

Fortis's power play in Belize

Building a hydro dam reveals the worst aspects of globalization

BY GREG MALONE

• TELEGRAM FORUM •

I have read the opinion of Eugene Conway in the Telegram Forum of Nov. 29, that the controversy surrounding the Fortis plan to put a dam in the Belizean rainforest is no different than Brigitte Bardot coming to Newfoundland to save the seals ("What's the cross between a macaw and a seal?").

In fact, Stan Marshall, CEO of Fortis, has used the same analogy, suggesting Fortis is no different than the poor sealers out to make a living.

The Newfoundlanders who went to the ice were poor, ill-equipped and desperate.

Few went to the ice who did not have to, and many did not return. The entire collective income of every sealer who went to the ice wouldn't come near the last quarter earnings of the Fortis corporation for sitting back and collecting our electric payments.

For anyone to pose with the Newfoundland sealer is misleading. Let me suggest another analogy: the Newfoundland fishers and the people of Belize.

No one in Newfoundland wanted to see the cod stocks depleted by foreign druggers and factory ships from as far away as Russia.

Would have helped cause

People in Newfoundland complained and protested about foreign overfishing for years. If a group of supporters from Europe or Russia had joined those Newfoundlanders and spoken up against foreign overfishing in Newfoundland waters, would we have told them to mind their own business, or would we have welcomed their sup-

port?

But why grope for imperfect analogies to understand what Fortis is trying to do in Belize when we have an almost exact comparison.

Fortis tried, in every way possible, to take control of Newfoundland and Labrador Hydro from the people of Newfoundland. First, they tried for a merger, and when that was stopped they tried for an outright buyout for \$300 million. What a bargain that would have been.

Great returns

Since then, Hydro has returned over \$400 million to the people of Newfoundland in dividends alone, not to mention reasonable rates for power.

The people of Newfoundland did not want Fortis to have Hydro and, with it, monopoly control over power generation and distribution in the province.

Fortis wasn't doing the ratepayers of Newfoundland any favours. They wanted to line their own pockets with a lucrative monopoly, but the people of Newfoundland realized this and stopped the sale.

Now, Fortis has gone to tiny Belize in hope of making another killing. They control power distribution in Belize, where they charge the highest rates in North and Central America to the poor Belizean people they claim to want to help. Now they want to take total control of power generation in Belize by building an expensive and destructive dam.

The people of Belize, just like the people here, or anywhere, do not want

a foreign multinational coming into their country and setting up a monopoly with their power. They don't want to be tied to Fortis with fixed rates over long terms, where they are forced to buy power from Fortis's dam, even though it's two or three times the price of other sources of power in the region.

And they especially do not want to be contractually obliged to buy power from Fortis's dam, even if the power is not generated and not delivered, as they now are obliged to do.

Mr. Marshall has not, and cannot, say his new dam will lower exorbitant Belizean electricity rates so that people in Belize without power will be able to afford it.

There are no advantages to be gained for the people of Belize by having Fortis gain monopoly control of their power. Fortis will be the winner there, and the people of Belize will be the loser.

Steep price tag for power

This is globalization at its worst. Fortis's greed comes at a terrible cost to the people, the animals and the environment of Belize. Their shameless exploitation of the Belizean people cries out for condemnation by people who know better.

People of Newfoundland know better. We have been around the block with Fortis and have saved our utility and our ratepayers from their greed.

I think we are in a unique position to support the people of Belize who know better, in their fight to save their country from Fortis's greed.

Greg Malone writes from St. John's.