

Sustainability, complexity and expedited national interest projects

Session: Streamlining IA in an Era of Global Uncertainty II

Date and time: 20 May 26 11:00 AM - 12:30 PM ET

Location: 309B



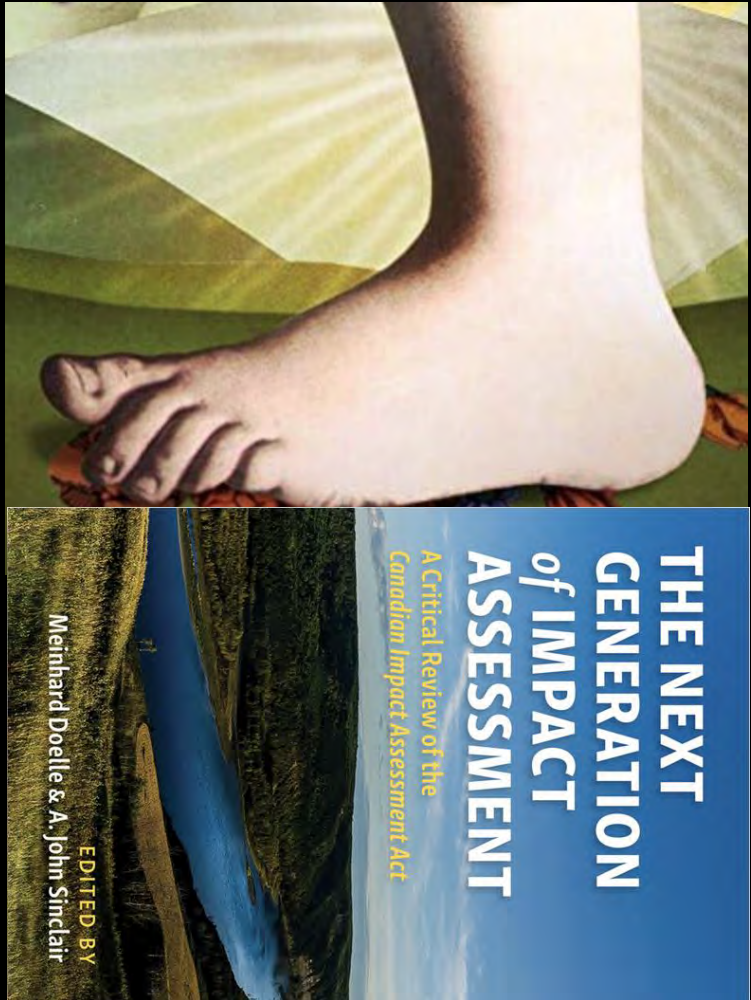
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Monty Python's giant foot stomps on IA in Canada

- at previous conferences we discussed advancement to next generation assessment
- we now face assaults on current generation assessment
- what to do?



Canadian federal government's response to global economic turbulence

- **attract investors** for resource extraction and trade diversification
- collaborate with / defer to provinces
- identify IA and permitting as red tape
- **use shrouded political process** to select and pre-approve big national resource and infrastructure projects
- **exempt or expedite** all others
- present as competition with UK, Australia, US, etc., who are doing the same thing
- **race to the bottom**



Charge of the Light Brigade, Balaclava, 25 October 1854, R.C.
Woodville, Wikipedia, public domain

50 years of IA in Canada

- **gradual spread** of IA law to all jurisdictions
- processes all different, poorly coordinated
- hampered by constitutional divisions
- resisted by governments and proponents
- usual aim only to **mitigate serious adverse effects**
- many **big conceptual advances** (e.g., cumulative effects, GBA+), gradually stronger applications
- gradually fewer assessments
- but project practice **rarely strong on big issues** (project economic viability, public costs, broad alternatives, overall cumulative effects, lasting consequences)
- **exceptional best practice cases**, rarely repeated
- key positive roles of Indigenous authorities and rights and public interest advocates
- always **almost all projects approved**

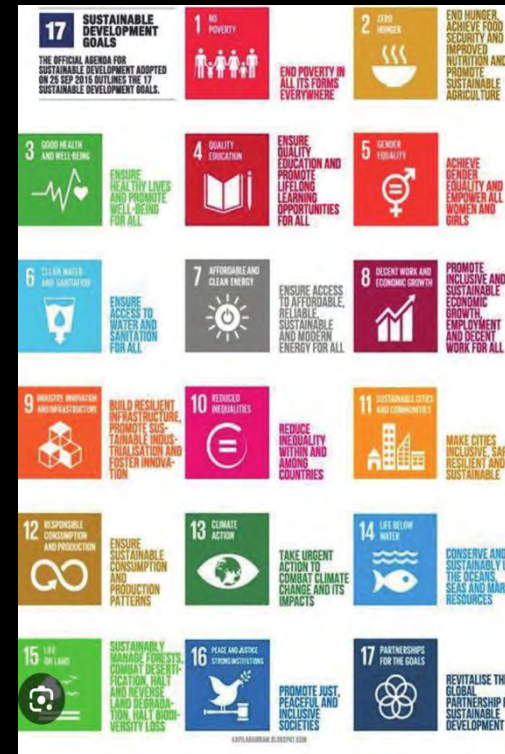


Bosko Looney Tunes, 1931

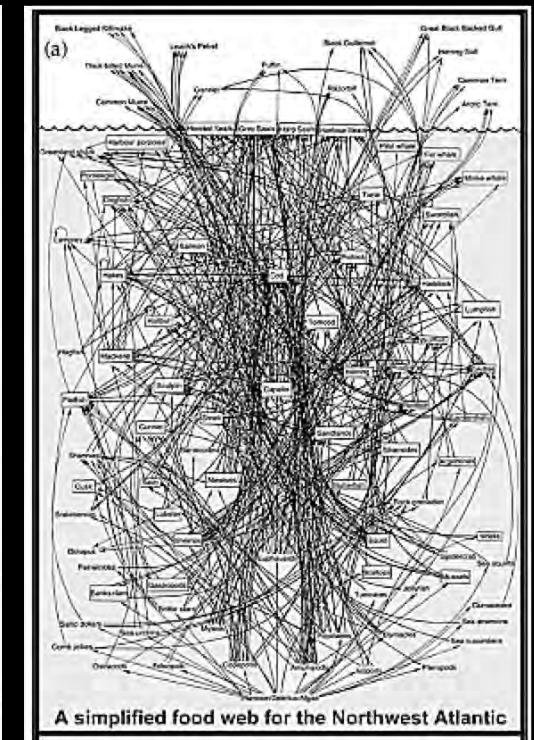
50 years of learning about sustainability and complexity

Two, now well-established understandings:

- unsustainability (fatal trajectories in climate, ecological services, inequity)
 - too much demand on biosphere
 - too little – billions lack basics
 - long past times when mitigation of environmental damage might be enough
- complex systems (world of dynamic interactions at multiple scales with cumulative effects)
 - key effects beyond particular valued components and individual projects
 - entails combined project and broader assessments for effective contributions
 - also entails precaution, adaptability, diversity, learning, openness and humility



United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals



David Lavigne, University of Guelph

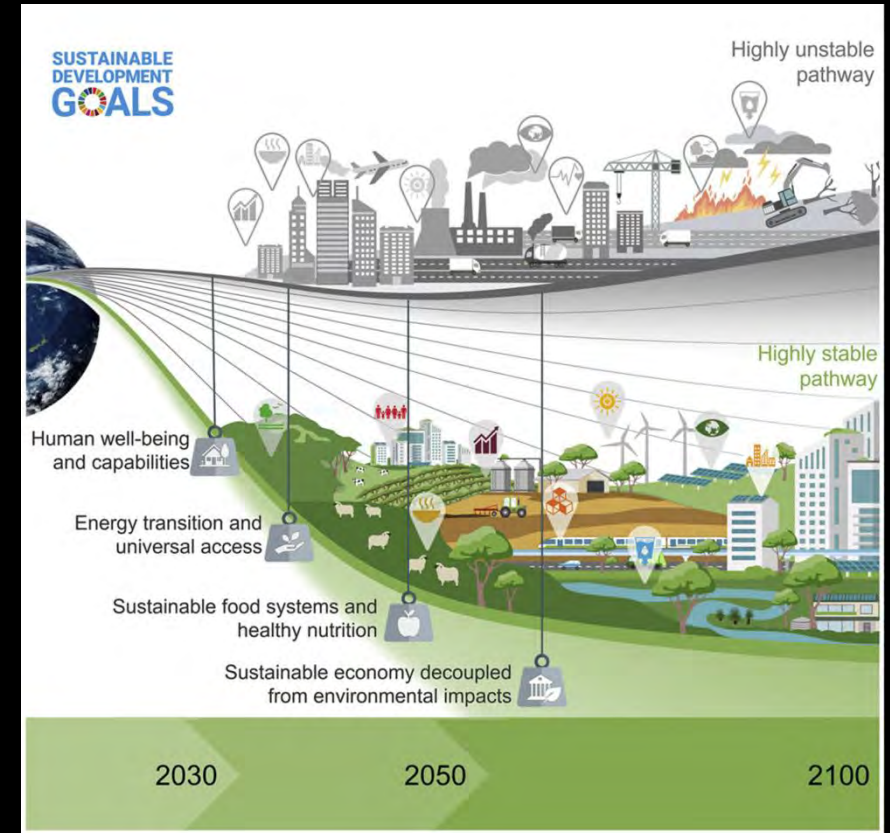
Implications of sustainability and complexity

Sustainability and complexity: **inseparable, highly demanding, fundamental for realistic and useful IA:**

Jointly require

- achievements far beyond mitigation
- **reversal of trajectories** (demand less, distribute fairly)
- alternatives to business as usual
- focus on cumulative effects and uncertainties
- **incremental transition** with flexible and diverse initiatives, constant learning, broad engagement, understanding and support (authoritative imposition likely to fail)
- **multi-scale application** beyond projects

Remaining window of opportunity unknown but shrinking, **postponed correction increases difficulty**



Moallemi et al, 2022

What we are doing instead: current federal IA steps

- assessment scope narrowed to areas of federal permitting and Indigenous rights
- separate and **secretive political process** to select and pre-approve “national interest projects” and ensure speedy assessment/permitting
- new proposed law with tight time constraints for all project assessments, and more Cabinet powers for **pre-approvals and exemptions** from established environmental protections
- more deference to provincial processes and sectoral regulators
- repeated commitments to Indigenous “consultation” but promotion of many projects that would impair exercise of their rights
- abandonment of core climate commitments



Agnolo Bonzino (Cupid's foot), 1545,
adjusted by Terry Gilliam (Monty Python's
stamping foot), 1969

Character of the current approach

1. political-level concentration of **arbitrary powers** to exempt, alter conditions, change regulatory requirements
2. inaccessible decision making – e.g., **shrouded process** for national interest projects
3. no effective attention to overall cumulative effects, broad alternatives, lasting consequences
4. reliance on willing Indigenous consent to poorly assessed or exempted developments
5. focus on de-risking private sector project investments but **silence on critical analysis of public costs and risks**
6. inattention to the results of races to the bottom



Seppo Leinonen

Consequences



- **contributes to unsustainable trajectories** (speeds extraction, extends dependence on fossil economy, weakens mitigations)
- **reduces attention to complexity** (cumulative effects, climate change, ecological services)
- **denies time, scope, openness and credible process** for decision making in the lasting public interest
- **wastes opportunity** to combine economic ambition with transition to a more sustainable future

A better option for IA and the lasting public interest

- announce a race to the top
- address economic turbulence and national divisions in ways that help **transition to a more sustainable future**
- avoid extending dependence on economic options that add to ecological and climate damage and concentrate more wealth and opportunity in fewer hands
- use **open IA identification and farsighted evaluation of**
 - some **big transitional national projects, and**
 - **supports for many small and quick initiatives** – nimble, adaptable, renewable and restorative, promising for creative combinations and wider adoption, based where people live, likely to deliver a diversity of lasting livelihood opportunities and a fairer distribution of benefits and risks
- **compete jointly with all others**



Terry Gilliam, Monty Python's The Meaning of Life, 1983



Working towards a better future

Appendix: Key deficiencies to correct in IA reinvention in the public (including economic) interest



Gary Larson

inefficiencies and insufficiencies to address

- too routinized
- too often focused on mitigating adverse effects on individual valued components rather than interactive cumulative effects and long-term consequences
- too often limited to individual projects rather than regional and strategic alternatives, needed transitions
- too rarely aimed at making lasting contributions to the public interest by identifying most desirable and least risky options for necessary transitions, and seeking positive overall cumulative effects rather than only mitigating adverse ones



Let's continue the conversation!

Message me your questions or comments in the IAIA26 app.

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