

## **End of Public Power in BC? That's where the Liberals are taking Hydro.**

By Rafe Mair

Published: May 12, 2008

TheTyee.ca

The B.C. government has blessed the proposal by the BC Transmission Corporation to put up transmission lines that Delta residents believe, based upon solid evidence, will pose a severe safety hazard in residential areas.

What is the BC Transmission Corporation? It is the spin-off from BC Hydro that the Campbell government spawned as part of the increasingly obvious plan to privatize BC Hydro.

The irony here is that the Tsawwassen victims of BCTC transmission lines are financing their own poison as their government feeds those lines by giving away their rivers and streams to private companies who alter their flows to generate power. Those companies then make a killing selling this power to BC Hydro and sending it over the heads of and into the bodies of the people of Tsawwassen!

What on earth can be in it for the Campbell government that they would take the risk of exposing citizens to serious health risks? Could it be for campaign funds from grateful corporate supporters or for right wing philosophical reasons?

### **Profits used to go to citizens**

The Campbell government is issuing water licenses for privately owned power plants on rivers and streams all over B.C., creating power. BC Hydro is compelled by the Campbell government to buy this power at a price that will bring enormous profits for the private producers.

Before the Campbell government took over, BC Hydro, a Crown corporation, produced and distributed 90 per cent of our power requirements, giving B.C. homeowners and industries the lowest power costs in North America.

When BC Hydro made money it went to the government as dividends providing money for schools, hospitals and the like. Under the Campbell government plan, we will pay amongst the highest costs in North America and all the profits will go to shareholders, most of whom don't even live here. Not only is this a license to print money, but the rivers and streams will be badly abused, fish will be at great risk, roads will be built and transmission lines erected and the wilderness will no longer be a wilderness.

These private companies aren't competing in the market place -- they are private monopolies on the dole, big time, from taxpayers' money.

Why would the Campbell government want to drive up the cost of electricity, give away taxpayer money to (mostly) huge private companies and desecrate the environment at the same time? Is it for campaign funds from grateful corporate supporters or for right wing philosophical reasons, or both?

### **Neutering local democracy**

All British Columbians have local governments to handle zoning, meaning that decisions are made by folks who work just down the road, so to speak. Why would the Campbell government take this power away from locally elected bodies and force residents to accept zoning that favours private monopolies? Again, is it for campaign funds from grateful corporate supporters or for right wing philosophical reasons, or both?

Until recently, the BC Utilities Commission had the power to examine power producing projects and provide the public with the information it needs to make an informed judgment. Thanks to Bill 15 that power is no longer there. Why would the Campbell government not want the people to know about such projects? Why would a government calling itself democratic deny democracy to the people affected by decisions taken?

One hesitates to suggest that the Campbell government puts the interests of corporations ahead of those of the people, but what is one to think? Could it be for campaign funds from grateful corporate supporters or for right wing philosophical reasons, or both?

## **Where's the oversight?**

The public is supposed to be protected against defilement of the environment by the Environmental Assessment Act but the EAA doesn't operate until the decision has been, to all intents and purposes, reached, and it has no power to stop even the most egregious of environmental insults.

The decision-making body is run by a Campbell government appointment and is seen, rightly in my view, as a very expensive locking of the barn door long after the horse is gone. Why wouldn't the Campbell government want the people it governs to have a full, impartial and fair environmental assessment process before any commitment was made? Does it have anything to do with campaign funds from grateful corporate supporters or for right wing philosophical reasons, or both?

## **Elected politicians hiding**

When citizens want to be heard, such as with the Eagleridge project, the many facets of the Gateway project, the proposed project on the Pitt River and the Delta transmission lines, why don't the government MLA and the environment minister show up at the meetings? I ask this because when I was B.C.'s environment minister many years ago, not only did I go to decidedly unfriendly meetings and listen, I toured the province inviting all and sundry to give me their views. Why wasn't Barry Penner, the environment minister, at any of the Eagleridge meetings, the Gateway meetings, the Pitt River meeting or the Tsawwassen rally against the transmission lines? All those meetings were in areas represented by a government member. Why were they never present? Can it be that they fear the loss of campaign funds from grateful corporate supporters or for right wing philosophical reasons, or both?

## **A mounting list**

I haven't dealt with the threat to Burns Bog, the immense danger exposed to wildlife in Delta and elsewhere, the impact on wildlife and the Agricultural land Reserve by the South Fraser Perimeter Road, which no one affected

wants, or the legitimate grievances of people in Kitimat, Terrace and surroundings who see Alcan forgetting about its promises to update the Kitimat smelter and build new ones so it can sell more and more of its power at an unconscionable profit to BC Hydro. Why is all this being done? Is it, perhaps, for campaign funds from grateful corporate supporters or for right wing philosophical reasons, or both?

When the Environment Ministry was set up by Premier Bill Bennett in 1975, the intention was that it acts as the policeman enforcing necessary and often tough environmental rules, yet Campbell government ministers of environment have publicly stated that their role is to help industry.

Is the Campbell government afraid it might offend corporate friends if tough rules are enforced by tough ministers?

Is the Campbell government perhaps ideologically married to the far right wing views of the Fraser Institute and Milton Friedman to such a degree that its decisions are not on the basis of doing good things but doing things that their philosophical god images say they should do?

### **Full disclosure: my new role**

I must, in fairness, state my position. I am an environmentalist and I have recently been named advisor to and spokesperson for the Save Our Rivers Society which stands four-square for public power and is opposed to the run of the river projects, which will do enormous environmental damage while slowly but very surely castrating BC Hydro by making it hostage to private monopolies.

Surely the road map is clear. The Campbell government has made it impossible for BC Hydro to increase its power except by buying from the environmentally destructive private companies who will put in the pockets of their shareholders unconscionable profits they will receive while driving up the cost of electricity to B.C. industry and to homeowners. In effect, the Campbell government has taken your money and given away your water so that private monopolies can export our energy, our environment and our money out of province driving our electricity costs sky high!

The Campbell government has privatized the running of its operation by a deal with Accenture. It has taken away Hydro's authority over transmission lines. And it has taken away Hydro's ability to meet future needs by placing all new power production in private hands. All but existing dams and Burrard Thermal will be in the hands of private monopolies -- thus ends public power in British Columbia.

My message, as I travel the province, will not be to support or otherwise any political party but to only support candidates of whatever stripe who stand firmly for public power and for the preservation of our rivers, streams and environment in general.

Does any candidate who does not stand on that ground deserve a single vote from anyone who loves their province?

### **A final question**

Last Tuesday I went to a press conference at the courthouse in Vancouver called by Alexandra Morton, the courageous scientist from the Broughton Archipelago, to announce that she and three other groups, the Area E Gillnetters Association, the Vessels Owners Association and the Wilderness Tourism Association, have filed a petition in the B.C. Supreme Court.

They seek a declaration that the federal government, in turning over the licensing and supervision of fish farms to the Province, breached the Canadian Constitution, which clearly states that the federal government has the exclusive power to regulate "seacoast and inland fisheries."

Now why that should need a court declaration, given the plain words of the Constitution, is beyond me. What is even more puzzling is why both governments continue policies certain to wipe out large runs of wild salmon. The science is irrefutable that this is happening and the public recognizes this.

Usually even the stupidest of governments -- and stupidity may be the best explanation -- don't do things like this unless there is a political reward in it. Is it for campaign funds from grateful corporate supporters or for right wing philosophical reasons?