
Have the Public and Government Abandoned the Environment File?

by Donald MacKinnon, MLA

This article looks at various environmental issues in Prince Edward Island and the rest of Canada and comes to the conclusion that legislators and parliamentarians must not permit continued abandonment of the environmental file.

Have the Public and Government abandoned the environmental file? For the most part, I think the answer to this question is YES; particularly if we define "abandonment" as including: the withdrawal of financial, technical and moral support from the commitments of previous governments, and governments in waiting; and the relaxed sense of urgency on some environmental issues, often in the face of a preponderance of scientific evidence. One example of an environmental issue meeting this definition is that of climate change, more commonly known as global warming.

In 1988, Canada hosted and sponsored the first international Conference on Climate Change that concluded, "Humanity is conducting a vast unintended, uncontrolled globally pervasive experiment, whose ultimate consequences are second only to global nuclear war!"

In 1993, the federal government in waiting, made a series of "green promises" one of which was a 20% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions below 1990 levels by the year 2005. At the Kyoto Conference last year, our government agreed to undertake a reduction in emissions to a mere 6% below 1990 levels by the year 2010. Today, unfortunately, identifying climate

change as a problem and doing something about it, are two very different propositions.

To my mind, this delay of action and even reversal of previous commitments constitutes abandonment of the Climate Change File. Until very recently, environmental indifference and lack of political will was also the standard as successive Prince Edward Island governments undertook a number of studies related to land use and environmental issues, only to have them sit on the shelf while the province developed in an *ad hoc* fashion, seriously limiting future options and placing the health and economic well-being of Islanders at risk.

As a result, public interest in the Environmental File increased dramatically for a number of specific reasons:

- the rapid expansion of the potato industry
- increased soil erosion
- accelerated land clearing and clearcutting of forests, and
- increased pesticide use and the resultant conflicts between agricultural producers and their non-farming neighbours.

In 1996, former PEI Premier Catherine Callbeck's Speech from the Throne announced Government's intention to develop a Resource Land Use Strategy and later the same year newly elected Premier Pat Binns honoured the commitment.

The 16-member Round Table on Resource Land Use and Stewardship was formed and represented a healthy cross-section of Island Society with an interest in the province's natural resources and the opportunities they present, provided they are managed in a sustainable

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manner. Public participation in the process was strong and meaningful.

A comprehensive report followed in September 1997, and the following 8 months was filled with standing committee hearings and assembly debate on the 87 recommendations, many of which resulted in new legislation or regulation change. For example, the last session of the House passed a number of new or amended Acts including:

- *The Lands Protection Act*
- *The Forest Management Act*
- *The Farm Practices Act*
- *The Environmental Tax Act, and*
- *The Wildlife Conservation Act*

In addition, guidelines were adopted for Manure Management and the Environmental Impact Process, as well as a Natural Areas Protection policy aimed at increasing the land base for protected areas.

Prince Edward Island is also developing a province-wide Waste Management Strategy, that will begin operating January 1, 1999, to achieve a waste diversion target of 65 percent to exceed the natural goal established by the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment.

Only through the application of comparable environmental standards throughout the US and Canada, can the environmental consequences of deregulation be mitigated.

It will follow the Waste Watch source separation model and function as a privately owned Utility, and as such, will be the first of its kind in North America. The Province is presently looking into the feasibility of packaging and marketing this model to other areas of the world to raise the "eco-image" of Prince Edward Island.

I believe Islanders have been aggressively dealing with environmental concerns for the past 2 years, but much work needs to be done, particularly in the area of ground water protection since we rely entirely on ground water sources for potable water.

Because potato production relies heavily on chemical fertilizers, nitrate levels have been on the rise in ground water sources for the past decade, and although pesticides have not been found in ground water to date, it can be said that where nitrate build-ups occur one can expect to find pesticide contamination in due course.

Presently, the Department of the Environment has completed the second year of a three-year study to assess the presence of high and moderate use pesticides in

heavily farmed areas of the province. Some pesticide products being used on Prince Edward Island are banned in many countries around the world for environmental and health reasons. It is important to note that the federal government, through a number of departments and agencies, administers a wide variety of legislative instruments which have relevance to water and aquatic life on PEI, including the *Pest Control Products Act*, which addresses the registration and use of pest control products in Canada.

Because of this jurisdictional issue, progress to date regarding key pesticide recommendations of the Round Table Report has been proceeding slowly. The Environmental File can be active in Prince Edward Island, but without intergovernmental cooperation it is extremely difficult to achieve positive results in some areas.

There are however, a number of very important environmental issues presently receiving significant intergovernmental cooperation. In June 1997, the conference of New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers recognized that acid rain deposition is a joint concern for which a regional approach on research and strategic action is required.

The New England/Eastern Canadian Acid Rain Action Plan was developed to address those aspects of the acid rain problem in the Northeast that are within the region's control to influence. Specifically, the Action Plan includes:

- A comprehensive and co-ordinated plan for further reducing emissions of sulphur dioxide and oxides of nitrogen.
- A research and monitoring agenda targeted at both improving the state-of-the-science for this environmental problem and increasing regional cooperative efforts in sharing research and analyzing the effectiveness of current control programs; and,
- A public education and outreach agenda to ensure the public continues to be educated and mobilized towards the overall goal of protecting the natural environment.

While acid rain is a regional problem that requires regional solutions, out-of-region sources contribute significantly to this environmental threat; the New England States and Eastern Canadian Provinces stress the need for appropriate control on sources outside the region.

Even though recent studies in the US and Canada suggest that a reduction of sulfur and nitrogen deposition of at least 50% below existing clean air standard is required to protect sensitive resources; the task of doing so is becoming increasingly difficult. Restructuring of the electric power industry in the US poses a significant environmental threat to New England and Eastern Can-

ada, as deregulation favours a production shift from higher cost facilities to those with lower operating costs like high-polluting coal-fired units in the midwestern states and central Canada.

Another environmental issue being dealt with inter-governmentally is mercury contamination. The New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers have as their goal, "the virtual elimination of the discharge or anthropogenic mercury into the environment, an action that is required to ensure that serious or irreversible damage, attributable to these sources, is not inflicted upon human health and the environment."

In developing the Acid Rain and Mercury Action Plans, the Governors and Premiers recognize, that in order to protect human health and the environment, the precautionary principle shall be used. Where there are threats of serious and irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be a rationale for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation and to protect public health.

In my opinion, the precautionary principle must also be applied to the issue of Climate Change. Consider this, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change projects that an immediate 60% reduction in fossil-fuel use is necessary just to stabilize climate at the current level of disruption; yet Robert Peterson, Imperial Oil's chairman states "I feel very safe in saying that the view that burning fossil fuels will result in global climate change remains an unproved hypothesis."

The fact is, the clear majority of the world's foremost weather scientists agree: "the balance of evidence suggests that there is a discernible human influence on global climates" and the burning of fossil-fuels is one of those influences.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to keep the environmental file open on the really big issues because of the international dimension and the magnitude and influence of the players involved.

Another example where the environmental file has been abandoned by government is in the field of alternate energy research and development, one area where on-going progress must continue if we are to be in a position to act on the climate change file, if and when we decide to do so.

In the early 1980s, when the availability of cheap fossil fuel was threatened, the federal government, largely the National Research Council, acted quickly to sponsor

wind energy research and development, because this source electrical power generation is one of the cleanest, cheapest and most readily available.

Financial and technical support was magnificent, in fact \$30 million was advanced to one wind energy test site alone, that being Cap Chat on the Gaspé Peninsula. Today however, with crude oil being cheaper than bottled water, support has waned. The total national budget this year is \$600,000 and even this paltry sum is on a short-term non-committal basis.

As a result, innovative thinking and planning, such as electrification of the national rail system, or even regulatory consideration that would allow individuals generating clean power to contribute to, or extract from, the national grid on an equitable basis have been curtailed.

Consider this, the burning of transportation fuel contributed to more than 30% of Canada's green-house gas emissions, yet Ottawa's transportation strategies continue to support the rubber-tired railway without establishing parallel policies to develop more environmentally friendly infrastructure.

Here is an illustration of how the environmental file has been abandoned. Environment Canada, once the seventh largest government department is now one of the smallest among twenty-one departments. Consequently, the federal government has cut back in areas like environmental protection and research, acid rain monitoring stations, freshwater ecosystem research, many aspects of regulation enforcement and public education.

Governments are concerned that addressing the big environmental issues in any meaningful way may negatively affect international competitiveness and economic well-being, and the public, for the most part, either do not know the issues, do not care or simply are not prepared to make the personal sacrifices necessary, either in monetary or life-style terms.

It appears as though a choice is inevitable, in simple terms, it is economic growth driven largely by fossil-fuel consumption or environmental quality. Our present course of action will not allow us to have it both ways.

Perhaps the recently appointed Climate Change Secretariat will find a way to keep the Kyoto Commitment from becoming a shallow and romantic promise; but one thing is certain; in order to compel other jurisdictions to act, Canadians must first take pro-active steps to find workable solutions to help solve the problem at home.

With strong political leadership and the support of a well-educated and well-informed public, the 21st century can belong to Canada in ways only future generations will be able to appreciate.