

NAFO/Fishery treaty hurts resource, democracy, sovereignty

Written by Gerry Byrne, MP

Sunday, 15 August 2010 17:53 - Last Updated Tuesday, 24 August 2010 09:48

Also see Questions re NAFO posed in Senate by Senator Rompkey [here](#)

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A recent and widely noted University of British Columbia study shows many regional fishery management organizations around the world failing to halt dramatic declines of fish stocks. Atlantic Canadians already know firsthand about RFMO shortcomings.

After foreign trawlers fished down the original abundance of Atlantic cod, Canada set up its 200-mile limit in 1977.

The Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization came into place to manage “straddling stocks” at the edge of our zone and beyond, on the Nose and Tail of the Grand Banks.

The organization has a dismal record. Lax rules and poor cooperation have long prevented recovery of badly depleted species.

East coasters know that. But most of them and Canadians at large have never noted an alarming new possibility.

Foreign fleets could

return inside our 200-mile limit – with NAFO setting the rules. That’s partly thanks to some distant-water fishing states’ maneuverings in NAFO.

But it’s mostly thanks to the Harper government, which has weakened our fishery, our sovereignty, and our democracy in a single stroke.

This strange story unfolded mainly in international discussions hidden from public view. But it started in the 2006 election campaign, when the Conservatives promised “custodial management” – Canadian control outside 200 miles

– of the currently mismanaged stocks on the Nose and Tail of the Grand Banks. In power, they immediately abandoned that promise.

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Instead, they
said they
would reform NAFO
to achieve the same objective
.The European Union, which has been at this game a long time,
s
aid okay, we'll make some improvements in our current policies.

And they did, within limits.

NAFO countries agreed that ships accused of breaking rules should return to port immediately and face home-state authorities, rather than continuing to fish their whole planned trip as before.

This may be a genuine advance, if the agreement
isn't changed or evaded in the future
. Meantime, the EU said, why don't we write a new and better NAFO Convention?

Canadians had written the original one, absolutely ruling out any NAFO interference inside 200 miles. The first EU re-write said that "by consensus," NAFO could manage and control any fisheries it wanted inside
the Canadian
200 mile
zone.

Four former top executives of the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans waged a public campaign, primarily in Ottawa and Newfoundland and Labrador, against that presumptuous privilege. Following alarm in Newfoundland, the EU agreed that Canada could have a veto.

Canada
would have to explicitly agree to any NAFO management inside ou
r
zone. The ex-DFO opponents, familiar with international dealings, warned that this was an empty
concession
.

The Europeans – who now dominate NAFO – could offer Canada some favour
or withdraw some threat
on
the
straddling stocks, and in return
NAFO would get to manage
specific fisheries –

including privileges for foreign vessels and enforcement against Canadian vessels –
inside our zone. Then the dominos would topple.

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NAFO could end up managing fisheries not only on the broad Atlantic but in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Bay of Fundy, right up onto our beaches.

Last fall, the necessary treaty amendment was tabled in the House of Commons. Newfoundland and Labrador opposed it; Premier Danny Williams wrote to each and every premier as well as the Prime Minister.

The bipartisan Standing Senate Committee on Fisheries and Oceans urged delay and further study.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans called for rejection.

And the House of

Commons itself – our democratic heart – voted to reject the treaty. The very next day, the Harper government announced that they had approved it.

So much for Parliament, the resource, and sovereignty. All this caused little outcry outside Newfoundland and Labrador.

Which probably means we did too little to explain it.

And granted, the story has complications.

But the key question was obvious to the majority of MPs and a unanimous committee of Senate.

It would be just as obvious to any Canadian schoolchild.

Why should we open the 200-mile limit, for which coastal communities and our nation fought so hard, to any possibility of foreign management? Nobody has put forward a good answer.

The Harper government speaks of the promise of a new NAFO dispute-resolution procedure.

This smoke-and-mirrors provision of the new treaty should do no harm, but neither can it provide a true remedy for NAFO's ills.

And even if it did, that could have been achieved without giving away the keys to our 200-mile

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limit.Can the damage be undone?

Other countries must approve the treaty before it takes effect, which does provide some time.

The current federal government has reversed itself on other matters.

But given the government's willful blindness to date, that will never happen without a strong outpouring of public opinion.

If Canadians will take a good look at this treaty, its foolishness will become apparent, and opposition could make a difference.

TAGS: NAFO, Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization, sovereignty, overfishing, treaty amendments, sellout of Canadian interests, illegal fishing, foreign overfishing, EU overfishing, Parliament rejects treaty, government ignores Parliament, retired executives, Gerry Byrne, Premier Danny Williams

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