

# On foreign interference in Belize

## Probe responds to Norris Hall on Chalillo

The *Guardian* has received information that the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has agreed to pay Agra Inc. a Toronto-based engineering firm, almost \$250,000 to produce a "project justification report" to justify construction of the Chalillo hydro dam in Belize.

This information was communicated to us by Grainne Ryder, Policy Director of Probe International of Canada. Ryder also shared his response to an article entitled "Persona Non Grata" written by Norris Hall. The response, we

address your concerns about their organization directly.

I take it your concern about Probe International's press advisory is that citizens outside Belize should not participate in the debate about the Chalillo dam in Belize. If that is the case, I suggest you look again at the current ownership structure of the Belize Electricity Limited and consider who indeed is "interfering" in the affairs of Belize and whose interests are being represented by the Chalillo project.

A Canadian company, Fortis Inc.,

ownership structure and the involvement of the Canadian International Development Agency, a taxpayer-backed agency.

Citizens groups in North America have every right to voice their concerns and opposition to a project that is designed, in our opinion, to benefit North American investors at the expense of the Belize environment and economy. As a Canadian citizens group, representing some 20,000 people across Canada, we exist to monitor how our tax dollars are used overseas and to assert our right to object to schemes we think are poor investments, environmentally destructive, and a poor reflection on Canadians in general.

That Fortis Inc. has somehow tapped our foreign aid budget to pay for a "project justification report" is, in our opinion, a gross abuse of public funds. We also note that Chalillo proponents may be appealing to international financing institutions such as the World Bank or Canada's Export Development Corporation for financing, in which case we will object to that also.

We have never claimed that con-



Hall still waving Chalillo Flag

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believe, is self-explanatory:

Dear Mr Hall: I have forwarded your document "Persona Non Grata" about NRDC and World Conservation politics to NRDC as it would be more appropriate for my colleagues at NRDC to

is the majority owner of Belize's national utility and a US company has a commercial interest in the existing Mollejon scheme. Like it or not, whether BEL decides to dam the Macal river is an international issue by virtue of BEL's

servation groups necessarily represent the interests of all citizens in Belize - nor do similar conservation groups in Canada claim to represent the interests of all Canadians — but it is within their right, and indeed they provide a service to all citizens in pointing out the environmental and economic risks posed by the Chalillo scheme. Such groups exist to advocate for the protection of wildlife - that their aims conflict with those of hydro developers is precisely why open debate is so critical for informed decision making.

For our part, Probe International is not trying to impose any standards or decisions on the people of Belize but at the same time neither can BEL impose its plans on Canadians. We think the Chalillo scheme is a loser, based on our years of investigating similar schemes around the world, and we can certainly object to the use of Canadian aid to help build it. We can also let others know why we think the dam should not be built.

We believe that Fortis Inc. will be hard pressed to come up with private capital for this scheme without government subsidies - clearly it has so little confidence in its scheme that it had to appeal to the Canadian government to pay for a "project justification" and another round of environmental reporting. Why is it, do you suppose, that one of Canada's wealthiest corporations is unwilling to foot the bill for Chalillo studies and yet Canadian taxpayers are forced to pay for them? We don't think Fortis should be at the public trough in Canada to cover its expenses in Belize. That is our position regardless of what Fortis is proposing to do in Belize.

Far be it from us to say whether citizens of Belize should support or oppose this project. That debate belongs to the people and organizations based in Belize. But at this stage, electricity rate-payers in Belize have not been given the right or the opportunity to choose nor does BEL appear interested in providing customers with a range of options.

Conservation organizations, meanwhile, appear to be encouraging public choice and debate in trying to bring all facts about the scheme to light. Any scheme that cannot withstand this sort of public scrutiny is suspect in my opinion, as are attempts to discredit Chalillo critics with charges of "foreign interference."

The *Guardian* contacted the office of the Honorary Consul to Canada and asked for confirmation of CIDA's funding for the "project justification report". A copy of Probe's information was forwarded, but at press time no response has been received.