Canada’s Environment and Climate Change
Minister Catherine McKenna

We Americans tend to think of Canadians as nice, friendly, well-intentioned folk, a little more left-of-center than the US — sort of what Blue America would be if it didn’t have to deal with the south. For the last 10 years, though, that has been anything but true: the Conservative government of Stephen Harper brought US Movement Conservatism north, and in the recent election campaign used good ‘ol American-style race-baiting as the centerpiece of its election strategy.

But Canada is still Canada, and Harper lost to the Liberal Party and Justin Trudeau, whose new government was sworn in today. One place where this will really matter is in climate policy, where the Tories pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol and tried to turn the country into an extractive petro-state. The “Grits” — a uniquely Canadian term for the Liberals — endorse putting a price on carbon and Trudeau himself is looking to play an active role in the upcoming Paris talks. It’s easy to make fun of Canada’s relative weakness in international politics because despite its vast physical size, it is a relatively small country with an even smaller military that can’t throw its weight around. But when it comes to climate, Canada is incredibly important because of its vast oil reserves, centered now of course on Tar Sands. If Canadians decide to pump oil and tar, that will matter far more than its small size army.

Trudeau’s new Minister for Environment and Climate Change is Catherine McKenna, a new member of Parliament elected in an upset in her central Ottawa district (or “riding,” as they call it up north). The good news about McKenna is that she has a tremendous amount of energy and a good deal of international experience: she is an international trade lawyer who has been active in global human rights causes. The bad news is that she does not appear to have a strong background in the details of climate policy and — as mentioned before — she is a rookie member of Parliament. So expect a whole lot of (political) energy and activity in Canadian climate policy — and also a lot of rookie mistakes and embarrassments. Here is a good if short writeup from The Ottawa Citizen; here is one from The National Observer.

If those embarrassments get bad, we will still be able to “Blame Canada.” Otherwise, we will just blame them for Justin Bieber.