



# The Brief

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## While oil and gas companies report record profits, Higgs government abruptly cancels student benefit program

By DUNCAN MURRAY



**Juliet, a fourth-year student at Concordia University, pursuing a bachelor's degree in multimedia. She said EI-Connect saved her from a workplace where she was sexually harassed, overworked and underpaid.** Photo submitted.

A memo was passed to various government offices recently, denoting the impending ‘soft announcement’ of the cancellation of the NB-EI Connect program. This, at least, is what the Saint John Regional Office of the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training, and Labour claimed, upon probing them for answers about the decision.

To explain the program’s cancellation, the department cites New Brunswick as the only province that still offers such a program and the lack of workers available for vacant part-time jobs. The logic, one gathers, is that students who the NB-EI Connect program had previously funded will now work, with all their spare time, at the local fast-food place or gas station, where they will be pushed too hard and paid too little.

By funding students, the NB-EI Connect program has allowed thousands to attend post-secondary institutions that they would otherwise be unable to afford.

Ordinarily, individuals who work for a total of 420 hours within 12 months qualify for employment insurance. The typical university student is able to work this number of hours during the summer and apply for benefits as they study, allowing them to pay for rent, food, and other necessities. The NB-EI Connect program helped students who worked summer jobs access the employment insurance benefits they are entitled to. The abrupt dissolution of this program leaves students scrambling to consider how they will pay tuition, rent, and food – the prices of which are notably rising.

The cancellation comes when students’ futures are already decidedly grim. Inflation and tuition are at record highs, while the thought of owning a house is becoming more of a pipe dream than a realistic financial target. This is without mentioning the climate crisis, about which our concern rises with each UN report more forbidding than the last.

Depending on one’s perspective, they may take respite in the fact that it is not all bad for everyone. The announcement to cancel the program coincides with the economy for one particular industry having never been more profitable.

Excess profits in the oil and gas sector have been met unchallenged by our elected officials while many families are struggling to make ends meet – one of the great injustices of recent memory. Writing in *Business Insider*, Ben Winck and Madison Hoff detail how American energy companies are profiteering from the recent hikes at the pump. The exuberantly high gas prices are not solely a consequence of supply and demand. Rather, they are largely caused by the profiteering of the gas companies themselves.

Pertinently to New Brunswickers, the province’s richest man, Arthur Irving, the sole owner of Irving Oil Ltd., has seen his fortune increase by hundreds of millions this year, according to estimates from the Bloomberg Billionaires Index (Since the beginning of the pandemic, his wealth has fluctuated between approximately \$3.83 billion and \$9.23 billion). With these facts in mind, it is logical to assume Irving Oil’s finances are accumulating similarly to the American companies.

Unfortunately, calls to combat the contrasting fortunes between classes are falling, largely, on deaf ears. Like that implemented in several European countries, a one-time windfall tax on the oil and gas industry’s excessive profit has been proposed by NB Green Party leader David Coon. The idea of a windfall tax, however, has been met with a mixed appraisal. Coon says that he has received a lot of support. But from some of his colleagues in the Legislature, the proposal has been met with ridicule and contempt.

There are ways to fund the NB-EI Connect program; Higgs and his colleagues are choosing not to. The claim that this government cannot afford to pay for the program is patently false. Students should not be made to work arduously, balancing low-paying, part-time jobs with full-time studies, at a moment in time when both tuition costs and inflation have never been higher. Meanwhile, executives and shareholders in the oil and gas industry are lining the pockets of their already egregiously expensive trousers.

Duncan Murray is an undergraduate student at the University of Prince Edward Island, majoring in Psychology and Biology.

## “Continue to fight”: Moncton tenants

By DATA BRAINANTA

New Brunswick is considered one of the most unfair places for tenants in the country.

But tenants in the province are organizing and winning gains. Three Moncton tenants recently joined a national conference in Montreal aimed at addressing the housing crisis.

The New Brunswick chapter of ACORN (Association of Community Organization for Reform Now) sent its two co-chairs, Peter Jongeneelen and Vanessa Jones, and member Christina Francouer to ACORN’s national convention in Montreal, June 18-21.

With chapters across Canada, ACORN is a strong voice for tenants and people living on low incomes.

ACORN NB and other tenant advocates have been pushing for better tenant protection in New Brunswick, recently winning a rent cap.

However, the tenant advocacy groups say that the province needs to do more to address the housing crisis, including stopping renovictions, which allow landlords to evict tenants for renovations as a way to raise the rent.

The NB Media Co-op interviewed ACORN NB’s two co-chairs to learn more about the dire situation facing New Brunswick tenants, as well as the organization’s plan to address the housing crisis in the province.

**NB Media Co-op:** Tell me about the ACORN convention in Montreal that you attended.

**Peter Jongeneelen:** ACORN Canada is a multi-issue, membership-based community union of low- and moderate-income people. We believe that social and economic justice can best be achieved by building community power for change.

A big portion of the first day of convention involved ways to learn new campaign and planning skills through workshops and discussions on various issues.

The convention was attended by more than 200 ACORN members from BC, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, [and] Nova Scotia, including an Ottawa ACORN member who hails from Labrador. It was a fantastic opportunity to network.

Many participants did not realize how bad the lack of rent control in New Brunswick was. Throughout 2020 and early 2021, tenants here faced huge rent increases every three months of around 30 per cent, 50 per cent, 75 per cent, and sometimes even up to 100 per cent due to the lack of tenant protections, rent control and the ineffectiveness of the Residential Tenancies Tribunal (RTT).

**NBMC:** What were the issues being discussed at the convention and who were the speakers?

**Vanessa Jones:** The issues that were discussed were full rent control, disclosure of building owners, ending the tax exemptions of Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), banning acquisitions by financialized landlords (REITs), tying financialized landlord incentives to affordability and maintenance, and building social housing.



**NB ACORN co-chairs Peter Jongeneelen and Vanessa Jones taking part in a march against the financialization of housing in Montreal on June 21. The march went to the Public Sector Pension Investment Board’s headquarters to demand their divestment from Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs). ACORN organizers say that the financialization of housing is destroying affordable housing throughout Canada.** Photo by John Anderson/ACORN Canada.



# New Brunswick’s media coverage of small modular nuclear reactors silences Indigenous perspectives

By HARRISON DRESSLER

In June 2018, the Government of New Brunswick committed \$10 million to Moltex and ARC Canada, two engineering companies interested in developing untried small modular nuclear reactors (SMNRs) near the Point Lepreau Generating Station, southwest of Saint John.

New Brunswick, its energy grid, and over 700,000 citizens have become guinea pigs for the trial of SMNRs, aimed at revitalizing a failing nuclear industry.

After the announcement in 2018, a tsunami of think pieces, news releases, and editorials flooded the pages of New Brunswick’s mainstream English-language newspapers owned by Brunswick News: the *Telegraph-Journal* in Saint John, the *Daily Gleaner* in Fredericton, and the *Times & Transcript* in Moncton.

This summer, while undertaking an analysis of these newspapers’ coverage of SMNRs, it became incredibly clear that the owner of Brunswick News—then J.D. Irving, and since February, Postmedia—has treated the technology one-sidedly and with little regard for public consultation.

Between June 2018 and June 2022, these three papers published 230 articles that referred to small modular reactors. I know this because I searched for the articles, read them all, and classified them. After duplicate and redundant stories were removed from the initial sample, I was left with a total of 205 stories.

Of these 205 stories, only 18 articles featured discussions about SMNRs and Indigenous, First Nations, and Aboriginal issues. Of these 18 articles, only five cited Indigenous sources.

The obvious conclusion: reporters, journalists, and editors in New Brunswick’s mainstream English-language press have almost totally ignored Indigenous perspectives.

Brunswick News’ coverage of SMNRs, June 2018 to June 2022		
	Stories that reference SMNRs and Indigenous issues (%)	Stories that include Indigenous sources (%)
Pro-SMR	72.2%	7.7%
Neutral	5.6%	22.2%
Anti-SMR	22.2%	50%

After I had ranked the stories by theme, it became clear that the province’s journalists were relying on lopsided perspectives to tell the story of small modular reactors.

First, stories that offered a positive outlook on small modular reactors were published far more frequently than stories critical of the technology. In the former case, Indigenous sources were almost always absent. Indeed, a pro-SMNR coalition (comprised of actors drawn from the nuclear industry and government) included only three Indigenous sources in their 13 published articles on the topic, all of which favored the adoption of small modular reactors.

These articles championed small modular reactors as a way of providing employment opportunities for First Nations youth and working people. Yet only 7.7 per cent of the articles which treated small modular reactors favorably included quotations, paraphrases, or summaries sourced from Indigenous people.

Among the articles that discussed Indigenous issues while remaining critical of small modular reactors, half of them included sources from Indigenous people. Of course, this amounted to only two articles. This low number of articles reflects a profound bias on the part of the province’s mainstream press, in which only four articles that discussed Indigenous issues while remaining critical of the nuclear industry were published.

Clearly, New Brunswick’s mainstream newspapers have consistently favoured the opinions and motivations of the nuclear industry at the expense of Indigenous perspectives.

Despite being silenced in the media, Indigenous nations have continued to fiercely contest the development of small modular reactors throughout Canada and New Brunswick.

In June 2019, the Anishinabek Nation Chiefs-in-Assembly in Ontario endorsed a resolution stating their opposition to the construction of small modular reactors on their territory.

In March 2021, the Wolastoq Grand Council in New Brunswick released a resolution calling on the Government of Canada to halt any further funding of nuclear reactors at Point Lepreau.

Just last month, on May 10, the Peskotomuhkati nation and Mi’gma’we’l Tplu’taqnn Incorporated made interventions to the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, with the aim of shortening the length of NB Power’s proposed 25-year license of Point Lepreau.

Biased coverage of Indigenous issues is not new.

Historically, media coverage has facilitated the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands. In *Seeing Red: A History of Natives in Canadian Newspapers*, Mark Cronlund Anderson and Carmen Robertson write that “the press has never been non-partisan or strictly objective in Canada.”

“Colonialism has always thrived in Canada’s press,” they add.

In New Brunswick, a series of mergers and buyouts have made silencing Indigenous perspectives the norm in mainstream coverage. For decades, the J.D. Irving-owned Brunswick News conglomerate held a monopoly over news media in the province. Since February 2022, the Postmedia Network—66% owned by US-based Chatham Asset Management—has run the province’s three mainstream papers. As of yet, their lopsided, biased coverage of small modular reactors and Indigenous issues shows no signs of changing.

While analyzing the results of this study, I was reminded of an interview I had undertaken with Chief Hugh Akagi of the Peskotomuhkati Nation back in May. “Have my questions been answered on Small Modular Reactors?” he asked. “Absolutely not. I have met with their salespeople, but that’s not the same as meeting with expertise.”

“I often say there’s a difference between listening and hearing—one is just sound waves, and the other is if you’re actually digesting the material and doing something about it.”

As of yet, it looks as if the province’s newspapers, and the Canadian nuclear industry, are doing neither.

*Harrison Dressler is a researcher and writer working out of the Human Environments Workshop (HEW) funded by RAVEN. He writes on New Brunswick and Canadian history, labour, politics, and environmental activism.*

NB MEDIA CO-OP ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING & KEYNOTE



Wednesday, September 21. By Zoom.

5:00pm - Annual General Meeting

7:00pm - Keynote with **Emilie Nicolas**, a journalist, media commentator and anthropologist. Nicolas will discuss how the media covers stories about Black people—and how it can fix its coverage.

For more information, contact **info@nbmediacoop.org**.

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## “Continue to fight”:

A few notable speakers included John Cartwright, chairperson of the Council of Canadians who said that social justice groups and unions need to come together for a common cause. Marva Burnett, president of ACORN Canada, highlighted the need for low- and moderate-income people to be a powerful force of positive change. Senator Pierrette Ringette, a former resident of New Brunswick, spoke about the bill she introduced, Bill S-239, aimed at lowering the criminal interest rate from 60 per cent to 30 per cent to help the poor who often take on the most risky debt to pay for basic necessities. Marie-Josée Houle, the Federal Housing Advocate for Canada, talked about the need for more affordable housing.

**NBMC:** Can you tell us more about the protest that you participated in after the convention?

**Jongeneelen:** On the final day of the convention, more than 200 participants marched from Concordia University to the Public Sector Pension (PSP) Investment Board’s office in downtown Montreal for a sit-in until the President and CEO’s office agreed to meet us. We demanded that PSP divest from displacement and stop raising rents because homes are not assets.

**NBMC:** What is the key takeaway from the convention?

**Jongeneelen:** The key takeaway is the resolution to continue the fight for tenant rights of low- and moderate-income people and to make them a force of positive change for the future.

We will expand the campaign to end the housing crisis here by calling for the immediate implementation of a permanent rent control and renovation ban that aligns with the British Columbia Tenancy Act, the strongest against renovation in Canada, that protects and compensates tenants against needless eviction. This law was won by BC ACORN last year. Once we win this campaign here, we will begin to explore other avenues around tenant law reform on the provincial, federal and municipal levels.

We will also expand our campaign to end predatory banking, a key component of which is the implementation of postal banking as a low cost alternative to predatory lenders and the big five banks. Fifteen per cent of Canadians and a large portion of the rural population is underbanked, meaning they have no local bank easily available to them. New Brunswick’s Grand Manan, for example, is about to lose their only bank in late August.

Internet banking, while an option for rural Canadians, isn’t the greatest because rural Internet usage is sometimes limited during times of harsh weather. Postal banking will also keep rural postal delivery alive and can save post offices from cutbacks of essential services to rural areas.

**NBMC:** What are your ideas and plans for here in New Brunswick?

**Jongeneelen:** We need to have housing as a human right in our province. We also need more affordable housing and preserve what is left of it. We plan on making housing a future provincial and municipal election issue. Everyone deserves secure, safe and affordable housing.

We will not settle for half measures from the current Higgs’ government around housing legislation and social policy. We have all seen the reluctance of this government in improving the lives of seniors, the disabled, veterans, and others on low and moderate income. A prime example is the current New Brunswick government’s reluctance to implement rent control for 16 months and then making it only temporary for one year with weak renovation rules ending on January 1, 2023. This needs to change.

We intend to be a driving force for this change by demanding that Premier Blaine Higgs, Minister of Service New Brunswick Mary Wilson (who oversees the Residential Tenancies Tribunal), and Minister of Social Development Bruce Fitch improve housing and social policies.

Another goal is to force all of the political opposition parties to make housing a matter for debate in our provincial legislature. We need to remind our elected officials that the proper Maritime way is that we look out for and help each other, and to change the rhetoric from “profits over people” to “people before profits.”

In Nova Scotia, ACORN had a huge maritime victory last October with the extension of the two per cent rent cap. While they were at it, they got the newly elected Nova Scotia Premier Tim Houston to give cities inclusionary zoning powers as well.

A number of municipal ACORN chapters, such as in London, Ont., and in Halifax, are hard at it to win municipal landlord licensing and inclusionary zoning. They are calling on municipalities to require that 20 per cent of all new apartment construction be affordable housing.

The only way to achieve our goals is to continue to grow our membership while continuing to work in solidarity with our allies. We currently have close alliances within the Common Front for Social Justice, labour unions, the New Brunswick Coalition for Tenants Rights and the New Brunswick Coalition for People with Disabilities.

**Jones:** We need to work with allies to make New Brunswick and this country a better place for all. As a society we need to start taking care of the most vulnerable people and no one should be unhoused.

We should always remember to continue to fight. Housing is a human right!

*Data Brainanta is a permaculturalist-in-training with an interest in politics.*

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