

Letter in support of Burnt Church

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The Hon. Harbance Dhaliwal
Minister of Fisheries and Oceans
(613)995-2962

Dear Minister Dhaliwal,

I am writing to express my great dismay at the conduct exhibited by officials of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and by members of the Liberal government in regards to the community of Burnt Church.

The images captured of DFO boats endangering the lives of native fishers are like flashbacks to the worst moments of our history. The accounts by independent non-native observers of the DFO treatment of the elders and of the fishers of Burnt Church are yet more graphic and disturbing than those captured by the media: violent, disrespectful and irresponsible are the only ways to categorize the government's behavior. It is past time for the Canadian government to stop treating the indigenous peoples of this land as people to be vanquished, and to begin negotiating in good faith and with full respect of the rights of indigenous peoples as sovereign peoples.

Time and time again, the spokespeople of Burnt Church speak eloquently of the principals that they are defending: their right to regulate and use natural resources, their unceded rights as sovereign people. Their view is supported by the Marshall decision and by many lawyers who have commented on the posture of DFO and the Minister.

The Canadian government is not demonstrating good faith. Certainly, any legal decision has to then be interpreted and negotiated. However, it is not acceptable to cast blame on Burnt Church as irresponsible fishers for organizing their own regulatory regime. As a Canadian originally from Newfoundland, I cannot accept DFO's portrayal of itself as the only defender of the fisheries resource. The lobster fishery - like the cod, the crab and the capelin - has been managed in an unsustainable fashion. The impact on the lobster resource of the fishers in Burnt Church is minimal in relation to the overall fishery.

More importantly, I want to see the Canadian government accept the legitimate view of the residents of Burnt Church that they have a right to organize their own affairs and enter into negotiations with DFO as equals. Please stop behaving like a bully. A first step would be to consider quietly the list of possible mediators proposed by the community of Burnt Church, and to enter into negotiations.

Most sincerely,
Lisa Roberts