

The Second Anniversary of the Lahey Review: Looking Back with Regret

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Two years ago this month William Lahey presented the provincial government with a report highly critical of industrial forestry's impact on Nova Scotia's woodlands. A few weeks later the McNeill government announced that it accepted the review and its recommendations.

Since then there have been consultations on the more technical recommendations, but the key issue raised by Professor Lahey has been ignored.

He concluded that successive governments had allowed major interests in the industry to dominate the making of forest policy, serving their own ends at the cost of degrading our woodlands. To bring back the health of the forests he made 45 recommendations, all of them intended to give 'priority to the conservation and sustainable management of ecosystems and biodiversity.'

His many detailed proposals all rested on one important change. He called on the government to amend forest legislation...

...to ensure that its purpose clause encompasses and gives equal weight to the full range of the values (and uses) relevant to the management of Crown land...

Although Professor Lahey spoke of balancing economic, social and environmental values and objectives in forest policies and operations, he did not define those values further.

Nor has the government. It has been left to the public to sort out for itself what values should be incorporated in forest legislation. A handful come readily to mind.

The first is suggested by history. For centuries the Mi'qmaq lived in harmony with the forests. Recently Mi'qmaq leaders have urged governments to pay more attention to 'Netukulimk', a term that describes the natural bounty provided by the Creator for the self-support and well-being of the individual and the community by achieving adequate standards of community nutrition and economic well-being without jeopardizing the integrity, diversity or productivity of the environment.

The McNeill government has responded by recognizing Netukulimk in the Sustainable Development Goals Act as one of that act's five main underlying concepts. It would be consistent with that act and with the Lahey recommendation to make Netukulimk a key value and objective of Nova Scotia forest legislation.

A second set of values arises out of the crisis in biodiversity. Our record in maintaining healthy forests and healthy wildlife populations has been abysmal. As a recent decision in the Nova Scotia Supreme Court demonstrated, we have failed to carry out our own legislation intended to protect endangered species. Rampant clearcutting has contributed to the decline of flora and fauna, as have attempts by industrial foresters to convert our Acadian forests into the kind of boreal forests common in central Canada. It is imperative that revised forest legislation address these crises.

Nor can we ignore global warming. Surely by now we can recognize the peril wrought by our profligate assault on the world's resources. In fact, the McNeill government has done so in its recently enacted Coastal Protection Act. There it states that 'risk-informed decisions regarding development in coastal areas are an important part of climate change adaptation given the inevitability of relative sea-level rise, coastal flooding, storm surge and coastal erosion and their related impacts on the Province.'

The same precautions should be incorporated in forest legislation. After all, clearcutting here, and around the world, has contributed greatly to global warming. It should be largely abandoned and steps should be taken to ensure that the saplings now emerging in clearcuts should be allowed to grow to the point where they create the new canopy needed to mitigate global warming. It is appalling, for example, that the annual harvest levels of 244,405 metric tonnes allocated to WestFor in southwest Nova Scotia in 2017 were allowed to continue to this year, despite the Lahey review and the increasingly dire projections for climate change emanating from the International Panel.

Should forestry values have a place in this mix? Yes. But not the values that prevailed in the pulp and paper era. Those values, still to be found in current forest legislation, mandated increased wood production; even doubling production by 2025. We need to return to the stewardship to which many woodlot owners still adhere and that are celebrated annually in the Woodlot Owner of the Year awards. Government could do a great deal to promote this kind of stewardship by persuading forest contractors to exchange their heavy duty harvesters for smaller more flexible equipment and making selection management a routine part of the ecological forestry that Lahey recommended. Such steps would help to revive the local enterprises that once flourished in rural Nova Scotia and they would enable more modern enterprises, such as wilderness tourism, to flourish here.

Many who have been employed in industrial forestry are afraid that expanding the range of values endorsed in Nova Scotia's forest legislation would only further weaken their economic base. Nothing could be further from the truth. By embracing, stewardship and the philosophy of Netukkulimk, by addressing the crises in biodiversity and global warming, Nova Scotians could address our own crisis in the forest economy whilst attaining the prosperity envisaged in the Sustainable Development Goals Act.

In his resignation speech Premier McNeill spoke proudly of some of the initiatives he had taken. He also admitted that he had made mistakes. His failure to aggressively follow up on the Lahey review was one of those mistakes. Perhaps in the remaining months of his premiership he will rectify that mistake.