

Canada must change way it approaches fisheries management

Because if we don't like the word change, then a word to the wise: we're going to like irrelevance even less.



BY DEREK BUTLER

ST. JOHN'S, NFLD.—I am compelled to respond to the opinion piece in the April 2, edition of *The Hill Times* pag. 18 titled, "Just the facts please, on Canada's fishery policy," by Herb Breau. On reading the piece, I am reminded of the quip from the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan: "You are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts." Unlike Breau, I support the analysis of the fishery by Brian Lee Crowley in his March 19, opinion column in *The Hill Times*, "Most successful fishing nations give fishers a right to a share of the catch before they go out to fish."

First, he suggests ITQs could not save the groundfish fishery. But the huge and historic collapse did not, as was suggested and implied, result from ITQs that were in place, because they were not in place, at least not across all fisheries. Their presence or absence in had no bearing on the collapse in question.

Second, he says we have had limited entry licensing for decades now, so the issue is not excessive participation in the fishery. But the federal Fisheries minister's control over licenses did not end decades ago. Hundreds of crab licenses were first temporary, and

then made permanent, introducing new capacity in that fishery in Atlantic Canada since the late 1990s. The same for shrimp, by a former minister in the current government in the past five years: more temporary licenses made permanent. Together these species represent 75 per cent or more of the landed value in Newfoundland and Labrador, and licenses were increased hand over fist to let people into the fishery, out of economic necessity. We have spread the poverty, not the wealth.

Now we are seeing the downside of those resources, and too much participation in the fisheries. That brings pressure to bear on the minister of the day to take into consideration the dire economic circumstances of many who "need fish." This is well-studied: too many people, not just "bigger engines," places undue pressure on resources and fisheries managers.

Third, he says change and ITQs have the downside of depopulating rural Atlantic Canada. But the region is already depopulating as a consequence of current fisheries policy, and the attempt to save rural Atlantic Canada via the fishery has been a colossal failure. Newfoundland and Labrador has the lower birth rate of any jurisdiction in North America, and the oldest population in Canada. That is what EI and a social fishery has achieved. Change it was is needed before it is completely dead. The evidence is incontrovertible.



Photograph by Jake Wright, *The Hill Times*

Fisheries policy: Fisheries and Oceans Minister Keith Ashfield.

Fourth, we should all take note when someone of this stature says the industry should be looked at through more than the lens of profit and loss. In the absence of profit and adequate margins, we cannot compete with the world. We do not have the margins to improve on quality, to do secondary and tertiary production, to

make the capital investments in enterprises and plants to keep the industry modern. Ask our competitors in Alaska, Iceland, or Norway if they will forego the profit option. Ask China, which is proving more competitive and innovative every day, while we languish with a social fishery, designed to qualify people and maximize EI

uptake versus response to market dynamics with a quality and healthy food protein.

Profit is not a bad word. It drives competition, quality, innovation and ingenuity. Our fishery could do with more of all of the above. Harvesters want profit just like processors, and just as we all should. Every business and enterprise must either profit, or stagnate. Profit, or subsidy. And subsidy, that is what has its costs.

And change is not a dirty word either. We must change the way we approach fisheries management in this country, and work for more sustainable fisheries management, both economically and ecologically.

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Derek Butler is executive director of the Association of Seafood Producers in Newfoundland and Labrador, and a sessional lecturer in political science at Memorial University in St. John's. He formerly worked in Ottawa with Foreign Affairs prior to working on the Hill for a number of parliamentarians in the late eighties/early nineties. Prior to working in the fishery, Mr. Butler worked in Africa and the Middle East—including Yemen, Morocco and Madagascar—for the Washington-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, managing democratic development programs.

*news@hilltimes.com
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