

Rough seas for NDP idealism at salmon farms

By [RALPH SURETTE](#)



Darrell MacNeil and his daughter Rory, 4, of Pleasant Harbour, show their opposition to open-net pen fish farming at the Atlantic Coalition for Aquaculture Reform meeting on June 4.

Environmental groups and the Ecology Action Centre say the NDP is not listening to concerns about the effects the salmon farming will have on the environment.



By not only endorsing but also financing the problematic open-net concept of salmon farming, and refusing to consider any logic but fast jobs no matter what the consequences, the Dexter government has set itself up for trouble, ignored the real opportunities at hand, and unleashed some serious tension within the NDP.

The latest group to be alarmed is none other than the lobster industry, which has been trying to open up markets in Asia based on the image of clean Nova Scotian water.

One exporter explained to me that the high-end Asian, particularly Chinese, consumers they're courting "don't eat their own seafood" precisely because their waters are so polluted by fish farming.

The Internet-borne word — based on either perception or reality — that the same thing is happening here could seriously damage those efforts. He said they're trying to get through the strangely deaf ear of the Dexter government, but don't want to make a public fuss, because a fuss just spreads the word. It's that delicate.

As for the big missed opportunity, it goes like this. Salmon farming is a problem worldwide, as pollution and disease spread with the chemical-laden industry's reckless expansion.

It's potentially more serious here than in places like Chile or Scotland because we have an inshore fishery flush up against the cages. But we also have world-class oceans and fisheries expertise at Dalhousie University and the Bedford Institute. The proper approach, as one insider puts it, would have been to use that expertise to pursue "a world-scale solution to a world-scale problem" right here, and export it.

To do that would have required a temporary moratorium on more open nets.

The party establishment, however, has its heels dug in. At the party convention a few weeks ago, the pro-moratorium forces were prepared to vote a resolution to that effect when the room filled up with MLAs and party staff to vote it down. That "drove a wedge deep, deep, deep into the party," says one angry insider.

There's background to this. Long-time party loyalists — notably environmentalists, community activists and so forth, plus some people I'm hearing from who have held posts in the party — expected to be heard but are shut out, and notably on the issue of economic development.

As the government ladles out big money to things like pulp mills and biomass, they're asking what's different in that from what we've been doing for 50 years in Nova Scotia?

One accuses the premier of being "Harper-like" in his refusal to take counsel. One thing that rankles is that Voluntary Economic Planning, the Stanfield-era board that interfaced between the public and government and had gained a positive reputation beyond these borders, was killed in favour of an online consultation system that these critics say has not been used.

Deputy Premier Frank Corbett was quoted at the time as saying, "If it's not in line with government thinking, why have it?" That is, indeed, Harper-like.

The government is blasé about all this, saying that social democratic governments always spawn disgruntled left wings. A spokesman for the premier points out that even Tommy Douglas was considered a sellout in his day and says the cabinet is pretty well studied up on all that.

But another voice from within says that even if that's a fact of life, the salmon-farm caper is still way over the top. It's not just the hundred or more groups and businesses from tourism, commercial fisheries, environmental, community and other sectors who are protesting the takeover of the coast by open-pen operations.

Significantly, the federal NDP, which wants communities to have a say as to whether they want salmon farms or not, and wants closed-pen systems developed, is unhappy that the province isn't listening.

For his pains, MP Peter Stoffer got the brush-off from Fisheries Minister Sterling Belliveau with the usual form letter about regulations being in place.

Meanwhile, the sub-headline on the front of Thursday's paper about new salmon sites in Shelburne County read "Environmental risk unlikely, Ottawa says."

Since "Ottawa" is busy destroying environmental regulations, its assurances should merely alarm us even more. By using "regulations" as cover for these operations, the Dexter government risks being linked to Harperism in more ways than one.

In political terms, the government is implying that its dissidents will stay in check because they'd have no one else to vote for anyway, which is likely true.

Neither the Liberals nor the Tories have any credibility on the issue of industrial giveaways in the pursuit of quick jobs, nor on the issue of salmon farms where they too support the floating pig farm concept. The irony here is that the NDP is not only the government but, on these issues, the opposition as well.

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