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A future for our forests — I don't think

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Since the provincial government released its "new vision" for the Crown Lands of New Brunswick, I have been asked by several people for my reaction. Fellow columnist Bill Clarke summarized it in his news story in last week's edition of The Tribune. However I felt then, and still do, that I hadn't said everything that I wanted to on the topic.

Back in 1999, the Department of Natural Resources and Energy released A Vision for New Brunswick Forests. That report recognized that the citizens of the province valued our forests for reasons other than as mere suppliers of raw materials for various mills. In fact, people indicated that direct economic utilization - in the forms of pulp or lumber - ranked only after several non extraction values: recreation, aesthetics, and conservation - in various forms - all received higher values. The report recommended that decisions concerning the future of the forests take these values into serious consideration.

Of course, the report was denounced by the Forest Industry who then commissioned the Jaakko Poyry report that recommended increased silvaculture investment (plantations), higher allowable annual cuts and all the other good things that are so important to it. Jaakko Poyry received enough negative reaction that the government empanelled a Select Commission of MLAs from both political parties to tour the province, conduct hearings and submit a final report. It did so, in September Of 2004. Much to the chagrin of the government itself and the industry, the Select Committee's findings mirrored almost exactly those findings of the DNRE report of five years earlier. It was time for round three: This time the government commissioned a couple of studies. Both the Roberts and the Hurdle Reports were submitted to government in the early fall.

Although both reports made every effort to remain neutral in presenting options, it became clear that writers of both reports were continuing to hear the same thing: people in this province do not want to see their forests hacked and chewed up any more than they have already been over the past seventy-five or so years.

The policy of ten days ago is tacitly admitting two things: One of them is that people still haven't gotten things right - in other words we still have not bought into industry's "vision" for more plantations, higher annual cuts, reduced conservation areas, and relaxed regulations about cutting in deer wintering areas, along stream and river banks, and in old-growth forests. The other thing is that because it seems that we are so stubborn in refusing to go along with industry's wishes, we are simply going to be ignored from here on. Government and industry, it seems, will have their own way. Three rounds of consultations have failed to get people to agree with them, so it is obvious that people cannot be counted upon to grant the wishes of the only ones who really matter. That, in turn, means that the government has decided that it has no other choice - the wishes of the true owners of the Crown Lands of New Brunswick will be simply ignored - Industry will rule. The government has so decreed.

This policy is no vision of a future that we can accept. On the contrary, it is nothing more than a poor, tired, cynical, and arrogant assertion of government power and industry greed.