Charest and Poilievre at odds over the environment during leadership campaign

By IAN BAILEY

Staff

GATINEAU - Two high-profile candidates in the race to lead the federal Conservatives touted their climate change credentials on Tuesday, with Jean Charest releasing his environmental plan and Pierre Poilievre saying he would look at reviving some energy projects blocked by the Liberal government.

Mr. Charest, a former Quebec premier, promised to repeal the federal carbon tax and replace it with an industrial carbon price to reduce emissions. His plan also includes a commitment to speed up the approvals process for all infrastructure projects that will result in emissions reductions.

Over all, Mr. Charest said his plan will meet or exceed a 30-per-cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, and achieve net zero by 2050.

Meanwhile, Mr. Poilievre said that, as prime minister, he would review energy projects that he said have been unfairly blocked by the Liberal government and approve them if they meet several standards.

To pass muster, the projects would have to be safe for the environment, generate paycheques for Canadians and "displace dirty energy from foreign dictatorships," Mr. Poilievre told a news conference in Gatineau. There would also be consultation with First Nations.

Mr. Poilievre said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has scrapped the Energy East pipeline, the Northern Gateway project and the GNL Quebec project, and that Mr. Trudeau did not support LNG development in Newfoundland.

The Ottawa-area MP said that when Mr. Trudeau took office, there were 18 natural gas projects, but only one is now under construction.

He said he would revive GNL Quebec’s Énergie Saguenay project, which proposed the construction of a natural gas pipeline from northern Ontario to the Quebec City area where a plant would have been built to liquefy the gas for loading onto ships for shipment abroad.

Both the Quebec government and Ottawa eventually opposed the project over a mix of environmental and social concerns.

Of Mr. Charest, Mr. Poilievre said the former Quebec premier enacted a carbon tax in power and otherwise raised taxes. "I don't think anybody can trust anything he says because he is doing exactly the opposite now that he did when he was Liberal premier of Quebec not so long ago," he said.

Mr. Charest served as Quebec premier between 2003 and 2012 after a career in federal politics that included roles as a cabinet minister under Progressive Conservative prime ministers Brian Mulroney and Kim Campbell.

Responding to Mr. Poilievre’s criticism, the Charest campaign issued a statement.

"We took time to consult with Conservatives for Clean Growth and other industry groups. Repealing the Trudeau Consumer Carbon Tax makes credible sense," it said, in part.

"I look forward to learning more about Mr. Poilievre’s plans to tackle climate change and environmental results."
Asked about the release of his own climate change plan, Mr. Poilievre said that it would be released "well before the next election," but he did not respond to media questions about releasing the plan during the leadership race, which ends on Sept. 10.

Stewart Elgie, a professor of law and economics at the University of Ottawa who is also director of the Institute of the Environment, said Mr. Charest had advanced a "credible climate plan" while the ideas proposed by Mr. Poilievre are flawed.

"To kill climate laws and produce more oil is not a climate plan, or even a smart economic strategy," Prof. Elgie said. "The world is moving to a low-carbon economy whether Mr. Poilievre wants it or not."

Prof. Elgie said he liked a proposal in the Charest plan to take the harmonized sales tax off low-carbon products such as electric vehicles, heat pumps and high-efficiency windows. "That's creative and good for consumers," he said.

And he noted that Mr. Charest's record as premier and federal environment minister who signed onto agreements on sustainable development at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, shows a genuine commitment to acting on climate change and building a clean economy. "Actions speak louder than plans," he said.

Prof. Elgie disputed the suggestion that Mr. Charest brought in a carbon tax, noting he brought in a cap and trade approach to emissions.