

Why the fishery continues to fail us

BY DEREK BUTLER

If you set it up like a boxing ring, and a bell rings, don't be surprised if a fight breaks out.

That pretty well sums up the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery. And the recent backlash against speculation on new plant processing licences once again highlights the dysfunctions and inadequacies of the current model of our ever-fragile industry — pitting plant workers against their union, harvesters against processors, community against community.

For 30 years now, the fishery has been one of chaos, disorganization and shutdowns. And wherever the need for reform and improvement — marketing, product quality, incomes, reduced seasons, harvesting capacity, plant overcapacity, secondary or tertiary processing — the structure itself stands in the way of progress.

In the words of one consultant in the business, "the industry is structured to under-perform." More precisely, "responsiveness to markets is highly constrained unless the industry has the structure and flexibility to deliver: consistent supply, consistent quality, stable pricing." Who said it? The consultant who recently wrote reports on both the crab and shrimp industries at the request of a meeting of Atlantic Canadian Fisheries ministers.

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And the chaos of our structure feeds the letters to the editors, fills the open lines and keeps CBC Radio's Fisheries Broadcast a top-rated program locally. Because we're all in the business? No, because the entertainment value is so good. It's like an accident: people can't help but stop and watch.

The industry as structured is premised on antagonism, at its very core. Courtrooms and Parliament are no different: two sides, two (at minimum) views of the world, and then the bell rings. Battlefields too.

It's easy enough to echo the need for leadership from industry players, as if there is much that anyone could do to resolve the contentious issues in the current structure. The John Lennon admonishment "make love, not war" looks great on a bumper sticker, but not on a battlefield. Not without the benefit of some of the best hallucinogenic aides so at least you won't feel the knife go in.

The fishery is not some smooth turn-

ing wheel that stakeholders are intent on throwing sticks into. It's a boxing ring, replete with rowdy spectators, respective corners, a weary referee, and a bell that rings all too often.

Easy enough for some to call for leadership from the industry itself. But when the call is drowned by the clanging of the bell — deadlines for price settlement, forced arbitration mechanisms, inadequate incomes, inconsistent public policy, ever-changing ground rules, a union that represents harvesters and plant workers, and processors engaged in chaotic and predatory raw material competition — don't be surprised when the two sides come out fighting.

We won't get it right 'til we change the structure, to the benefit of overregulated and burdened harvesters, impoverished plant workers struggling for a living wage, and overcapitalized processors engaged in predatory pricing wars. Not to mention beleaguered politicians and public policy managers wishing they could wake up and see the fog of war lift.

Fight? That's what's been asked of us, exclamations to the contrary notwithstanding. It's that old hockey adage, with the coach addressing his eager players in the dressing room. "Remember boys," he egged them on, "we're not here to play hockey."

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