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Aboriginal people defend the environment

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ABORIGINAL PEOPLE DEFEND THE ENVIRONMENT

I have long been of the opinion that our aboriginal brothers and sisters are the last bastion against the continuing assault of the petroleum and mining industries on nature. Yes, we need oil and minerals, but these industries have an abysmal record where the environment is concerned. The bottom line rules and environmental protection costs money, at least in the short term. I've found that the Aboriginal People's Television Network (APTN) covers environmental issues the mainstream networks miss. I recently watched an interview with residents of a Louisiana Gulf coast community in which the aftermath of the Gulf oil spill was discussed. The Gulf spill occurred on April 20, 2010 and continued to spew oil for three months. Two years later, the shrimp fishery in Louisiana is still decimated, oyster beds are wiped out, and entire communities are reduced to living on welfare. This is a subject about which I have written much (1, 2). One year after the spill, its psychological impact was evident. Depression, alcohol abuse and absenteeism from school were noted, as they had been after the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska (1). When I visited the eastern panhandle coast in 2011, some recovery was under way but much damage was still evident (2). Sadly, the spill has had a divisive effect on residents of the area. Those involved in the fisheries or tourism resented any activity, including pollution research, which might depict the area in an unfavourable light.

Current aboriginal concerns stem from the provisions of the omnibus bill C-45. Foremost of these concerns is the overhaul of the Navigable Waters Protection Act which removes environmental protection from all but 97 of the 32,000 lakes and rivers previously protected. This will allow unbridled industrial and urban development, threatening species at risk and the habitat for many more and possibly the water supplies of some communities. (It is worth noting that Canada has no national drinking water protection act.) Specifically, the proposed bridge over the Detroit River is exempted from the terms of the Environmental Protection Act, the Fisheries Act and the Species at Risk Act. The previous omnibus act, Bill C-38, exempted pipeline construction from the terms of the Environmental Protection Act, prompting native groups to oppose the Northern Gateway pipeline proposal. The pipeline is planned to traverse many native communities. The current omnibus bill led to the Idle No More movement, with peaceful protests across Canada. One of the major concerns is the total lack of consultation with first nations groups. One of the terms of C-45 changes the conditions of land management on reserves. Native lands can be sold by the government without any consultation.

This lack of consultation is the reason that Chief Theresa Spence of Attawapiskat is holding a hunger strike on Victoria Island in the Ottawa River, trying to convince Prime Minister Harper to meet with her as a prelude to holding meetings with aboriginal leaders. He has steadfastly refused, and also stated he will not be swayed by the protest movement. There are many legitimate questions concerning the \$96 million that has been poured into Attawapiskat where much housing is still substandard but some ride around in new pickup trucks with i-phones and i-

pads and the good houses may have 50” TV sets. Nonetheless, housing on reserves is a federal responsibility and conditions are generally abominable in reserves across the north. Many in Attawapiskat feel that the nearby DeBeers diamond mine is destroying the land. There is no revenue-sharing agreement with DeBeers although the reserve receives an unspecified annual payment from DeBeers (3, 4).

Occasionally letters to editors appear in newspapers decrying the lack of police interference with the technical lawbreaking aspects of protests. I would point out to the writers that civil disobedience has been an important part of the democratic process for over a century. Without it, unions would never have made the gains to protect workers that they did in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Without it, the march on Ottawa by work camp inmates in the ‘20s would not have occurred. And without it, the Americans might have been mired in a fruitless war in Viet Nam for much longer. These gains were often achieved in the face of armed, sometimes lethal, force. When a large segment of the population is virtually ignored by the elected government it has few other options.

REFERENCES

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