

PUTTING HARPER ON NOTICE

WORLD WATER DAY TO HIGHLIGHT THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL WATER POLICY

by Susan Howatt

We are in the midst of a crucial political moment in the fight to protect Canada's water. All four opposition parties are calling for a ban on bulk water exports and stronger environmental protections for the water in Canada's lakes, oceans and rivers. Even prominent Conservative politicians are admitting that Canada's water is under threat, due to trade agreements like NAFTA and the SPP. The question is, how much pressure will it take before the Harper government finally takes action?

The federal government knows that citizens are concerned about Canada's water. In 2005 the Prime Minister's Office received 120,000 letters, emails and phone calls on the subject of bulk water exports and water privatization. This was the second largest volume of communications on any issue – second only to same-sex marriage.

SUDDEN INTEREST

The Liberal party is in the midst of crafting a policy that they say will beef up the government's management and protection of water. The party has also tabled a proposal for a new Water Stewardship Minister, who could help bring order to a maze of more than 20 departments that set federal policies affecting water.

Last spring, the Bloc Québécois introduced a motion to the Standing Committee on International Trade that recommended that the government quickly begin talks with its American and Mexican counterparts to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA. It passed in June 2007 with support from all of the parties except the Conservatives.

In March, Peggy Nash of the NDP introduced a motion in the House of Commons calling for a comprehensive water policy that recognizes access to clean water as a human right, prohibits bulk water exports, invests in infrastructure and ensures water does not become a commodity. The Green Party has also demonstrated support for a federal water policy.

MISSING IN ACTION

The overwhelming chorus of support for stronger policies that would protect Canada's water has left the Harper government isolated. Even Conservative Senator Pat Carney, who was one of the chief negotiators of NAFTA, now acknowledges that the agreement could open the door to bulk water exports, and has put forward a bill to change this.

Meanwhile, Canadian infrastructure is crumbling. The Canadian Federation of Municipalities reported at the end of 2007 that national infrastructure is "near collapse" and that a \$123 billion injection is needed immediately to address the crisis, including \$35 billion for water services alone. The Harper government responded by saying that it is not in the "pothole business," flip-pantly ignoring municipalities' desperate need for new resources.

And while the feds may not be in the pothole business, they sure are in the public-private partnership business. In November, the Conservatives unveiled a \$1.25 billion Public Private Partnerships Fund, which seeks to "support innovative projects that provide an alternative to *traditional government infrastructure procurement*" (emphasis ours) and "facilitate a broader use of P3s in Canadian infrastructure projects."

Canadian Perspectives readers are well aware by now of the problems associated with P3s, including skyrocketing costs, diminished quality and unaccountable management. But the Conservatives are determined to push the P3 model, at the expense of Canada's deteriorating water infrastructure.

CELEBRATE WORLD WATER DAY

Last year on World Water Day, we paid Environment Minister John Baird a visit to drop off 45,000 petitions from Canadians demanding a national water policy that will protect Canadian waters from privatization, diversions and bulk water exports. We haven't heard back from him – have you?

On March 22, join activists from across Canada to demand that the federal government take action to protect Canada's water. Visit www.canadians.org for more information and to find out how you can get involved in your community.

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