

Green Scene: The ‘Ominous’ Bill

by Elaine Golds

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People who read newspapers should, by now, be familiar with the broad outlines of the Harper government’s Omnibus Bill which is now moving towards passage in Ottawa. This huge 450 page bill, ostensibly written to deal with the federal budget, will unravel environmental protection in Canada as we have known it for many years. *Bill C-38* will repeal the *Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act*, the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* and the *National Round Table on Environment and Economy Act*. It will also severely weaken protection for species at risk as well as for all fish species.

While over a third of *Bill C-38* weakens or eliminates various aspects of environmental protection, the remainder will result in other fundamental changes in Canada such as cuts to the CBC and changes to the *Employment Act*. Many of the details of the Omnibus Bill remain uncertain and await details to be revealed in regulations still to be released. However, the direction and intent of this bill are clear. Like some sort of monstrous nightmare, *Bill C-38* will change or repeal approximately 70 federal laws and all without public consultation. This is an unprecedented and appalling way for the federal government to do its business.

In contrast, I remember when another federal government in the late 1990s was considering passing legislation to protect species at risk. Such legislation had already been in place in the USA for almost a quarter century so Canada was certainly overdue in introducing similar legislation. People who believed the federal government should play a more active role in protecting Canada’s biodiversity were very supportive of such legislation while some property owners and businesses were worried about potential impacts. The government of the day recognized people should have an opportunity to express their concerns. Draft legislation was released for review, background information about the proposed new legislation was made available and a parliamentary committee travelled around the country to listen to the public’s concerns.

Finally, after much consideration (and two parliamentary prorogues which required re-introducing the Act twice), a *Species at Risk Act* became law in 2003. While this legislation was not as powerful as I would have preferred, the final product attempted to strike a balance between diverse interests. To my mind, this was a reasonable way to develop legislation and solicit feedback from citizens. In fact, I would like to think, this is the Canadian way. What is happening now with the Omnibus Bill bears absolutely no resemblance to such a thoughtful or participatory process.

People like me who care about the environment have been characterized by Ministers in the Harper government as being radical environmentalists. We have also been told if we don’t support rapid development of the tar sands and export of its crude bitumen to Asia, we are working against the national interests of Canada. Silly me, I thought protecting the national

interests of Canada included ensuring a healthy environment for future generations of Canadians. More than ever, we need effective legislation to protect the environment and ensure corporations pay the full costs when they cause environmental damage such as oil spills. If not, future Canadians will be forced to pay the price either through living in a more polluted and damaged environment or funding the costs of environmental remediation. Consider what is happening in Howe Sound at the old Britannia mine site where the environmental cleanup to protect human health and restore fish habitat is costing millions. The mine owners who caused the pollution in the first place have taken their profits and are long gone; it is the current generation of taxpayers who are providing most of the cleanup costs.

I also find it abhorrent that, for many months, scientists who receive their paycheques from the federal government have not been allowed to speak freely to the public or the press whether it be on the topic of global warming, coastal fish farms or other timely topics. Whatever happened to free speech? Recently, the government announced they will shut down the world-renowned research in the Experimental Lakes Area in Northern Ontario to save \$2 million a year - yet their Omnibus Bill will allocate an additional \$8 million to Revenue Canada to investigate environmental groups that receive funds from American donors. What is wrong with this picture?

As evidence of growing concerns, a number of prominent environmental groups blacked out their websites on June 4. Citizens are beginning to gather at federal MP offices to protest the ominous direction the federal government is taking. Democracy works best when we all participate. Surely, there cannot be a more important time than now to speak up.