He says that — to his knowledge — it will be the lowest-emitting project of its kind in the world.

But activists in the environmental circles Guilbeault once frequented disagree. They say the approval ignores the warnings of scientists, and is inconsistent with the lofty rhetoric from the Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau about the need to take more aggressive action against climate change.

It's certainly a striking decision by a man who has never owned a car and was once dubbed "Green Jesus."

"It was the most difficult professional decision that I've ever made in my life," Guilbeault told The Washington Post. "I sincerely hope that I don't have to make another one like that. It was heartbreaking."

Such is his dilemma — and Canada's.

For Guilbeault, meeting the Paris climate accord goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above preindustrial levels is critical. Deadly [heat waves](#), calamitous [floods](#) and catastrophic [wildfires](#) fueled by climate change have taken their toll here.

He has read decades of reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — including one released by the U.N. body shortly before Bay du Nord’s approval warning that the window to prevent a more perilous future is “brief and rapidly closing.”

But in the country with the world’s third-largest proven oil reserves, his job is complicated. There are complicated regional tensions to navigate, particularly in the oil-rich prairie provinces, where many think Ottawa is threatening the sector that powers their economies.

And as European allies work to reduce their reliance on Russian oil and gas after the invasion of Ukraine, some of those countries are looking to Canada as an alternative source. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz plans to visit the country next week to discuss the possibilities.

Still, Trudeau swept to power in 2015 on a promise to put climate action high on his agenda. His record has been mixed. Many here viewed Guilbeault’s appointment to the environment portfolio in October as a signal that the government — fresh off an election victory — intended to move much more swiftly to address the climate crisis.

“Expectations were high,” said Marc-André Viau, director of government relations for Équiterre. “That’s why when the minister approves a project like Bay du Nord ... a lot of people were disappointed and frustrated. This is the kind of project that the minister in his previous life would have fought.”

Guilbeault doesn’t necessarily disagree.

“I obviously didn’t come into politics to approve oil projects,” he said. “If I was alone, making the decision for myself, it’s not the decision I would have made. ... But I’m now the environment and climate minister for 38 million people.”

Guilbeault grew up in La Tuque, Quebec, a city of 11,000 where forestry has long helped drive the economy. Virtually everyone he knew had a relative who worked at the local pulp-and-paper mill, giving him a front-row seat to the human stakes of the boom-bust cycles of resource towns.

“I think it helps to be mindful of the fact that we want to be ambitious on a great many things when it comes to protecting the environment,” Guilbeault said. “But we also have to be mindful that we do this in a way that is respectful to people that are affected in these sectors.”

In his first environmental protest, at the age of 5, he climbed a tree in the woods behind his house to prevent developers from felling it.

He co-founded Équiterre in 1993 and spent years with Greenpeace, known for its confrontational tactics.

At a meeting of Group of Seven environment ministers this year, he was asked whether it was his first such gathering.

“Well, it depends how you look at it,” Guilbeault replied. “I’ve protested a number of them before.”

In 2010, a Globe and Mail column — titled “Steven who? Steven Guilbeault. Remember the name” — praised his “impressive record of activism” and predicted he would “likely” go into politics “some day.”

He entered the fray in 2019 as a candidate for Trudeau’s Liberals, despite his public opposition to the government’s controversial decision in 2018 to buy the Trans Mountain oil pipeline. He served as heritage minister before he was moved to his current role.

In Canada's oil patch, the appointment of a former environmental activist was greeted gingerly at best — and seen by some as a deliberate slight. Alberta Premier Jason Kenney said it sent a “very problematic” message. Harold Kvisle, chair of the Calgary-based energy firm ARC Resources, said it was a “direct shot in the eye.”

Neither responded to requests for comment for this article.

Trudeau, seeking to balance Canada's climate goals with its economic reliance on the energy sector, has frustrated groups on both sides.

His government imposed a price on carbon and passed legislation that requires it to report its progress on meeting its climate targets to Parliament. Days before Bay du Nord's approval, it released its most detailed blueprint for getting there, which requires the oil-and-gas sector to cut emissions 42 percent below 2019 levels by 2030.

But the environment commissioner, a government watchdog, has identified several problems: Canada is the worst performer of the G-7 since the Paris accord was signed. It overestimated how much using hydrogen could slash emissions. And it is “not prepared” to support those affected by a transition away from fossil fuels.

Guilbeault said environmentalists used to call him a “radical pragmatist” — someone pursuing “radical” policies while also recognizing that meeting his goals can't “happen overnight.” Still, he said, when he was an activist, he did not fully appreciate “the intricacies” of government and “how difficult it can be to move quickly.”

“I think that's my greatest challenge,” he said. “That being said, I think we have to learn to do things faster.”

When he approved Bay du Nord, Guilbeault imposed 137 legally binding conditions that Norwegian energy giant Equinor must meet if it decides to move ahead with the \$12 billion project. Those included, for the first time, a requirement that the project reach net-zero emissions by 2050.

Critics object that the condition applies only to the drilling operation, and not to the emissions from burning hundreds of millions of barrels of oil over the project's decades-long life span.

Tim Gray, executive director of the nonprofit Environmental Defense, said having an environment minister with an activist background has made a difference, particularly in the way climate change is discussed. He lauded what he called “really progressive action” to ban some disposable plastics and promote electric vehicles.

But he and others say the government's plans to meet its Paris targets rely too much on carbon capture and storage — technology that seeks to prevent carbon emissions from escaping into the atmosphere and instead stores them underground. Its “fundamental error,” Gray said, is believing it can address climate change while also expanding fossil fuel extraction.

Gray said he recognizes that Guilbeault is in a tricky position.

“Steven, in particular, given his history ... deeply believes in the need for climate action,” he said. “At a personal level, I totally understand the constraints that he's under. But he's part of a government that has a responsibility to act. And so, you know, I think he has to wear that as well.”