

## **Our Water's Not For Sale**

### **Fresh water is a public trust, not a private commodity**

*By Maude Barlow*

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Last May, Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy promised to take measures to protect Canadian water after a public outcry greeted the news that companies were on the brink of exporting bulk water to foreign markets. He and Environment Minister Christine Stewart were to consult the provinces over the summer and table legislation in the fall - a long overdue Liberal promise from the 1993 election campaign.

This is not the first attempt to protect our water. In 1988, the Mulroney government tabled the Canada Water Preservation Act, largely in response to the Liberals' charge that the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement posed a threat to Canadian water security; but that session of Parliament ended before the law could be passed and it was never re-introduced. As the House of Commons prepares to adjourn for the holiday, once again there is no legislation in sight. This is not acceptable.

#### **A drain on the public trust**

Increasing water scarcity and worldwide destruction of the health of the aquatic ecosystem are creating a global water crisis. The consumption of water is doubling every 20 years - more than twice the rate of the increase in human population. By the year 2025, as much as two-thirds of the world's population could face severe water shortages. The World Bank says, "the wars of the next century will be about water."

Global corporations and financial institutions believe they have the answer - the privatization and commodification of the world's water. Every year, they hold a global water summit where industry leaders like Lyonnaise Des Eaux of France, which distributes private water services to 68 million people worldwide, rub shoulders with influential politicians and thinkers to advance their mutual interests. In Canada, which holds over 20% of the world's fresh water supplies, the push is on to get in on the ground floor of this business opportunity.

Liberal MP Dennis Mills is promoting the GRAND Canal project, which would entail massive water diversion of Canadian fresh water to the United States. A Canadian company, Global Water Corporation, has signed an agreement with Sitka, Alaska, to export 18 billion gallons per year of glacier water to China, where it will be bottled in one of that country's infamous free trade zones to save on labour costs. The company brochure entices investors "to harvest the accelerating opportunity...as traditional sources of water around the world become progressively depleted and degraded" and laments the B.C. government's ban on bulk water exports.

Before this goes any further, we need a public debate in Canada. I believe that water is a public trust; it belongs to the people. No one has the right to appropriate it or profit from it at someone else's expense. An adequate supply of clean water for peoples' daily living needs is a basic human right and is best protected by maintaining control of water in the public sector.

### **Pouring cold water on trade**

It is wrong - environmentally, economically and morally - to engage in the large-scale trade of water. Water must never be regarded as a commodity for exchange in the international marketplace. Adequate supplies of clean water for people in water-scarce regions can only be ensured by promoting efficient utilization of local water resources. This is not to say that I oppose sharing water in times of crisis. But the people who now lack access to supplies of clean water simply could not afford to import it if it were sold on a for-profit basis. Exporting water for the elites who could afford it would reduce the urgency of finding real, sustainable and equitable solutions to water problems in the developing world.

We urgently need legislation to prohibit the large-scale export of water by tanker or diversion. As well, the government must realize that because NAFTA does not explicitly exempt water, it gives U.S. corporations "national treatment" rights to our water once any Canadian company is granted an export permit. In opposition, Lloyd Axworthy himself said that the free trade agreements "would override the Federal Water Policy prohibition of exports of interbasin water." Perhaps that is why Minister Axworthy is dragging his heels now.

This is a crucial moment for Canadians and peoples around the world. Privatizing, commodifying and commercializing water will serve to make a small handful of water transnationals very wealthy while doing nothing for people who need access to clean water resources. It will also threaten the environment by placing lakes, rivers and groundwater beyond the reach of governments and beyond the rule of law. Neither poor people nor those trying to protect aquatic ecosystems have the financial resources necessary to compete for water in the open marketplace.