



A History of Québec's Declaration of Climate Emergency Campaign

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***By Teika Newton, CAN-Rac membership campaign coordinator
with Normand Beaudet of Group Mobilisation***

In recent months, a movement has grown in Québec that has seen more than 300 municipal councils endorse a 'Declaration of Climate Emergency'. In mid-February 2019, I spoke with one of the strategists behind the Declaration campaign, Normand Beudet, to learn more about the origins of this ambitious and inspiring civic engagement action and to hear about plans for next steps.

Normand Beudet works for the [Resource Centre on Non-Violence](#) in Montréal where he develops popular movement strategies. He is also a member of a regional environmental committee on Montréal's North Shore, [Action Environnement Basses Laurentides \(AEBL\)](#).

What follows is Normand's account of the development of this campaign, as told to me in that conversation.

Normand Beudet met with me on a phone call in February 2019. He was eager to share information about the exciting work underway in Québec to have municipal governments recognize climate change as an emergency. In the space of a few short months, more than 300 Québec municipalities have signed declarations of climate emergency - a feat that many elsewhere in Canada hope to replicate.

Normand explained that in the summer of 2018, filmmakers Michel Jetté and Louise Sabourin partnered with André Bélisle, executive director of the [Association québécoise de lutte contre la pollution atmosphérique \(AOLPA\)](#), to draft a written declaration that would clearly articulate the current state of climate crisis, framing it as a public emergency. They drafted a document that could be used by citizens to compel political leaders to take appropriate and urgent action. André's brother was a fellow AEBL committee member, alongside Normand, and soon they all were working together to bring life to this new [Declaration of Climate Emergency](#).



Students in support of the Declaration d'urgence Climatique. From https://www.facebook.com/D%C3%A9claration-dUrgence-Climatique-DUC-613098332423206/?tn-str=k*F

This group had previously worked together to build massive citizen and political resistance to the proposed [Energy East pipeline project](#) in Québec in 2014-2017. Normand described for me the parallel approaches used in the campaign to stop Energy East and in building out support for the Declaration.

In the case of Energy East, Normand's strategy group recognized that an oil spill into the St. Laurence from Energy East could spell disaster for the source of drinking water for millions of people. Along the St. Laurence, drinking water was clearly the public asset most at risk from this project. Given that municipal councils in Québec are responsible for ensuring the safety and purity of municipal drinking water, the strategists suspected mayors and municipal councillors would pay attention if alerted to the risks posed by the project.



The Savaria report. http://cmm.qc.ca/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/20150514_oleoduc-energie-est_rapport.pdf

Consulting firm Savaria had been commissioned to produce [a report](#), published in May 2015, that documented serious potential risks to drinking water for the Montréal Metropolitan Communities (CMM), the regional board of greater Montréal. In particular, it highlighted that because of the CMM's relatively simple existing methods of water purification of St. Laurence source water, if Energy East was to go through, Montréal would have to look at an extremely costly full revamp of its entire water purification treatment chain to protect against potential chemical contamination.

Savaria had done extensive citizen consultation and engagement, and their resulting report was backed by plenty of public support for its findings and recommendations. People in the Montréal area were engaged and very much aware of the risks Energy East posed to their drinking water.

The strategy group to which Normand belonged used the Savaria report to convince teachers of the Québec Centre national de formation en traitement de l'eau (CNFTE; national training centre on water treatment) to produce [a report](#) for the official review of Energy East through Québec's Bureau d'audience publique sur l'Environnement (BAPE). The report described how hydrocarbons could potentially pollute source waters along the St. Laurence and received wide [media attention](#) in Québec when it was presented before the BAPE.

By the end of 2015, the North Shore councils had banded together with all the mayors and councils across the Montréal region - some 80 mayors belonging to the CMM - and in January 2016 they took [a firm position opposing Energy East](#), citing enormous costs related to any potential need to clean up an oil spill. In his conversation with me, Normand stressed the importance of strong citizen engagement in the production of the CNFTE teachers' report as being one of the key factors that created the political space for municipal leaders to take such a powerful position on a controversial subject. Through the crafting of this

report, citizens had become deeply invested in the care and protection of their drinking water, and they were going to hold their elected leaders to account.

Ultimately, the [Energy East project was cancelled](#) by the proponent, TransCanada, in late 2017. Many - [including Montréal mayor Denis Coderre](#) - cited the fierce opposition encountered in Québec as a major reason the project was ultimately not viable for TransCanada.



With the current Declaration of Climate Emergency, Normand's group, now called [Group Mobilisation](#), followed a very similar public and political engagement strategy as was used in the Energy East campaign. They followed the same process for taking a report public - in this case, the text of the Declaration - and first tested it out with Montréal North Shore Regional boards, a municipal group that facilitates sharing of information and resources.

Montréal's North Shore municipal councils belong to a municipal association, a forum where between six and 15 regional mayors meet publicly about once a month. Members of the public are allowed to make brief deputations to this council of mayors, pose questions of them, and have the mayors respond to those questions at the following meeting. In this way, people do not need to organize a stand-alone event; they speak directly to all mayors of their region, and usually local media attend and cover these meetings.

Group Mobilisation made a deputation to the North Shore mayors in the summer of 2018. The results were striking. As Normand recalled, when they first engaged these leaders at the beginning of the Energy East campaign, the mayors' reactions were always the same, initially: "This is not our primary business, we did most of what we could and weren't successful, so what more do you want us to do?"

But this time, they found that city representatives were almost panicked when presented with the Declaration text.

It was right in the midst of a heat wave in August, and just before the provincial election campaign was about to start. Heat waves in Québec in 2018 had already had historic, lethal impacts. The early July heat wave had [claimed the lives of 93 people](#), and everyone was acutely aware the health risks of heat, and the heat waves' connection to climate change.

Against this backdrop of already heightened sensitivity to very present climate change impacts, Group Mobilisation was sharing the Declaration text with communities along Ottawa River that had experienced severe flooding two years ago and were still in shock and trying to recover from that catastrophe. Climate change was a very real, very present threat in the lives of the municipal leaders receiving this Declaration - a Declaration that said to these communities that all the atrocity and chaos they had already experienced was but a preview of what is to come in the future.

The Group Mobilisation organizers were further surprised when the campaign suddenly, organically began to take on its own momentum in the week before the start of the provincial election campaign. As the provincial election campaign got underway, municipalities started to step forward of their own volition to endorse the Declaration. Within the first week of the election period, 20 municipalities had endorsed it.



As of February 2019, more than 300 municipalities throughout Québec have endorsed the Declaration, including MRC du Fjord-du-Saguenay (left) and Ville de Pohénégamook (right). Notre-Dame-des-Prairies (lower left) is another municipality that has endorsed the Declaration. The Declaration has also been deposited with leading institutions like the Caisse de Dépôt (Credit Union) (lower right). Photos from <https://www.facebook.com/D%C3%A9claration-dUrgence-Climatique-DUC-613098332423206/?tn-str=k%F>





The team deposited the Declaration with each of the provincial political parties, asking for a meeting with party representatives, and they decided to use the provincial leaders' all-candidates' debate to set up a table and get everyday people to sign the Declaration. They would set up a booth right in front of Radio-Canada, where the debate was to happen.

Patrick Bonin, Greenpeace Canada's Climate and Energy campaigner based in Montréal, contacted Group Mobilisation and suggested doing a "die-in" demonstration during the debate. The group secured permission from the demonstration organizers for a die-in and 300 people ended up participating, symbolizing lives lost due to climate change, right in front of Radio-Canada in the minutes leading up to the debate. In an astonishing show of political theatre, officials from Québec Solidaire, the Québec Green Party, and the Parti Québécois came down to the Group Mobilisation booth and signed the Declaration right ahead of the debate, just before going on camera.

This stunt got so much attention that Group Mobilisation started to panic, wondering if their small team had the energy to maintain this unexpected momentum.

But the fuse had been lit. Other cities started contacting them to sign on, even as the provincial election of Légeault signalled a provincial shift to the right, toward a party not interested about climate issues.

The Group next presented the Declaration to the CMM, and the CMM was so receptive to the document that they facilitated its transmission to their 80 municipal leaders in the last week of October, the week following the provincial election. A week after that, the CMM mayors agreed to adopt the Declaration, adding their own amendment to the text to list the actions they would take to address climate change in their communities. This brought the list of endorsing communities to 100.

Next, the Group sent the Declaration to the 40 city councils belonging to the Québec Municipal Council. Québec City adopted the resolution, but the regional body is still vigorously debating the issue as they consider a number of potentially conflicting matters involving new highways and natural gas infrastructure expansion.

At the same time, the Group wanted to demonstrate to Québec citizens that the actions they were taking could be done by anyone, in any city or town or village. They were sensitive to the common complaint from people in smaller, more remote or rural communities who felt alienated from climate movement activities happening in the lively, big urban centres. The Group wanted people across the province to understand that the actions they were doing to



promote the Declaration were available to anyone, no matter where they lived. It was merely a process of engaging municipal councils to submit an official document, and by using the same document deposited simultaneously all over the province, people were given a sense that local actions could be part of a larger and global movement.

The Group's Michel Jetté and Louise Sabourin are a professional videography team, and they have recorded all of the Group's deputations and document deliveries to municipal governments. They encouraged citizens to do the same, and to post the videos and photographs to a Facebook page, [Déclaration d'Urgence Climatique - DUC](#). The page became extremely popular and was an exceptionally powerful tool to empower and inspire citizens, who saw these videos as proof of their participation in taking meaningful action on climate change. Normand notes that every time someone sends in a video, it reinforces their feeling of involvement and inclusion, and this has been a powerful way to grow support for the Declaration.

Once the Declaration was out, Normand observes that it was no longer theirs as Group Mobilisation. It has now become a living document, owned by the people of Québec, alive in each of the 260+ communities that have endorsed it. Today, most of the effort done by Group Mobilisation is to support people in keeping up local action.

In the next few weeks, toward the end of February, Group Mobilisation will be publishing the details about what cities should do... and it won't be easy!

As he explained to me, in the original draft of the Declaration penned by André Bélisle, Michel Jetté and Louise Sabourin in 2018, there were two parts to the document. The first section addressed recognizing and acknowledging the climate crisis; the second section discussed the actions required of cities as a result. The Group Mobilisation made the strategic decision at the outset to cut the second portion of the document out of the Declaration text, for fear that the severity of the recommendations it contained would scare off prospective municipal endorsers.

But now, with more than 260 municipalities acknowledging the seriousness of the climate crisis - and some, like the CMM's 80 mayors - already taking steps to pledge their own commitments to action, the time seems right to the Group to launch the second half of the Declaration.

Based on recommendations from the book, [Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming](#), edited by Paul Hawken, phase two of the Declaration will be aimed at achieving ambitious zero-emissions solutions across 11 socio-economic

sectors. Group Mobilisation recognizes that it will require an enormous commitment of will, resources and staff energy for cities and towns to implement the recommendations and they anticipate reluctance to surface. But with the force of hundreds of thousands of citizens now rallying behind the Declaration, there is also equally strong public pressure to compel municipal leaders to act.

Group Mobilisation will be partnering with [La Planète S'invite au Parlement, Extinction Rebellion Québec](#) and other allied groups to mobilize people in the streets to amplify public pressure, demanding municipal governments act now, in time to make a difference.

Some additional notes on the Declaration:

- The document is available on the Group Mobilisation website at: <https://www.groupmobilisation.com/>
- The Declaration is available in three languages:
 - French (the original document): <https://www.groupmobilisation.com/la-duc>
 - English translation: <https://www.groupmobilisation.com/the-dce-english>
 - Spanish translation: <https://www.groupmobilisation.com/la-dec-espanol>
- Note that the translated versions have not been verified for legal implications to the choice of translated vocabulary. For example, in the English language version, the phrase 'State of Emergency' is often used. This is a phrase with specific legal and political meaning in English, as a declaration of a state of emergency can allow a government or leader to bring extraordinary resources to bear for a limited period of time to address an emergency or crisis situation. Group Mobilisation recommends groups in non-Francophone regions develop their own version of the text, verified with a legal expert to avoid any confusion over technical or legal terms.