What if natives stop subsidizing Canada?

By DRU OJA JAY

Montreal - There is a prevailing myth that Canada’s native population is economically disadvantaged compared to the non-native population. This myth, though, is largely proclaimed and widely believed, is for the most part a myth. No one is really sure if the opposite is true. Indigenous peoples have been subsidizing Canada for a very long time. Natives have lived in Canada for centuries and are integral to the nation’s history. Many of Canada’s rivers, lakes, and streams are up to 10,000 square kilometers. For thousands of years, they have made continuous use of the land. They have never signed a treaty giving up their rights to the land. An estimated $100 million per year is spent on subsidies from their territory in the form of logging, hydroelectric dams, and recreational hunting and fishing. And yet the community lives in third-world conditions. A diesel generator provides power, few jobs are available, and families live in dilapidated bungalows. These are not the lifestyles of a community with a $100 million economy in its backyard. In some cases, governments are willing to subsidize their economies, for example, sending 50 fully-equipped not police from Montreal to break up a peaceful road blockade with tear gas and physical coercion.

Barriere Lake is subsidizing the logging industry, Canada, and the provincial government. The community isn’t asking for the subsidies to stop, just for some jobs and a say in how their traditional territories are used. They’ve been fighting for these demands for decades.

Attawapiskat has been in the news because their ongoing housing crisis came to the attention of the media in 2011 (MP Charlie Angus referred to the poverty-stricken community as ‘Haiti at 40 below’). More recently, Chief Theresa Spence made headlines for her hunger strike. The community is near James Bay, in Ontario’s far north. Right now, DeBeers is constructing a $1 billion mine on the territory of the First Nation. Anticipated revenues will top $6.7 billion. Currently, the Conservative government is subjecting the budget of the Cree to extensive scrutiny. But the total amount transferred to the First Nation since 2006–$90 million is little more than one percent of the anticipated mine’s revenues. As a percentage, that’s a little over half of Harper’s cut to GST.

Royalties from the mine do not go to the First Nation, but straight to the provincial government. The community has received some temporary jobs in the mine, and future generations will have to deal with the consequences of a gold open pit mine in their backyard.

Attawapiskat is subsidizing DeBeers, Canada and Ontario.

Lubbock strike

The Lubicon Cree, who never signed a treaty ceding their land rights, have waged a decades-long campaign for land rights. During this time, over $1 billion in oil and gas has been removed from their traditional territory. During the same period, the... (continued on page 2)

Rivers and lakes be damned: why Bill C-45 concerns us all

By STEPHANIE MERRILL

Fredericton - The Harper government has fundamentally changed the way the federal government involves itself in environmental oversight, essentially downgrading its responsibilities to provinces and the courts. Bill C-45, passed last December, and Bill C-38, passed last June, are the most significant changes to Canada’s environmental laws in more than a century. The changes that took decades, if not more than a century to build up. The Fisheries Act and the Navigable Waters Protection Act are the oldest and strongest pieces of environmental legislation in Canada with the latter dating back to the Canadian Constitution in 1882.

“Changes are an obvious trade-off between water and land protection to appease dirty oil and gas companies who are pressuring the federal government for relaxed regulations,” said Garry Guild, a Fredericton-based retired professional who says he never protested anything until fracking for shale gas came on his radar. Indeed, the amended or repealed legislations were actually requested by the oil and gas industry. In a letter recently obtained by Greenpeace Canada through an access to information request, the industry named six federal pieces of legislation that they felt should be reformed, cited as being “outdated” for focusing on “preventing bad things from happening rather than enabling responsible outcomes.”

Speculation among the conservation community is that what was left was something that overlapped the Migratory Birds Convention Act, Species at Risk Act, and the others.

The Harper government contends that the changes to the environmental laws are to reduce red tape on the legislative processes. Industry insists red tape is too costly. Costs of extreme resource extraction is not going to be the easy to reach conventional oil, gas, and minerals are gone. Industries like tar sands pipelines, shale gas fracking and open pit mining are beginning to infringe on the land and water of people live. Environmental reviews take time, so there’s no way to deal with the economic underdevelopment. Even if they oppose them, they’re potentially delaying approvals. For proponents of these projects, environmental laws, which in recent years have only become hoops to jump through, are adding increasing costs to projects that are presumed to be approved in the end.

William Amos, an environmental lawyer and Director of the Ecoculture Clinic at the University of Ottawa says that what is being proposed goes far beyond streamlined federal regulations.

“Canada’s paddlers, anglers, cottagers and outdoor recreation enthusiasts may be surprised to learn that their right to navigate favourite waterways will now need to be fought in the courts, at their own expense,” says Amos.

“Under the new Navigable Waters Protection Act, development in areas under 5.6% of lakes and rivers across Canada require no permit from Transport Canada. This has effectively gotten Transport Canada out of the business of enforcing Canadas’ centuries old right to navigate,” he added.

In New Brunswick, every single lake, river and stream, except for the lower portion of the Saint John River downstream of Matagami Dam, has been left off of the list under the new Navigation Protection Act. New Brunswick’s iconic Miramichi and Restigouche rivers now receive no federal oversight, nor do Grand Lake and the important smaller waterways like the Nashwaak, the Ashuapmushuan and those that support salmon spawning, canoe tripping and amazing vistas – and millions of dollars in government funding to the province.

While residents in many economically depressed regions in New Brunswick feel inclined to support extraction projects in hope that they will create jobs and spin-off benefits, many also see diminishing returns to themselves and their communities, not to mention environmental destruction that new technologies and the need for bigger and bigger projects pose.

About 200 people marched across Fredericton’s Westmorland Bridge to Old Government house, residence of Graydon Nicholas, New Brunswick’s Lieutenant Governor, to deliver letters to the group from the Queen. The march was part of a national day of action against federal Bill C-45. Photo by Tracy Glynn.

In New Brunswick, we have witnessed both the promises and the backlash to shale gas exploration, uranium mining, the downsizing of public lands with herbicides to convert our diverse forest into sterile plantations and other proposals that promised economic prosperity. It’s not much, Bill C-45 has brought Canadians from all walks of life together; Idle No More has united Canadians over a common love and concern for the future of our shared waters.

"Harper has gone too far. We are uniting across this province, natives and non-natives, in a battle to save our precious water," said Guild, who can be found raising his voice and a sign at the Idle No More actions in Fredericton.