

TROUBLED WATERS IN FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

PRIVATE COMPANIES CASH IN ON FAILING WATER SYSTEMS

by Susan Howatt and Chief Garry John

The northern Ontario community of Kashechewan made headlines all over Canada in 2005, when its poor water quality and unsanitary conditions forced the evacuation of 1,000 of its residents. The Kashechewan crisis awoke the rest of Canada to a much larger problem: over 80 First Nations communities are currently under “boil water” advisories, and 21 are deemed to be at high risk for contamination.

URGENT NEEDS

First Nations communities fall under the jurisdiction of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). Federal funding has been inadequate to address the communities’ urgent drinking water and wastewater treatment needs. At the same time, First Nations communities are in desperate need of better infrastructure to deal with ongoing, long-term problems.

There has been some recognition of these needs. Minister of Indian Affairs Jim Prentice announced a \$450 million funding package in March, aimed at increasing the supply of safe drinking water and housing on reserves, and at improving educational outcomes and socio-economic conditions for Aboriginal women, children and families.

But despite Prentice’s pronouncements, the budget announcement didn’t allocate a specific portion of the funding package to water services. So it remains to be seen how much money will be directed to improving water infrastructure. This uncertainty leaves many communities vulnerable to the growing threat of privatization or public-private partnerships (P3s).



Chief Garry John leads a demonstration supporting the right to water, at the World Water Forum in Mexico City in March.

Courtesy of CUPE

In fact, private water companies are aggressively pursuing new “markets” in First Nations communities. In May 2006, Terasen Utilities – a natural gas company that has become one of Canada’s prominent water privateers – announced the creation of a new subsidiary, First Nations Utility Services.

Within days of Terasen’s announcement, INAC officials said that they would pursue new partnerships with the private sector to help upgrade infrastructure in First Nations communities. They also announced that they would establish a program, in co-operation with Terasen, to train and certify water workers.

WRONG DIRECTION

But is this the right course of action? We don’t think so. By allowing corporations to control water services in First Nations communities, the federal government will be abandoning responsibility for health and environmental concerns, for overseeing community employment and for keeping local costs low.

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) has always argued that self-government

is the key to unlocking the economic, social and political potential of First Nations people. Indeed, giving greater control to First Nations people is the first step in addressing the appalling living conditions in First Nations communities.

The federal government appears to be moving in this direction. This summer, the AFN, INAC and Health Canada struck a series of public hearings called Safe Water for First Nations. A newly formed “expert panel” travelled across the country to hear from the public. The panel was investigating options for a new regulatory regime for First Nations water systems and services. Its recommendations will detail how money could be allocated to communities, along with requirements for testing, design codes, certification and training.

However, it is not reassuring to realize that the chair of the panel, Dr. Harry Swain, is widely known as a supporter of privatization of water services.

While we haven’t yet seen the panel’s recommendations, the private sector’s growing interest in First Nations communities is cause for concern. First Nations’ water systems have indeed been starved of resources and attention. But the answer is not to carve out a space for the private sector. First Nations people deserve publicly administered and managed water systems that remain accountable to the community. Water is a basic human right, not a commodity to be delivered on a for-profit basis.

For more information on the Council of Canadians’ campaign to protect public water, check out www.canadians.org, or call 1-800-387-7177.

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