

Privilege and the Protection of the Grand Bank Ocean

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I am grateful for the opportunity to speak here today. It is rather humbling to meet with the Rotary Club and to acknowledge the many magnificent contributions that you make to our society - so many of which focus on health care and on helping the less privileged help themselves.

It is on privilege that I will try to focus much of what I say here today.

My very socially conscious daughter, Gioia, showed me a Chinese proverb yesterday in book that she is reading on food security. It read, "A person who has food and water has many problems. A person who has no food and water has only one."

Owing to the privileges that we have, it is both obvious and appropriate that we have many, many problems.

What turns privilege into honour is how privilege is used for greater well-being and good. The activity of the Rotary and of so many of you shine in this respect. Dennis (+ Susan) Knight have so inspired my daughter Gioia whom I just mentioned. John McNicholas's work with eye care issues and problems have been outstanding. It's a long list.

Because of the privileges that I have, there is often opportunity to make statements and some very modest efforts about environmental concerns and protection. Yet all too often for personal comfort, such effort involves being the conveyor of grim news or showing up to react when there is a disaster like current oil blowout in the Gulf of Mexico. Trust me, I have no intention of dwelling on back news for its own sake.

Yet it strikes me, how bad news really attracts our attention and appears to be our modus operandi. As a psychologist and biologist, I think that this could derive from some very basic human capacity to respond to emergency and disaster and to want to reach out to help. It is clear that the initial and most

powerful human responses to tragedy and disaster are assistance and compassion.

Yet some times bad news is just too much. Last Friday, I was driving a friend to the airport. There were 3 news stories on the radio – 1 – a woman shot her husband on a hunting trip apparently thinking he was a bear, 2 – a crime involving sexual exploitation, and 3 – a crime involving child abuse. This was followed by a grim weather report. I was thinking “where are we?”

Why aren't we interested that 6th grader Johnny Edwards at Beachy Cove Elementary got an “A” in math up from a “B-“ in the previous semester. For example –

CBC - “Wow, Johnny – how did you do it?”

Johnny - “My Mom told me I couldn't play hockey, if I didn't put in more time with my math studies and improve my grade.”

CBC – “Johnny – do you think that you discovered a new educational paradigm?”

“Well, I got a goal and an assist in my last game.”

CBC - “It just goes to show you can shoot goals in different games without taking any penalties. This is Raj reporting live at Beachy Cove School in Portugal Cove. Back to you Peter.

Peter - “Thanks Raj, this one's got legs, and we'll be following up in the days ahead”

Well, we just don't seem to be all that interested in those sorts of good news stories and human triumphs

So let's consider the ongoing oil blowout in the Gulf of Mexico. I will take this opportunity to contrast what is happening in the US with what is happening here in Canada and in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The long reach of the oil disaster struck home vividly for me in the images of the first oiled bird recovered – a heavily oiled gannet from eastern Canada, perhaps Cape St. Mary's or Bonaventure Island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

In the Gulf of Mexico, as here, major concern focuses on the damage oil can create when oil hits the shore. What we do not see and do not experience first hand does not bother us nearly as much as what we experience.

Often times when there are oil spills offshore, the initial reports are that there are no oiled birds. Yet these statements are usually made in the absence of evidence and more critically in the absence of an adequate search for evidence. This is a deadly serious problem to which I will return.

But first, there is another very important and basic piece of misinformation about what is ongoing in the Gulf of Mexico that needs to be corrected. What is happening is not an accident. It's an engineering error.

There is only one time that a blowout preventer is supposed to work. That is - when there is a blowout. The blow preventer of the Deepwater Horizon failed. Subsequent to this failure, the Remote Operating Vehicle back-up to the blowout preventer also failed. These are not accidents, and in order to address them appropriately they need to be assessed in their proper context.

There is an inevitable but too a large extent preventable uncertainty involved in these incredible engineering feats. To better assess these, the President of the United States has called a time out on offshore drilling until there is a better understanding of what went wrong. Keep in mind what went wrong did so in the face of confident assurances of low risk and little environmental concern from British Petroleum and from the Mines and Minerals Service, the regulator offshore drilling in the US.

In Canada and in Newfoundland and Labrador, we are drilling a well that is 2.6 km below the ocean surface. That is - 3000 feet deeper than the site of Deepwater Horizon in the Gulf of Mexico. A marvel of an engineering feat for sure, but what is the certainty that the highest level of engineering tolerances and backups are in place?

The ongoing drilling is not in the warm and relatively benign waters of the Gulf of Mexico but rather 430 km NE of Newfoundland in iceberg alley in the harsh and often unforgiving conditions of the North Atlantic Ocean.

This drilling is proceeding with assurances from Chevron, the Prime Minister, our Premier Williams, our Minister of Natural resources and the Canadian Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board (CNLOPB) of low risk and minimal environmental concern. On what basis are their assurances any more substantive than those offered by British Petroleum and the Mines and Mineral Service? Senator Carney of BC said on Tuesday that nothing has ever gone wrong in the offshore of Newfoundland and Labrador – a total fabrication presumably aimed to add to our assurances of minimal risk.

In terms of finding a solution, what can we do, to do better?

We have known from day 1 [before Hibernia came on line] – that in order to have legitimate assessment and accountability there has to be independent arms length observation and interrogation. It's not rocket science, it's common sense.

In a 1999 report commissioned by the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), colleagues of mine and I made this recommendation. It was not acted upon.

The Terra Nova Environmental Assessment Panel chaired by Dr. Leslie Harris and championed by Dr. Jon Lien made similar recommendations. They have not been acted upon.

In 2004 – 2005 research report for the Energy Board of Canada that involved support vessel surveys of seabirds to and from offshore platforms, my research associate and I pointed out the need for better protocols and even questioned if existing environmental protocols were being followed. As you might imagine, the report was poorly received by oil industry environmental consultants and the Environmental Affairs Officer of the CNLOPB made extraordinary requests that the emails in the report detailing these requests be removed. They were not. The requests and recommendations went unanswered.

So why is it that we do not have independent observers on platforms? Why are there no independent observers about the Stena Carron in the Orphan Basin? We know that self-reporting is the weakest form of regulation and accountability. That is why there are observers on fishing vessels and why there are independent auditors of economic expenditures by government, and so on.

Why is it that during the Terra Nova spill of November 2004, did the regulator, the CNLOPB, essentially reiterate the press releases of Petro-Canada?

In the US, the President has referred to the relationship between government regulator, the Mines and Mineral Service, and oil companies as too cozy. Cozy is an overstatement for what is going on here.

I could go on but I will spare you the details. Suffice it to say that you don't have to take my word for this. There are lots of voices and lots of evidence. Assessments can be made of the frequencies of surveillance flights over offshore platforms and over shipping lanes and how these have changed over time with the detection of oil slicks. Of course, CNLOPB does not release this information.

The regulatory body responsible for protecting the great Grand Bank Ocean of the Humpback Whales, the cod, the seals and seabirds, has created a systemic practice of covert information, self-reporting and self-monitoring by the industry.

As oil continues to gush in massive and unknown quantities into the Gulf of Mexico, the US has called a time out on offshore drilling. Here in Newfoundland and Labrador – we have not taken that precaution.

The lack of transparency and accountability about offshore oil activities in the great Grand Bank Ocean of the Humpback Whales, the cod, the seals and the seabirds has led us to a complacency and an erosion of public trust that is truly environmentally and life-threatening.

We know better. We have to act better

Let me conclude by saying that while the use of privilege can indeed be a honourable gesture, the misuse of privilege can in contrast indeed be criminal.

Thank you very much for your time.