

**ENCOURAGING ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE EATING
BEHAVIOURS THROUGH EXPERIMENTALIST GOVERNANCE**

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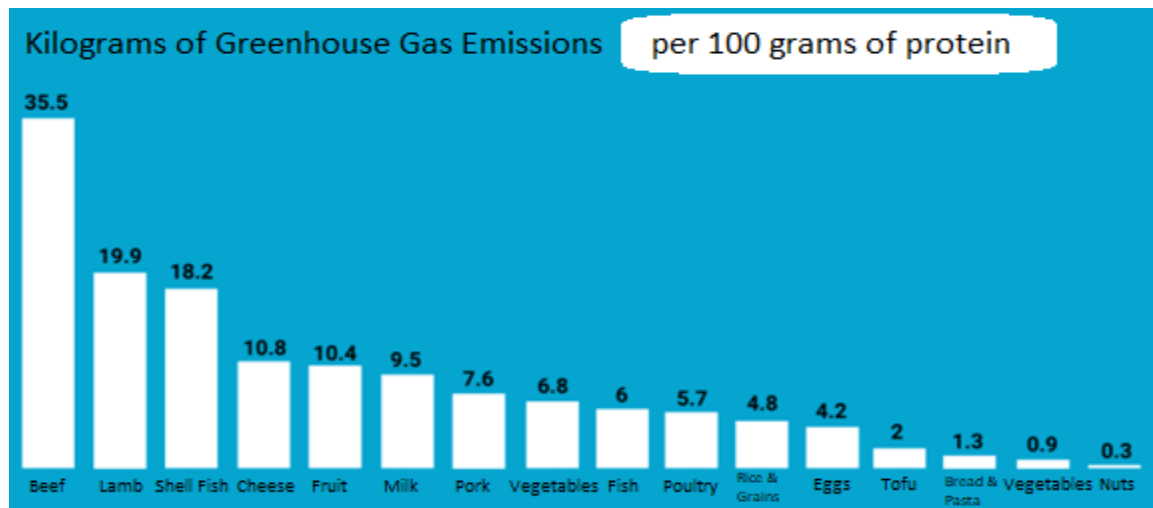
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The climate emergency problem

Government strategies in the fight against climate change are being increasingly scrutinized by the public. The symptoms of an emergency multiply, particularly among already vulnerable populations (Benevolenza and DeRigne, 2019). In Canada, for example, the human and cultural rights of a portion of the Innu population could be threatened by the degradation of their territory, such as erosion of the shoreline (Amnesty International, 2022). In the fight against these climate changes, Canada has a responsibility not only as an international leader, but also as a leader for its own people, and, as stated during the opening of the last parliamentary session, “this is the moment for bolder climate action” (Speech from the Throne, 2021).



Source: United Nations (2022) (No translation available)

This essay focuses more specifically on the role of the population’s eating behaviours in this fight, as “about a third of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions is linked to food” (United Nations, 2022). 20% of greenhouse gas emissions are connected to agriculture; half of these emissions are connected to livestock (Shields, 2022), in particular those caused by the methane produced by ruminants, which pollutes even more than carbon dioxide. Scientists recommend reducing consumption of red meat by approximately 75%, a number which rises to 85% for Canadians (Shields, 2019), since red meat is an important part of this problem.

However, people's food is a delicate subject, thus causing decision-makers to be reluctant to intervene. The introduction of informative and behavioural public policies designed to influence citizens' behaviour without direct constraints, such as taxation, is among the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on the theme of food systems (IPCC, 2022 p. 88).. This essay proposes that experimentalist governance practices be used to implement informative labels about the environmental impacts of food. The objective of this essay is twofold: to propose a concrete and effective measure in the fight against climate change, and to argue in favour of greater use of the experimental method among federal public servants.

Proposal: informative food labels

Health Canada is a federal institution funded by the Minister of Health of Canada. Its objectives are to provide quality health services and create policies to reduce health risks (Government of Canada, 2022). Among its functions, Health Canada proposes healthy eating strategies, which includes providing citizens with better information concerning nutrition. If a new public policy, which will be in effect in 2026, will already oblige the food industry to include labels with information about high sodium, sugars or trans fat content on the front of food packaging, it would certainly be appropriate to take advantage of this window of opportunity to create a similar initiative based on the environmental impacts of food. In fact, the costs of implementing such a public policy would be greatly reduced if it were to be implemented when producers must already modify their packaging.

What would the concrete benefits of informative labels concerning the environmental impacts of food be? First, similar initiatives in Europe have already demonstrated the effects on consumer behaviour, primarily when consumers have shown significant preferences for products labelled as being more environmentally responsible (Bunge et al., 2021). According to the IPCC, first, such an initiative makes it possible to guarantee better social acceptability given that the decision to promote fewer polluting foods remains under consumers' control (2002, p. 88). Citizens become conscious of the environmental impacts of their food while being empowered in the process, rather than constrained by policies such as taxation, which could cause a backlash (Patashnik, 2019). Finally, the proposed measure makes it possible to meet several objectives all at once

without increasing the costs. For example, environmental cost labels can also inform consumers and thus influence them to choose producers who practise fair trade or promote animal welfare (IPCC, 2022).

Leach et al. (2016) propose various models for the incorporation of water, carbon and nitrogen footprints on food labels, without directly testing their results on citizens' behaviour. They argue, however, that the integration of informative labels would not only promote consumer awareness, but it would also economically benefit producers who strive to improve the sustainability of their products. To be easily recognizable and understandable, it is important that these labels are created in a standardized way (Bunge et al., 2021). In short, this type of initiative is expanding in the scientific community, and Canada has the opportunity to be daring and to participate in demonstrating real benefits. It is appropriate for the federal public service to be interested in innovations that the current climate context necessitates, and state agencies or organizations, such as Health Canada, have both the financial resources and the institutional capacities that are decisive in the implementation and success of new solutions (Sabat, 2004).

The experimental method in public administration

The need to innovate in public policies to fight climate change has popularized the experimental method (McFadgen, 2019), which is also known as experimentalist governance in the field of public administration. In 2019, the federal government created an initiative called Experimentation Works (EW), thus encouraging “public servants to incorporate experimentation into their skills and practice” (Government of Canada, 2019). As part of this initiative, experiments on the various effects of different types of messages or visual designs have already been successfully carried out. For example, in communications to citizens concerning energy efficiency and cost-framed messaging attracted more attention than neutral-framed or comfort-framed messaging. EnerGuide program officials also tested an energy efficiency rating and how its informative labels are understood by appliance users.

The use of experimentation as a research method in public administration is expanding, particularly through survey experiments and framed field experiments (Bouwman and Grimmelikhuijsen, 2016). The mobilization of this method by public

administrators in the development of programs or policies also follows this trend. Sabel and Zeitlin (2010) conceptualize experimentalist governance, describing it as particularly appropriate when the objectives encounter strategic uncertainty and when the distribution of power prevents actors from implementing their preferred solutions. Responding to uncertainty is thus one of the strengths of experimentation, especially when encountering scientific uncertainty concerning the means of solving a public problem such as climate change (McFadgen, 2019).

The experimental process therefore makes it possible to test innovative policies while also producing data, which can then be used to improve these policies or to provide evidence of their effectiveness (McFadgen, 2019). Once again, this greatly facilitates social acceptance by citizens. The notion of learning is central to this practice: with the study of a case of cultural policy-making, Mattocks (2021) confirms that experimentalist governance has led to important learning experiences, particularly at the cognitive level as well as at relational and normative levels (see Huitema et al., 2010). In the case of the informative labels proposed in this essay, the experimental method would allow federal public servants to test different visual designs or information before implementing whichever one produces the greatest results. Significant cognitive learning could lead to finding ways of persuading citizens to adopt better consumption behaviours on their own. Developing federal public servants' skills in experimentation through practice, which is an objective of the Canadian public service, is also a notable benefit (Government of Canada, 2019).

Conclusion

The climate emergency context undoubtedly necessitates a daring and rapid approach by state actors. In the case of eating behaviours, the Canadian population must make changes to their daily diet to reduce, among other things, the related greenhouse gas emissions. However, if incentives are not put in place by the government, changes in eating behaviours will not be adequate. This essay argues in favour of having federal public servants more frequently adopt the experimental method in their work, particularly when their objective is to modify, without constraints, certain behaviours of citizens. Great scientific uncertainty is inherent to complex problems such as climate change. Experimentalist governance allows innovative solutions to be tested while producing data that will inform future public

service processes concerning problem solving. In all cases, the costs of inertia in the current climate context far exceed the risks of experimentation.

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