

Privatizing the Ocean

by Silver Donald Cameron

ISLE MADAME, NS --

It is hard to conceive of privatizing the ocean. But then it must have been hard, once, to believe it possible to privatize the land.

Between 1723 and 1725, Daniel Defoe made 13 journeys through England, Scotland and Wales, publishing his account as *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*. He was well pleased with what he saw; not once did he even mention poverty. A century later, William Cobbett made a similar series of journeys, and he was appalled at the devastation of the rural countryside. Surveying a "once populous village," Cobbett found "all the indubitable marks of most melancholy decay" -- overgrown streets, fallen houses, abandoned inns, a deserted marketplace and, overall, "a picture of shabbiness scarcely to be equalled."

Between Defoe and Cobbett, England's economic output doubled, largely as the result of industrialization and large-scale agriculture. Great for "the economy," otherwise known as the wealthy -- but for most people life became immeasurably worse. One large factor was the Enclosure Acts, which privatized community land, subsuming village commons into large private farms. Like the Highland Clearances which depopulated Scotland, this vast land grab was perfectly legal, sanctioned by Parliament. But "Parliament" was the landowners: only male property-owners, amounting about one-fourteenth of the population, were even eligible to vote.

We are poised to repeat the same mistake in the oceans, surrendering our common heritage to further enrich the wealthy. This time the instruments are not fences and Acts of Parliament, but quotas and bureaucratic regulations. The motive is still greed, though the pretext is conservation. The operative device is usually called an Individual Transferable Quota -- an entitlement, which can be leased or sold, permitting the holder to catch a specified quantity of fish.

The implications of ITQs are explored at length in a report on *Privatization and Quota Licensing in Canada's Fisheries* just issued by the Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries. Advocates of ITQs -- chiefly fishing corporations, federal bureaucrats and economists, with some fishers -- argue that ITQs foster economic efficiency and also provide an incentive to conserve the fish stocks which, in effect, the operators own. That, plus the reduction in the number of fish harvesters, allows the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to save money on regulation and enforcement. ITQs are increasingly common world-wide; DFO loves the examples of Iceland and New Zealand, where they are the primary form of fisheries management. About 20% of Nova Scotia's fishing vessels operate under ITQs, and take about half of all the fish.

Opponents -- mainly conservationists, First Nations, scientists, community organizations, inshore fishers and fishing unions -- maintain that ITQs concentrate the fishery in the hands of footloose corporations, promote social inequality, strangle fishing communities, and encourage wasteful and destructive fishing. The very legality of ITQs is being challenged in a lawsuit against DFO by the Canadian Fishermen's Defence Society, headed by Sarah Huskison, the feisty mayor of Lockeport, NS. The suit contends that ITQs extinguish a public right to fish which goes back to the Magna Carta and can only be terminated by an Act of Parliament.

"ITQs could be useful if they were properly applied, but I don't think they've been thought through," says Senator Gerald Comeau, chair of the Senate committee. "One witness from New Zealand called them 'blackboard economics' -- they work on a blackboard, but in real life they create major long-term problems.

I have the sense they provided a quick and painless way to solve some financial problems at DFO.” A chilling thought, since DFO is still run by the same bright buttons who “managed” the Atlantic ground fishery into virtual extinction.

The Senate committee calls for a clear declaration of policy intentions from the federal government and a full Parliamentary debate. What is the role of ITQs? Will they extinguish the ancient right to fish? Is the fishery “the economic basis of a traditional Canadian way of life,” or just another industry? Meanwhile, the Senators want DFO to rein in its infatuation with ITQs, look more critically at Iceland and New Zealand, consider the interests of coastal communities and small-scale fishers, and cease to issue ITQs until Parliament has spoken.

Bravo, Senators. The stakes are immense. Midway between Defoe and Cobbett, Oliver Goldsmith also took some country walks, and he too was appalled. The result was his poignant masterpiece, *The Deserted Village*, which made its central point in one caustic couplet.

*Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.*

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