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Who wants Jaakko Pöyry Lite?

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It's discouraging to those who try to go up against the almighty dollar in the public policy realm when their modest gains are eroded and even reversed. Such is the case with Premier Graham's new Crown forest policy.

Some readers will remember the controversy in the final years of the Bernard Lord government over a report commissioned by the forest industry (with public funding) from the Finnish consulting firm Jaakko Pöyry. The subject was how to extract as much commercial wood from our Crown forest as possible.

Not surprisingly, the company recommended that the natural forest be more 'intensively managed' to produce the kinds of trees the mills need at a faster rate. This would mean converting more of the mixed Acadian forest into industrial tree plantations and rolling back hard-won conservation measures that, according to scientists, still fall short of what is needed to protect watersheds and biodiversity.

The response from New Brunswickers was overwhelmingly negative. This forced the government to strike a legislative committee to hold public hearings into Crown forest management. People told the committee that industry already has too much control over the public forest, undermining private woodlots and the natural forest that they valued.

To its credit, the government listened to the public on this important matter of public policy and rejected the Jaakko Pöyry report. But while it was determined what not to do on Crown land, the question of what should be done remained. Bernard Lord then set up a task force, led by UNB forestry professor Tom Erdle and which included the divergent voices of J.D. Irving, Limited and the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, to develop options for Crown land management that met both public and industry goals.

This task force survived the change in government and continued its work. But something else also survived the change in government. Despite being rejected by the public and the Lord government, the Jaakko Pöyry report was back on the table. It made its first appearance in the infamous report of the Self-Sufficiency Task Force. Then the forestry task force was directed by the Natural Resources Minister to include Jaakko Pöyry as an option.

After two years of work, the task force delivered to the Minister its six possible options representing varying degrees of industrialization - plus a seventh, the Jaakko Pöyry option - with computer-modelled implications for biodiversity and wood supply for each one. This was supplemented by the results of a survey conducted by two social scientists, which once again revealed that the public wants its forest to be managed to protect biodiversity, watersheds, air quality, recreation and other natural features. Industrial wood supply is the public's lowest priority, even in forest-dependent communities.

With public opinion and computer-modelled options in hand, the government was well equipped to decide its Crown forest management policy. It may have been too optimistic to assume that Mr. Graham would choose the option that most closely reflected public values. But at least he might have come down somewhere between that and industry's favourite pick - striking a balance, so to speak.

Instead, the Premier rejected all six task force-generated options, and instead rolled out Jaakko Pöyry Lite. Only slightly less radical than the rejected original, the new forest management regime is more industry-oriented than any of the six task force options. It increases dramatically the conversion of natural

forest to industrial plantations, rolls back conservation rules in sensitive habitat zones, and allows more clear-cutting of the few remaining old growth stands.

With this announcement, Premier Graham has sent a very clear message to everyone who participated in good faith in the various public processes designed to come up with a plan for our public forest. It is that his government disrespects public opinion. It even disrespects a deliberate process designed to mediate divergent views and make public policy decisions transparent and accountable. Only one interest - industrial forestry - has his ear where the public forest is concerned.

Such situations create and deepen public cynicism towards government. People are willing to participate in public policy discussion. But they don't expect, nor do they have the capacity, to fight again battles already won. What they learn from this is that participation is a waste of time, and government does not engage in good faith.

The next time around they won't show up - a good thing in industry's view ,perhaps, but a serious blow to democracy.

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