Challenging NB Power’s use of “blood coal” from Colombia

By ABRAM LUTES

New Brunswick’s economy has long centered on resource extraction. Timber, mining, and oil and gas, significant contributors to the province’s GDP and exports, are all industries heavily supported by the public through provincial and federal tax breaks and direct subsidies.

While social movements and creative thinkers around the province are strategizing alternative means of economic life, generations of Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments and industry leaders have tied the New Brunswick economy to an extractivist model of development, especially in rural areas. To support this model, governments prioritize mining, drilling, quarrying, logging and transporting natural resources over other forms of economic activity such as community-based local development initiatives.

The community of Belledune in rural northern New Brunswick, which boasts a lead and zinc smelter, a phosphoric acid factory, a coal-fired power plant and a large port for exporting resource products, is exemplary of this model. The NB Power Belledune Generating Facility is the last coal-burning power plant in New Brunswick. According to information received by Colombian solidarity activists from NB Power in 2016, it sources its coal from two mines in Colombia owned by Glencore PLC, a multinational company that also owns the smelter in Belledune through its subsidiary Glencore Canada. When workers at the Belledune smelter went on strike on April 24, Glencore locked them out.

Tracy Glynn, a doctoral researcher with the RAVEN project at the University of New Brunswick, has worked with mining-affected communities and solidarity networks for two decades. Glynn is part of efforts to end NB Power’s reliance on “blood coal” from Colombia.

Blood coal is mined in a way that is extremely harmful to the health and well-being of the people and communities where their mines operate. According to research by Colombian solidarity activists, Glencore uses highly toxic chemicals like cyanide and mercury in its mining processes, which are released into soil and water, polluting the environment and affecting the health of the local population.

Glynn, Coon and others have been critical of NB Power’s use of “blood coal” from Colombia, highlighting the need for the province to phase out its reliance on coal. They argue that transitioning to renewable energy sources will not only reduce greenhouse gas emissions but also improve the health and well-being of communities affected by mining.

In June 2019, the government of New Brunswick announced plans to phase out coal by 2030. However, the plan has been met with criticism from environmental and labour activists, who argue that the transition should be managed in a way that protects workers, communities, and the environment.

St. Thomas University social work students working on refugee solidarity highlighted NB Power’s use of blood coal at the Belledune Fair in 2016. Photo by Rebekah Reid.

By Susan ONeill

Early on the cold and wet morning of June 14, a group of environmental activists gathered at the Saint John Convention Centre to protest the speech inside the building by Alberta premier, pipeline booster and union buster, Jason Kenney. Their political action contrasted sharply with the lack of climate action inside the New Brunswick Legislature on the same day.

The government moved to end the second session of its 58th Legislature and only return in November. Their inaction on the climate crisis is two months after the release of the Canada’s Changing Climate report and six weeks after reports living near the Wajahat-At (St. John River) experienced historic flooding for the second year in a row. The report confirmed that emissions from fossil fuels are creating the climate crisis and extreme weather events, while it urges Canadians to act immediately.

June 14 in the Legislature proved to be just as frustrating for environmental activists concerned about the spraying of glyphosate on public lands. Green Party leader David Coon attempted to extend the legislature sitting by calling for a climate emergency debate on the suitability of glyphosate this summer. Rather than extend the legislature for this debate, Daniel Guiral, the Speaker, a Liberal MLA, ruled that he did not view this as an emergency, and refused the request.

This week in June also provided many snapshots that together tell a story of inaction by most of our political leaders on the most urgent political, environmental, social and economic issue of our time: the climate crisis. The Liberal majority government conducted two rejection of a defeated renewable energy bill, political debates about if fracking is part of a transition to renewable energy.

On June 12, the Green Party’s bill to revise the Electricity Act to allow communities and First Nations to develop community renewable energy generation that had passed its second reading, was voted down in committee by the Progressive Conservative government and its allies, the People’s Alliance MLAs.

On June 13, the government presented its climate plan for the province. While it placed strong emphasis on energy efficiency and solar energy, and worked with a coalition of environmental and labour activists to do so. The plan was praised by environmental and labour activists but criticized by most of our political leaders on the most urgent political, economic and social issue of our time: the climate crisis.

The lack of climate action inside the province is two months after the release of the Canada’s Changing Climate report and six weeks after reports living near the Wajahat-At (St. John River) experienced historic flooding for the second year in a row. The report confirmed that emissions from fossil fuels are creating the climate crisis and extreme weather events, while it urges Canadians to act immediately.

Political action and inaction in New Brunswick on the climate crisis
When Kenney thanked Premier Higgs for his dedication to the dream of a national pipeline corridor, Milton rose and left the Legislature. The other Green Party members, David Coon and Kevin Arseneau, were also visibly absent during Kenney’s presentation. The government and People’s Alliance members gave Kenney a standing ovation.

Earlier in the day, in his speech to the Saint John Chamber of Commerce, Liberal Party leader Kevin Vickers called Jason Kenney “my good friend” and spoke in support of RAVEN - Rural Action and Voices for the Environment.

In 2006, University of New Brunswick researchers William Hare and Piers Defraigne linked what they called the Penobsquis fault line intersecting the Picadilly potash deposits south of Penobsquis in southern New Brunswick, though evidence was later abandoned without reference to the fault. Following EIA approval of the Picadilly Mine, Map MP2008-186A was subsequently revised in 2011, removing two of the three faults historically shown intersecting the Picadilly potash deposit. These questionable maneuvers were accomplished at a time when the province was committed to identifying all wetlands in the Penobsquis area were likely being depleted by the potash mine operations.

Exhibit C: Regulator re-defines wetlands to benefit J.D. Irving

In 2011, J.D. Irving registered a proposed peat harvesting operation in Juniper for an EIA. The EIA was required by the Clean Water Act and Clean Environment Act as the province has legislated the elusive and illusive Sisson Mine project. The proposed Sisson Mine in the Upper Nashwaak Watershed involves a massive open-pit tungsten and molybdenum mine along with a massive tailings pond more massive than the ill-fated pond at Mount Polley in British Columbia. Successful New Brunswick governments first procrastinated, and then ignored their obligations under the Clean Water Act. Governments were, and continue to be intimidated by the regulation as it empowers the local watershed populace to weigh the pros and cons of the mine project, and to decide the project’s fate. All of these actions reinforce the Ombudsperson’s warning that the illusion of safeguards without the regulation was and is “in some respects worse than having no regulation at all” and “like a smoke detector without batteries, [the regulation] provides no protection and may induce less vigilance. It appears to address and remedy a problem when in reality it does nothing of the sort.”

Cheryl Johnson is one of many residents in Upham concerned about the environmental assessment process for the Hammond River Holdings gypsum mine. Photo submitted.

Controversy over the proposed gypsum mine/quarry by J.D. Irving’s Hammond River Holdings near Upham in the Hammond River Watershed in southern New Brunswick has evoked confused and contradictory comments from the Department of Environment and Local Government. This ongoing drama has been the subject of several recent NB Co-op articles. The current situation is only the latest example of an entrenched history of industrial capture of New Brunswick’s provincial regulators, ostensibly mandated to protect the province’s people and environment.

In 2014, the provincial Ombudsperson Charles Murray issued a scathing report on the failure of the government’s Department of the Environment to implement one of the Vital regulations protecting the province’s clean water, the Water Classification Regulation of the Clean Water Act, Murray observed that the “complete ineffectiveness” of the regulation was and is “in some respects worse than having no regulation at all” and “like a smoke detector without batteries, [the regulation] provides no protection and may induce less vigilance. It appears to address and remedy a problem when in reality it does nothing of the sort.”

And so it is with too many of the province’s so called “regulatory safeguards” of the public interest and the environment. We have regulations on the books that give the appearance of regulatory vigilance, and we the taxpayers employ, at great expense, civil servants whose job it is to enforce those regulations. Yet, when push comes to shove, inevitably governments find ways to ignore, manipulate and abuse the very safeguards the public perceives as defending its own personal interests.

The responsibility for regulation primarily falls to specific departments depending on the act, e.g. the Department of the Environment has primary responsibility for enforcing the Clean Water Act, and the Clean Environment Act, and various inclusions of departments of natural resources and energy regulate Crown forests, and mineral and petroleum extraction. However, multiple departments ultimately hold collective responsibility for regulation through obligatory participation on technical review committees (TRC) that review all projects undergoing environmental impact assessment.

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process is designed to identify all possible negative impacts to the environment and to prevent a result from a proposed industrial development, and to ensure that proponents will have the ways, means and will to mitigate those impacts. Given the TRC oversight, when the regulatory system fails, it is systemic failure.

Exhibit A: Regulator employs double-speak to skirt EIA requirements

The aforementioned proposal by Hammond River Holdings to develop a gypsum mine in Upham is hampered by a troublesome “designated” or “regulated” wetland as re-defined in 2011. A fraction of a regulated wetland intersects the proposed project location. In typical fashion the province has seen fit to truncate and exempt the portion of the wetland that lies on the Hammond River Holding property. Unfortunately, the government cannot keep up with all its manipulation and manipulation of documents contradicts others on the state of affairs with regard to this wetland. Meanwhile the citizens of the Upham area are forced to contend with government doublespeak on whether an EIA is required or not.

Exhibit B: Regulator fiddles with data to benefit the potash mine operations.

Exhibit C: Regulator re-defines wetlands to benefit J.D. Irving

The NB Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op’s 10th Annual General Meeting at 5:00pm at the same venue. You must be a member to vote.

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us!