

OPINION / EDITORIAL | OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

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Cochrane Mayor Peter Politis | Cochrane, Ontario – October 21, 2013:

ONTARIO SACRIFICING THOUSANDS OF JOBS AND FAMILIES BY IGNORING FOREST SECTOR.

Few who understand the dynamics of the North would argue that diversification of the northern economy is both challenging and necessary. Few northerners would argue that the region we live in, that occupies 90% of the entire provincial land mass, is on a slippery slope to becoming little more than an uninhabited backyard for the well-intended, but misguided, southern voter to visit on occasion. What should be seen as a rare 21st century frontier of opportunity instead seems to have been reduced to a limited colony consumed by irrational extremism fuelled by what can seem like political cowardice and a society that loses its grip on sensibility at times.

Once again, as a Mayor fighting alongside many other Mayors to not only keep our way of life from falling into the abyss, but our entire future as a region as well, I'm left feeling frustrated over the lack of urgency or priority critical northern matters receive. Over the past few years, the government has forced several policies that were clearly intended on satisfying interests other than ours: the current disastrous Species At Risk legislation that has led to the catastrophic caribou conservation policy; the completely ill-conceived divestment of a critical northern asset in the ONTC; they closed ten parks (nine of which are in the north) regardless of some having double the occupancy rates they did four years ago; and they left northern citizens to deal with community safety associated to Black Bears through a website, while trivializing the importance of critical economy associated to sustainable hunts designed to keep Bear populations manageable.

As a result, my fear is history will tell us that we are witnessing one of the fastest deteriorations of both an important region to the Ontario economic turn around and an entire race of people. Let's review the current Caribou policy as a clear example. It sees half of the sustainable forests that have already been through some of the most rigorous environmental assessments in the world become sacrificed in order to "recover" Caribou where they used to live before people were here. Even though there are 2.8 million Caribou in Canada, our provincial government has allowed extremists to convince them that sacrificing entire communities between North Bay and Hearst in less than twenty years is acceptable in order to make this happen. Worse yet, the forest industry that forms a critical pillar in the northern economy, who has suffered through one of the worst downturns since the great depression, is now on the doorstep of a super cycle that will see the potential of tens of thousands of jobs develop in the region as soon as next year. The problem is the Province has tied up all that sustainable forest that would lead to this rare and critical benefit to tens of thousands of Ontario families, in order to "recover" Caribou where they lived before people were here. Unfortunately for Northern Ontario and Ontario at large, those jobs will be going to provinces who can supply this demand instead, like our sister province next door. Even though the Mayors have put a different approach on the table over two years ago that was built by them, scientists, environmentalists and industry together and would see a zone created where Caribou actually live today that we can apply the policy to, while balancing this out with focus on the socio-economic needs of the region elsewhere.

Curiously, while the province keeps creating optics around listening and holding the odd group discussion and committee, the fact is they have not changed the Forest Plans one iota since we started two years ago. – Reminds me of the ONTC where committees are created and suggestions that "other options" exist, but divestment continues full steam ahead.

There's dramatic irony in the old Midnight Oil song that asks, "How do we sleep while our beds are burning", isn't there?