

It's no wonder the Canadian government has refused to recognize water as a right.

Maude Barlow
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The Canada Pension Plan Investment Board (CPPIB) clinched a deal last month to invest \$1 billion of Canadian workers' pension money into a private British water corporation, Anglian Water. Along with three other global investors, the CPPIB has just purchased one of the world's largest private water companies with Canadian pension funds.

Anglian Water was created when Margaret Thatcher privatized Britain's water system in the 1980s, in what was one of the biggest privatization initiatives in history. Anyone who has any doubt about the harmful effects of water privatization they need only look at the record of British water corporations like Anglian.

In the first five years after the water system was privatized, 18,636 households were disconnected from their supply. Prices rose by 50 percent while directors' fees, salaries and bonuses increased between 50 percent and 200 percent in most water companies.

Anglian also has a deplorable environmental record. Since 2004, Anglian Water recorded the second highest number of cases of water pollution in the U.K. In 2001, Anglian Water was fined for an incident in which 200 tons of sewage spilled into a river in Essex. In 2005, water companies were ranked as the worst polluters in the United Kingdom.

Canadian pensioners are outraged that their money is being invested in a corporation with such an abhorrent human rights and environmental record. The Council of Canadians, the citizens' watchdog organization I chair, has heard from concerned individuals across the country who are joining us in demanding that the CPPIB divest from British for-profit water. On December 18, we took our message to a CPPIB public hearing.

The CPPIB investment underscores the urgent need for Canada to recognize water as a right. It is part of a growing trend of water commodification by corporations and financial institutions both in Canada and abroad.

Two decades ago, the Thatcher government demonstrated the disastrous impacts of privatizing public services. Now Canada is heading down the same path. Our Conservative government's long-term economic plan would see greater investment in private-public-partnerships (P3s) in Canada. According to Canadian Finance Minister, Jim Flaherty, these P3s "will also provide opportunities for Canadian pension funds and other investors to participate in infrastructure projects here in Canada rather than being forced to look abroad, as is often the case now." Flaherty wants Canada to create its own Anglians to invest in.

CIBC certainly thinks this would be a good idea. The Canada financial institution released a report last month peddling the benefits of investing in water. While those of us who see water as a fundamental right are outraged that our governments have neglected water infrastructure in communities across the country, the CIBC sees crumbling infrastructure as a great opportunity for private corporations to make profits.

The move by Canadian institutions to join the ranks of the World Bank and the World Trade Organization and support private corporations provides some insight into Canada's position on the right to water.

The government of Canada has consistently opposed the right to water at the UN. Canada was the only one of 53 countries to vote against appointing a special rapporteur on water at a 2002

meeting and reacted negatively to an October 2006 resolution of the Human Right Council to conduct a study on the right to water.

The fact that water is not acknowledged as a right has allowed decision-making over water policy to shift from the UN and governments toward institutions and organizations that favour the private water companies and the commodification of water.

Canadian activists and civil society groups have joined forces with allies around the world to create a movement that is growing rapidly in strength and numbers.

And we are beginning to see the fruits of our labour.

At the Fourth World Water Forum in Mexico City this past March, the UN highlighted the failure of privatization and called for governments to re-enter the water services arena. Calls for a UN Convention to re-assert the crucial role of government in supplying water to the poor increased dramatically at the Forum and new impetus was given to this campaign.

On November 29, 2006, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) adopted, without a vote, a resolution requesting the OHCHR to undertake a study on the relation of human rights to access to water. This resolution was a combined initiative of Germany and Spain, and is widely seen as step towards greater recognition of the right to water.

A number of governments, including the British government, have now realized that for-profit water has failed and have taken steps to recognize water as a right.

But, as the CIBC report shows, the forces of privatization are also gaining momentum. The world is running out of water and large corporations see this as an opportunity to make colossal profits.

Canada must now decide whether it will join the UN and an increasing number of countries to protect water as a common good for future generations or remain a rogue state that promotes profit over people and nature.

World-renowned social justice advocate, Maude Barlow, is the chairperson for the Council of Canadians and Co-founder of the Blue Planet Project, which works to stop the commodification of the world's water.