

Premier Williams' broken promise - the Sandy Pond give-away

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Atop the hills above Long Harbour, Placentia Bay in Newfoundland, Sandy Pond is surrounded by a lush evergreen forest. This beautiful, pristine water body is teeming with a healthy population of large brook trout. America eels also visit the pond following heroic migrations from the distant Sargasso Sea.

During a recent visit with a friend from Germany, we observed signs of moose and fox and saw bald eagle, robins and gray jays. We enjoyed a magnificent afternoon in an idyllic setting. Sometimes, usually too often, we take these special places and experiences for granted. Sometimes we have to defend them.



Sandy Pond is at a tipping point. Sandy Pond is large 38 hectares in area and it's deep. Those features that make it attractive for wildlife also have made it attractive to Vale Inco as a dumping site for acid leaching waste from the nickel processing plant proposed for construction in Long Harbour. The company is planning to dump about 400,000 tonnes of stone pollution into the pond over the 15-year projected duration of the project. The Williams' government has accepted this proposal.

The rationale is that it is economically more viable to destroy Sandy Pond and kill every living thing in it than to require the company that will reap the environmental profits to build a costly artificial retaining pond. Yet we should not be surprised at the costs (investments) - constructive approaches are more expensive than destructive ones in the short-term. Constructive actions are also economically more sound in the long term as the history of our industrial developments has clearly shown time and time again.

The current environmental destruction-for-profit approach establishes a dangerous developmental precedent and strategy. Basic ethical questions need to be addressed. What value do we put on an aquatic ecosystem and the life that it nurtures? How much of our environment are we willing to destroy and kill to maximize corporate profits? If we can accept the destruction of Sandy Pond, what might we decide to destroy next, particularly if we are pressured by economic downturns?

We need to accept our responsibility and to embrace basic ethical principles to decide what is right and what is not. No one in Newfoundland or anyone elsewhere need ever apologize for demanding their birthrights to a clean unpolluted environment. Yet such demands are usually bastardized by developmental proponents as being anti-development. To appreciate the straight-forward resolution of this conflict, one need only acknowledge the Vale Inco Health, Safety and Environmental Policy "to contribute to the enhancement of the environment through activities such as the protection and improvement of biodiversity and responsible land use planning" (http://vinl.valeinco.com/PDFs/HSE_Policy.pdf). So let's get on with it.

Developmental proponents emphasize the job creation value of industrial progress. Yet too often the obvious employment benefits that would accrue to constructive rather than destructive industrial approaches are ignored. The longer term costs of health and societal costs virtually never flash on the radar screen, but this does nothing in actuality to diminish the burdens that will accrue if constructive approaches are skirted.

Under Canada's Fisheries Act it is illegal to dump toxic chemicals into fish-bearing waters. Owing to pressure from mining interests however, the Act's Metal Mining Effluent Regulation was amended in 2002 to allow lakes, ponds and other water bodies to be classified as "tailing impoundment areas." It's just a matter of a definition on a piece of paper! Newfoundland and Labrador is a Canadian leader in aquatic degradation by mining industries. The provincial and federal governments have cooperated to allow Aur Industries to pollute Trout Pond and Gill's Brook tributary in Buchans, Newfoundland as toxic containment sites. These were the first water bodies in Canada to be legally destroyed by mining effluent. These actions were precedent-setting and have led to numerous proposals by mining companies to dump toxins into natural fish-bearing water bodies across Canada rather than create containment sites. In the US, the deliberate pollution of natural fish-bearing lakes is illegal. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the Williams' government is employing third world environmental tactics in its promotion of global economic initiatives.

The Williams government's role in this give-away is of major environmental, economic and ethical proportions. Premier Williams has been highly successful in his economic ventures for Newfoundland and Labrador. Yet the environment is another and sadder story altogether.

From the outset of his term in office, Premier Williams has preached almost on a daily basis the importance of keeping a promise without compromise. He has looked every Newfoundlander and Labradorian in the eye and promised no more corporate give-aways. By the action of his government with respect to Sandy Pond in Long Harbour, Placentia Bay, he has demonstrated something else - that sometimes it depends ...

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