

WRITTEN BY MARK CALZAVARA

INCREASED CLIMATE IMPACTS REQUIRE ACTION, NOT PRIVATIZATION

Defending water from privatization, overextraction and pollution has long been central to the Council of Canadians campaigns. Alongside our many allies and supporters, we have managed to successfully oppose corporations seeking to profit from commodifying water and resist their relentless attempts to undermine protections for water that might reduce corporate revenue. We have alerted people to the dangers of privatizing water services, we have directly supported communities in their battles to protect local water sources from irresponsible development, and we have constantly reminded our governments that we cannot treat water like a commodity to be bought, sold, and traded for profit.

Now, it is clear that the impacts of climate change are happening much faster than most experts predicted. Weather conditions and events once considered extreme or exceptional are occurring with startling frequency, impacting every aspect of our lives—including our water sources. We must drastically reduce our emissions to avoid absolute catastrophe, but even a reduction to zero overnight will not save us from the extreme weather that past emissions have set in motion.

In the face of such an overwhelming situation, it would be easy to give up, but that would be a terrible and unconscionable decision. We must redouble our efforts to mitigate climate change by reducing our emissions. And we must also make our communities as resilient as possible by protecting both the natural water infrastructure (like rivers, lakes, wetlands, green belts, and groundwater recharge areas) and the infrastructure we have built to provide our drinking water, treat our sewage, and manage stormwater.

Our built infrastructure has been made acutely vulnerable due to a decades long failure to invest in maintaining the proper function and capacity of these systems. According to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Canada faces a deficit of more than \$100 billion to repair and replace neglected water infrastructure.

The impacts of this deficit are already being felt. Last year, Iqaluit, the capital city of Nunavut, had to shut down its decrepit tap water treatment and distribution systems for months due to toxic chemical infiltration. Across Canada, municipal water systems lose between 10 and 40 per cent of the water they treat through leaking pipes. Our built water infrastructure will be stressed like never before by extreme weather events. This August, Iqaluit declared a state of emergency

due to their worst drought in 40 years. Many communities may not be viable unless significant investments are made in their vulnerable water infrastructure immediately.

The massive infrastructure deficit is largely due to neoconservative governments creating a crisis through austerity so they can push for the privatization of our public assets as the solution. But report after report from independent auditors and budget oversight committees all over the world have shown that privatization costs more and delivers less in the long term. Privatization proponents are constantly inventing new schemes (or renaming old schemes) as they attempt to con their way into publicly controlled sectors such as essential infrastructure, healthcare, education, government services, and more.

In Canada, the public has become wary of allowing private corporations a clear monopoly over essentials like drinking water. Now, instead of straight privatization, our cash strapped municipalities are told that Public Private Partnerships (P3s) are the solution for urgently needed infrastructure upgrades, promising the efficiency of the private sector while allowing the public to own (eventually) the infrastructure in question. P3s take many different forms but they all have one overarching goal—to maximize profit for the private sector.

PUTTING OUR EGGS IN THE WRONG BASKET

Despite the discreditable track record of P3s world-wide, the Trudeau government continues to embrace the concept. In 2017, they established the Canadian Infrastructure Bank (CIB) with \$35 billion in federal funding intended to create and finance more P3 deals



between governments and the private sector. In 2020, the CIB tried to launch a \$20 million pilot project to finance water infrastructure in Mapleton, ON, but the deal collapsed under public scrutiny generated by the Council of Canadians and CUPE. To date, the CIB has failed to establish a single water infrastructure P3, but they have not given up.

Earlier this year, the Parliamentary Committee tasked with performing a five-year review of the CIB made one recommendation: to disband the CIB. We agree. The money being funneled through the CIB would be more efficiently deployed as simple, low interest loans or grants for municipalities to fix their infrastructure. This would be cheaper, faster, and more transparent than the failed CIB boondoggle. The federal government understands this. In April they committed \$214 million to solve Iqaluit's water infrastructure problems in the next four years. No P3s, no delays, no crushing debt for Iqaluit. This is good governance.

PROTECTING THE FOUNDATIONS

A robust and resilient water infrastructure also requires that we protect the critical natural water infrastructure at its foundation. This natural infrastructure has always been under pressure from urban sprawl and industrial development, but there has been a resurgence in efforts to strip away the few protections that exist in the name of short-term profit.

In Ontario, the Ford government has made unprecedented use of Ministerial Zoning Orders to force through destructive highway expansions and low-density urban sprawl. His government has eliminated what little power and influence Ontario's Conservation Authorities had to protect our rivers and floodplains and the Ontario Greenbelt is under constant threat from Ford and his developer friends.

Things are no better in Alberta where the provincial government is prioritizing coal mine development over the protection of rivers flowing out of the Rocky Mountains—rivers already deeply affected by climate change. Alberta also wants to drain the toxic contents of the tar sands tailings ponds into the Athabasca River and is pressuring the federal government to allow this on behalf of the fossil fuel industry.



In British Columbia, despite recently experiencing some of the worst flooding, forest fires, extreme temperatures, and drought in the province's history over a period of just a few months, the provincial government continues to spend billions subsidizing economic activity that destroys the natural infrastructure protecting communities from the effects of extreme weather. Clearcutting in vulnerable watersheds, fracking for more natural gas, destroying river valleys for unnecessary hydro dams—it is business as usual, and it makes us even more vulnerable.

We are allowing a “death by a thousand cuts” for the natural water infrastructure and the water infrastructure we have built. Both are critical for the long-term health of our communities. Extreme weather events due to climate change, like the forest fire that levelled the village of Lytton, B.C., last summer, or the powerful storm that struck southern Ontario in May, killing 10 and

leaving tens of thousands without power for days, will almost certainly become more frequent and more harmful.

We can protect our water. We can prepare our infrastructure to better withstand extreme weather. Building public transit will allow us to restore green spaces. Restoring lost wetlands reduces pollution and protects from flooding. Stopping urban sprawl reduces emissions while also protecting our water and food supply. These are actions we can take now to mitigate and protect our communities from the inevitable impacts of climate change. They are collective solutions, public solutions, solutions that are rooted in our interdependence and duty to care for one another, the environment, our commons. We must not waste any more time on false solutions like privatization. **CP**

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