

# CANADA'S SHAMEFUL POSITION ON THE RIGHT TO WATER

By Anil Naidoo

Once again, on the international stage, the Canadian government has played the role of the bully on human rights, challenging other countries, standing firm and articulating a lonely position.

Does this sound like the other times Canada has stood out on human rights and social justice issues? Is it similar to when we stood alone on banning landmines, securing an international treaty? Or when we asked others to join us on the expanded idea of United Nations peacekeeping? No, unfortunately, this time is much different. Today, Canada isn't being praised for its courage. Instead, our country is being criticized for its obstinacy.

Canada is blocking recognition of the human right to water – an issue that affects billions of people who live without access to safe, clean water. Canada first took this position in 2002 in a vote at the Human Rights Commission. In March, our country confirmed its stance at the new Human Rights Council by leading the efforts to gut a resolution on the right to water.

Why would Canada, a country blessed by more than our share of water and an international reputation for supporting human rights, take this stand? We have few supporters on this at the international level, beyond the United States.

Simply put, the Canadian government argues that acknowledging the human right to water would result in a loss of sovereign control over our resources, and lead to water exports to the United States. There is absolutely no basis for this argument, and the UN resolution that Canada fought hard against – and in the end successfully weakened – explicitly stated that it



did not relate to transboundary water issues.

The reality is that the greatest risk to our water has always been trade agreements such as NAFTA, which do entrench this position and limit our ability to block transboundary water transfers.

Supporting the human right to water does not increase the risk of imposed water exports. In fact, it does the opposite, because the U.S. has not even signed the UN Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, the main international treaty that encompasses the human right to water. The U.S. rarely acknowledges any international human rights instruments, so the U.S. government would be hard pressed to invoke them to make a claim on Canadian water.

As the largest per capita user of water in the world, the U.S. could also not claim water scarcity as a human rights issue. In the United States, water use is unsustainable because of huge drains on ancient aquifers and because massive cities have been built in deserts. The

U.S. has more than enough water for personal and domestic uses, which is all that the human right to water covenant considers.

Beyond removing water from all trade agreements – something the Council of Canadians has consistently called for – the provision of water as a human right, coupled with recognition of water as part of the commons and a public trust, would go the farthest toward protecting Canadian water and lead to the equitable and sustainable use of our water.

Canada has very clear obligations to human rights and stewardship that we are not meeting. If Canada does not address the lack of planning, poor management and outright abuse of our water, we will soon find ourselves in a situation similar to that of other countries that do not have the same access to water we currently enjoy. For many suffering boil-water advisories, or who have lived through water crises like Walkerton, or the ongoing struggle for clean water in our Native communities, the reality of not having access to clean water is not some future prospect. The Great Lakes are under threat, the glaciers are disappearing and drought is more than something your grandparents talked about.

We must respect the human right to water and implement a national water policy if we are to protect water in Canada for future generations. Without dealing with these fundamental inconsistencies related to our denial of the human right to water, this will continue to be a stain on our international reputation.

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