

We're off the bench and into the game

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It's hard to rattle veteran politician John Baird, but soon after becoming environment minister 10 months ago, he was flabbergasted.

"It just shocked me to find that, in 2007," he says, "it was still legal to dump raw sewage into our oceans, rivers and lakes. I mean, that's an environmental crime. We've got to act.

"Canadians are understandably very cynical when it comes to politicians making promises on the environment," he concedes.

"We study things to death but never actually get things done," he says. "I'm all for scientific research, but I'm also for action."

This "I-didn't-come-to-Ottawa-to-push-paper" environment minister and former Treasury Board president has turned his considerable determination to the Great Lakes.

"For the last 50 years, we've treated the Great Lakes -- one of the most remarkable features that Canada is blessed with -- as a dumping ground. I can bring a real personal commitment and the government has a real commitment to the Great Lakes.

"We don't need any more studies. We don't need tests. We need action, remediation." Water quality and conservation are crucial, he says. "For Canadians, clean water is a huge priority."

And it's a political priority: "It's a really big issue for our team because virtually every riding along Lake Ontario, Lake Huron and Georgian Bay has a strong voice in our caucus."

Mr. Baird says the Conservative government will tackle upfront, eight "big hotspots." The worst is Randle Reef in Hamilton Harbour, with parallel clean-up announcements on the seven others, which have not been named, to follow.

Canada produces one trillion litres of sewage every year from some 4,600 wastewater collection and treatment systems in towns and cities.

The National Sewage Report Card III on 22 cities by the Sierra Legal Defence Fund concludes: "Victoria, Saint John, Halifax, St. John's and Dawson City continue to dump some or all of their sewage, raw and untreated, directly into Canada's rivers, lakes and oceans -- a total of 140 billion litres per year.

"Three other cities (Vancouver, Montreal and Charlottetown) discharge some or all of their sewage with only primary treatment (e.g. settling and skimming off of large debris). Together, these eight cities generate more than 3.0 billion litres of sewage effluent per day -- nearly 40,000 litres every second. All of it is discharged with no or only minimal treatment."

But it won't be legal, Mr. Baird promises, for much longer.

"For the first time ever, we're going to prohibit dumping (probably sometime next year after public consultations). But we're not just coming forward with the regulation. We're also coming forward with a huge multi-billion-dollar infrastructure grant to help municipalities tackle the necessary work.

"It's going to take 10 or 20 years. In the first year, we're going to come up with \$8 billion available to municipalities and provinces -- from Saint John, N.B., to Victoria."

Speed is his creed. This environment minister says he can accomplish things fast because, unlike previous environment ministers, he is not battling his boss.

"The one big benefit I have as environment minister is that I have a prime minister who is backing me up and committed to action, not talk. He's not a guy who wants to drag things out for a generation. We've got an extraordinary opportunity, even in a minority government, to make a difference. We're moving pretty aggressively."

Mr. Baird cites Canada's handling of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions as an example of "talk, talk, talk, study, study, study" -- with no real effort to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney recognized the problem at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit back in 1992, but Canada, he says -- never mentioning that the Liberal party governed for the ensuing 13 years -- "did nothing after that."