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Motor Mouth: Quebec reverses its ban on internal-combustion



In a further softening of its EV mandate, La Belle Province tweaks specifics to make its over-idealistic policy Canada's most pragmatic

By **David Booth**
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Traffic on Highway 25 in Montreal on Thursday June 20, 2024 PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front

—NELSON MANDELA



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As *Motor Mouth* recently detailed, the ZEV mandates that once seemed inescapable have been — or will soon be — gutted. California's mandate on electric vehicles — which numerous other U.S. states have copied — will almost assuredly be rescinded during the Trump administration; the Canadian federal government recently decided to pause its "Electric Vehicle Availability Standard" just as it was getting started; and, just two months ago, Quebec tweaked its provincial mandate so regular hybrids like Toyota's Prius and Honda's latest CR-V qualified as "zero-emissions vehicles."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Now comes news that, rather than requiring 100% of all new vehicles sold come 2035 to be zero-emissions, *La Belle Province* will revise that limit to 90%. Yes, that's right, come that ominous deadline 10 years hence, some 10% of light-duty vehicles in Canada's second-most populous province — and its second-largest market for automobiles — can remain piston-powered. Between its inclusion of hybrids and the softening of the ZEV requirements, it's a massive shift in policy for the electricity-rich and pipeline-hating province.

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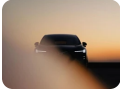



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Quebec Premier François Legault PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

That said, despite the timeliness of the announcement, it's not nearly as huge a policy shift as the headlines trumpet. For instance, while regular — that should be read “non-plug-in” — hybrids are now defined as zero-emission vehicles, they only qualify for half a credit, while full battery-electric and plug-in hybrids are eligible for full credits. In other words, the vast majority of vehicles sold in Quebec will still have to be plug-ins of some variety, be they full battery-electrics or plug-in hybrids.

Nonetheless, it's quite a comedown for a province that was so confident in its transition to battery power that, less than two years ago, it *toughened* its ZEV rules. What had originally required “only” 26% of all the cars automakers sold in the province be ZEVs by 2026 was upped to an even more unrealistic 32.5%. Ditto the benchmark for 2030, which saw an already ambitious 65% quota amped up to seriously hubristic 85%.

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First of all, subsidizing all those EVs became prohibitively expensive. Quebec's EV incentives were the country's most expansive, offering, up to January this year, as much as \$7,000 for the purchase of a ZEV. So expensive that, as the that deadline approached — and Quebecers rushed to Tesla dealers — the province's *Roulez Verte* program ran out of money. Almost coincidentally, the federal ZEV subsidy program ran out of funds as well, and its \$5,000 incentive was cancelled. What had been as much as \$12,000 in incentivization for Quebecers to buy battery-electric suddenly turned to zero.



An EV charging station powering up a Chevrolet Volt in Quebec PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette


As a result, ZEV adoption in *La Belle Province* declined to 13.2% in the first quarter of this year; and 15.6% in the second, sales running at less than half of that latest 32.5% quota. Either automakers would be subject to unconscionable fines, or they'd simply refuse to sell cars in the province.

Nor is the Canada-wide picture any better. ZEV sales currently stand at 8.6% nationwide — with almost a third of those being PHEVs — a far cry from the Liberal's federal 20% requirement. And, while Quebec's *Roulez Verte* program's coffers have been replenished and the province's (now reduced) incentives returned, the federal subsidies (\$5,000 for a full BEV and longer-range PHEVs; \$2,500 for shorter-range PHEVs) have not been reinstated. In other words, neither Quebec nor Canada, as a whole, has a hope in Hell of making its 2026 numbers.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Why Quebec's revisions are brilliant

First, let's understand how little Quebec has compromised. The new rules require that at least 90% of vehicles in 2035 must still qualify as ZEVs. In its simplest form, that would mean nine in 10 vehicles sold in the province would be either a BEV or a long-range PHEV. Automakers could also reach their mandate were 80% of their sales BEV or PHEV, and the remaining 20% HEVs. Either way, the vast majority of the province's new cars come that 2035 deadline will still be electrified, and compared to its original full ban, tailpipe emissions would still only increase by 10% (or, perhaps even less, if the actual split errs more on the side of those allowed 20% HEVs). Either way, tailpipe emissions are much reduced.


 2025 Ford F-150 Lightning EV

2025 Ford F-150 Lightning EV PHOTO BY FORD

Let's also understand that those 10% ICEs — or, again, 20% HEVs — will almost assuredly be trucks and, to a lesser degree, large SUVs. And, as *Motor Mouth* recently explained, [pickups and their sport-brute cousins are the least likely vehicles to be fully — or even partially — electrified.](#) I suspect the prospect of an unhappy electorate being force-fed [Ford F-150 Lightnings](#) and [Tesla Cybertrucks](#) they don't want had a little to do with recent decisions.

More importantly, the plan is also politically brilliant. As *Motor Mouth* has detailed many times, Canada is under enormous pressure from the Trump administration to dump its ZEV mandates, and Quebec's revision — or something very like it — might prove the thread-through-the-needle compromise that allows the Liberals to simultaneously soften the blow to its EV-loving constituency and salve the ego of the "stable genius" south of the border.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

 Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney speaks during a press conference after the First Ministers Meeting in Ottawa, Canada on March 21, 2025

Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney speaks during a press conference after the First Ministers Meeting in Ottawa, Canada on March 21, 2025 PHOTO BY DAVE CHAN /Getty

Team Carney could at least trumpet they were no longer banning ICE-powered vehicles, and since The Donald has never met a brief he bothered reading, he might not know that only 10% of vehicles would be fossil-fuelled. And, even if he did, he might not care, so long as he got to boast to MAGA-land that he had “forced the Canadians to lift their HORRIBLE ban on V8 engines.”

Making this even more promising is that he'd likely get significant help from the media. Almost every headline trumpeting this latest news hyped the discussion of Quebec “dropping its ICE ban”; how picayune the accommodation actually was way “below the fold.”

That's why the federal Liberals and the British Columbia New Democrats (B.C. has the only other provincial EV mandate) are under increasing pressure to adopt Quebec's policy, which in turn is why, I suspect, that Francois Legault's Coalition Avenir Québec has gone, in two short months, from championing the most idealistic — that should be read “extreme” — EV policy in the land to its most pragmatic. Perhaps Premier Legault took Nelson Mandela's advice about leading from behind. Whatever the case, Quebec is once again leading the national agenda on electric-vehicle mandates.

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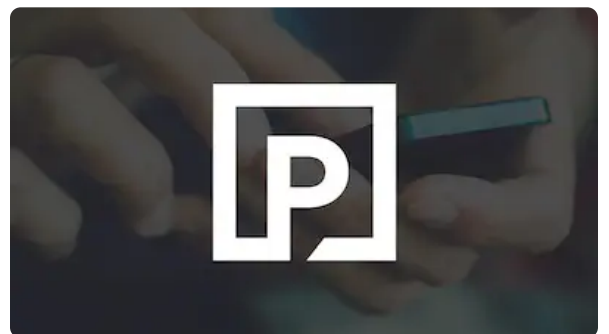
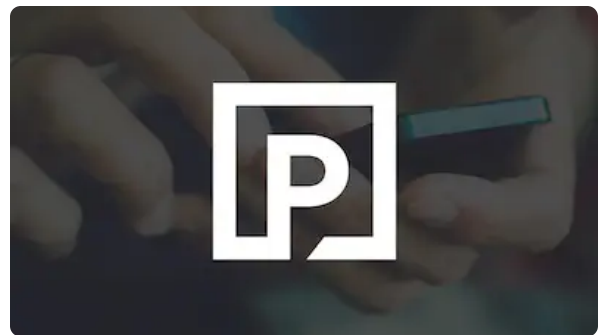
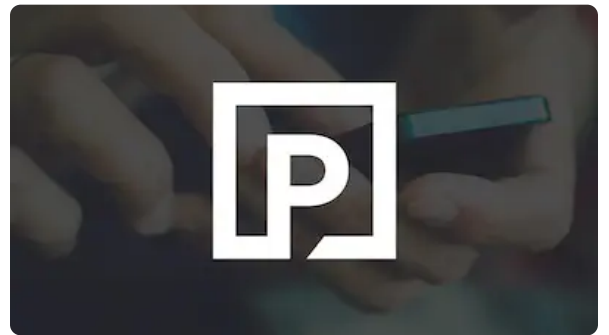
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