



Prepared by Seth Klein
Team Lead, Climate Emergency Unit

CANADA NEEDS A YOUTH CLIMATE CORPS

Our vision for a Youth Climate Corps: both a call to service & an opportunity to train in the jobs of the future

The climate mobilization in Canada has yet to feel like a grand societal undertaking. Among the bold initiatives that would send such a signal is a Youth Climate Corps (YCC). An audacious YCC — an invitation to the country’s youth to mobilize to confront today’s gravest threat — could be a flagship and transformative new public program, signalling to young people and society at large that we are genuinely in climate emergency mode.

We envision a government-funded program that would say to every person under 35 years of age: if you understand that we face a climate emergency, and you desire to meet this generational challenge now and are ready to serve, then we have a place for you; no one will be turned away.

An Historic Precedent

Consider how youth signed up in response to a previous existential threat, and how the government encouraged and supported their efforts.

In the Second World War, Canada’s population sat at just over 11 million people. To counter the rise of fascism and one of the greatest threats to democracy our world had ever faced, over one million Canadians enlisted for military service—a remarkable level of participation. Those who signed up were prepared to sacrifice everything. From all corners of the country and all ethnic backgrounds, the majority of people who went to fight overseas had an important characteristic in common: their youth. **About 64 per cent of those who enlisted during the Second World War were under the age of 21.** That generation of young people left their farms, they delayed plans to join the workforce or launch their careers, and they deferred their post-secondary studies because they understood the emergency to be immediate.

Back then, when young people stepped up to serve, our government was eager to receive them (even when, in the early years, the readiness of the training programs was still being hurriedly patched together). No one was turned away.

Youth Mobilization to Meet Today's Crisis

Today, thousands of young people are eager for a chance to meet this new generational moment. As the world begins to confront the climate crisis, the last few years have seen a burgeoning of youth leadership. Just like we saw in WWII, youth are once again mobilizing to secure our collective future. But so far, our governments have failed to create public programs to accept and deploy their energies and talents. The invitation has been absent.

The good news for today is that the crises we must confront call upon us to help and to heal — both society and the planet. Enlisting with the YCC could be just the antidote to the mental anxiety experienced by countless young people in the face of escalating climate disasters.

Canada needs a new youth corps, focused on building community resilience and the infrastructure and programs required to tackle the climate emergency. Not a compulsory form of youth service, but an attractive one.

What kind of work and training would the YCC fund?

The YCC should fund **thousands** of both climate mitigation and adaptation jobs; work that both expedites the reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and work that helps communities prepare for, respond to, and become more resilient to climate impacts and extreme weather events that are inevitably coming.

Program highlights:

- Likely a 2-year apprenticeship program with thriving wages
- Duration of the apprenticeship to be spent in the field or in a partnership with a post-secondary institution (combining field work and classroom study)
- In-depth training in a meaningful line of work
- Potential pathway into life-long careers in climate/energy transition jobs of the future
- Open to all youth—with special focus on enlisting systematically marginalized youth (Indigenous Peoples, Black, Brown, People of Colour, recent immigrants, lower income, youth with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+)
- Potential for 'room and board' training or in-community apprenticeships

And like the military, when they complete their service, alumni of the program could be offered tuition-free post-secondary education.

Members of the YCC could be engaged in restoring ecosystems that help capture carbon, managing our forests to reduce wildfire risks, responding to climate disasters and enhancing community resilience/safety, and building the new climate infrastructure we desperately need (renewable energy projects, building retrofits, high speed rail and more). The YCC could contribute to a growing Indigenous resurgence movement, making clear that traditional ecological knowledge has a leading role to play in how we respond to climate change. YCC youth could also be involved in low-carbon caring work (elder and child care) at the heart of a Green New Deal and social care and mutual aid work (such as people who go door-to-door during extreme weather events to check in on people and make connections).

The work must not displace other workers, but as there is so much climate-related building, restoration and resilience work to be done, there is no reason such a program should be seen as a zero-sum game. It could prove that green work can be good and introduce a new generation of workers to unionized labour.

Who makes the decisions?

Decisions about what projects will be funded should be governed by local and regional boards, with representation from community organizations and provincial, Indigenous and municipal governments, along with people with climate and professional expertise. The projects should be integrated with local and provincial climate emergency plans, and some should be specifically focused on and governed by Indigenous nations, as they seek to decarbonize their communities.

A YCC could be a win-win — youth would be engaged in meaningful work and gain valuable experience for their future plans and careers, while society gains an eager brigade of thousands of young people helping us rise to the climate emergency.

The YCC would be perfect for someone in a gap year, post-secondary students without a clear idea of where to go next, or young professionals dealing with the banality of working during a climate crisis. The messaging to youth can be simple: “Whether you want to contribute to climate action, are looking for good work, or both, join the Climate Corps. Come build the future you deserve.”

Implementation

Ideally, the YCC would be a national program. That said, like past programs such as Medicare and more recently child care, the YCC could begin as a provincial program (demonstrating proof of concept) and then evolve into a national federal-provincial cost-shared program. As such, campaigns to press for a YCC should focus on both federal and provincial governments, and should seek support and advocacy from community organizations/leaders, municipal governments/leaders and Indigenous national/organizations/leaders. (The Climate Emergency Unit has already begun the work of finding allies and supporters nationally and in various provinces, among municipal leaders, Indigenous organizations, student organizations, youth groups, and other community organizations.)

There are currently numerous youth training and employment programs across Canada (funded by both the federal and provincial governments). But none are at the scale we envision for a YCC, nor are they focused on the climate emergency. The largest existing programs are the federal Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (\$600 million a year) and the Canada Summer Jobs program (a wage subsidy program that supports about 100,000 summer positions each year). But these placements are short-term and tend to rely on job & training opportunities already on offer in the private and non-profit sector. We envision a bold new program to fund climate work that is not otherwise underway. **An initial budget target for a federal YCC would be in the realm of \$1 billion a year, but the budget should grow to accommodate demand.**

More service-oriented youth programs also exist. The closest such program we have is Katimavik, a federal youth program created under the government of Pierre Trudeau (and at one time chaired by Justin Trudeau), which has operated off and on since the late 1970s and has placed more than 35,000 young people into community service volunteer work. But Katimavik is only a half-year program with just a handful of spots available each year. More recently, the federal government initiated the Canada Service Corps, but it, too, is a relatively small program that merely offers short-term volunteer opportunities to young people.

In the early months of the pandemic, the environmental NGO Wildsight partnered with the City of Nelson, B.C., in the Kootenays and created a local [Youth Climate Corps](#). It is an inspiring program that combines climate-related education and field work. But it is a very small initiative, only able to offer a couple dozen placements each year. Nevertheless, it provides a small-scale “proof of concept” for the idea.

We need something at a much larger scale.

In the U.S., the new Biden administration, heeding the call of the youth-led Sunrise Movement, has launched a similar initiative — a [Civilian Climate Corps](#) — and has asked Congress for \$10

billion to seed it. Inspired by the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps (a foundational element of President Roosevelt's New Deal that employed about 300,000 people), this new program isn't explicitly youth focused but seems oriented that way. More about what this program could look like is available [here](#). Sunrise has produced a short video offering a flavour of what they envision, [here](#).

An ambitious YCC could quickly become a very popular program, one that could not be easily undone by a future change of government.

Don't ask youth to wait. The emergency is now.

Why, at this time of heightened crisis, with a civilizational threat again at our doorstep, would we want young people eager to act to wait? A new generation of young people needs a way to meet this moment.

Young people crave a sense of purpose — a desire to believe in something greater than themselves. That yearning for a sense of purpose is what led many to enlist in the Second World War. It is what American philosopher William James sought to find in a non-destructive cause in his famous 1910 essay "The Moral Equivalent of War." James was an anti-war activist but believed people need the sense of meaning, purpose and common struggle that often comes with war. James sought examples of events or struggles that could "inflame the civic temper as past history has inflamed the military temper." To which the climate crisis replies, look no further.

Many young people are struggling with issues of economic insecurity and with feelings of political and societal abandonment (as they wrestle with the escalating costs of housing, tuition and other essential goods). This reality makes some of them susceptible to appeals from the populist right, encouraging them to scapegoat others and misdirect blame. The YCC could be a compelling and positive counter-offer at this critical juncture, inviting young people to call upon their best selves.

Climate change will be the defining issue facing today's youth, with profound consequences for their futures, families, communities and careers. How we confront the largest collective action puzzle of human existence will be the story of their lives. We would do well to fully enlist them in the challenge as soon as possible.

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Let's join together and make the Youth Climate Corps a reality!

If you'd like to get involved, email: seth@climateemergencyunit.ca

In Alberta, Juan Vargas Alba at: juan@climateemergencyunit.ca

In Ontario, Sabah Ibrahim at: sabah@climateemergencyunit.ca

In BC, Ben Simoni at: ben@youthclimatecorps.com