

District Convention Tuesday, March 19th

The primary focus of District One this past year has been centered on the ever increasing intensity of the land grab on Prince Edward Island. Land grabbing, has become a world-wide phenomenon that is threatening to alter the current and future economic and political independence, as well as social stability, of numerous world jurisdictions.

The history of Prince Edward Island is steeped in the land question. It has been an ongoing fight for generations of Islanders to have the right to own and control the Island's primary resource – the land.

Because of a man of foresight in the person of Angus MacLean, and those who surrounded him, the 1982 Lands Protections Act was legislated to protect Island land from off-Island and corporate ownership. But MacLean's insight was greater than the passing of provincial legislation. He ensured that the right of Islanders to determine the ownership of their limited primary resource for current and future generations was part of the Canadian Constitution. MacLean gave to Islanders the Gift of Jurisdiction.

If MacLean's legacy was being honoured the current land grab would be a non-issue for Islanders. But from the moment the legislation was passed there were those with self-interest who set about to undermine the act's spirit and intent of preventing large consolidations of Island land holdings to outside individual, corporate, and state interests, as well as prevent processors from being in direct competition with farmers in crop production, and to prevent the ownership of our shore frontage by non-Islanders.

MacLean's foresight has been an irritant for many. They have searched and found the loopholes in the legislation for their self interest, and successive governments have signed away our gift of jurisdiction while maintaining the letter of the law is being carried out.

Suddenly there is a realization by many that the Island is at a crisis point in the land grab. For the past thirty years the NFU has been sounding the alarm bell that the violation of the spirit and intent of the Lands Protections Act has been a simmering pot placed on a side burner by Island governments. Now the pot is boiling over and the damage caused by the scalding liquid is rolling across the stove top. We are seeing what ignoring the intent of the act for almost forty years has brought us.

There are those who say the Lands Protections Act no longer fits the times of a free marketplace that is consistently ensuring that farming continues on the path of becoming fewer, ever increasing large scale operations, of which some operate as vertical integrated corporations. They believe the act should be pushed aside and let the marketplace unfold as it will.

The NFU argues such ideology is leading to a monopoly on food production, processing, distribution, and land resource ownership by an elite few. We argue such support is leading to the demise of the health of the land itself as it is forced to overproduce for the corporate bottom line. The very viability of the land itself is at risk, as is our water

supply, which is essential to life for every species. The infrastructure and social vitality of rural communities is being destroyed.

So based on that belief the NFU believes the need for the Land Protections Act has never been greater. The ideology or belief behind the act has never held more importance when it comes to protecting our economic, political and social stability than currently. Instead of moving away from the act, it needs to be strengthened, and it needs to be honoured.

The only way governments will do so is if the people demanded it. Unfortunately many of our citizens now live in urban PEI and have lost that direct link to the land and with it the knowledge of food production. But they do relate to water. They need to be informed that the accessibility and quantity and quality of Island water are tied to the health of the land. Also perhaps spirit and intent are too vague a concept for people to fully grasp. Perhaps they should be replaced by the word ideology, or belief.

Successive Island governments, and many individuals, have bought into the ideology of corporations who play the politics of fear game. I ask our Island politicians, is handing over our primary resources a fair return on a small percentage of jobs or capital investment? Governments seem to forget corporations are about making profit, not building sustainable social systems for the greater good. Politicians of all stripes and the governing party need to gain an understanding of the ideology of the Lands Protection Act. They need to educate themselves on the belief of the act not just hide behind the laws, which they have not strengthened. It needs to be remembered here that executive

council does make the final decision on a land transaction. Both the minister and cabinet have a great deal of power. They need to remember they represent Islanders, not corporations, and not off-Island investment.

It is apparent more is needed alongside the Land Protections Act to protect our land for the good of Islanders. Forward, innovative, outside the box, thinking is needed as Islanders look for additional ways to protect our land ownership, and productivity to ensure food production and stability on our Food Island for both current and future generations. Land banking is one viable option that can work to protect our land and make it accessible to current and future farmers.

Its time our Island government started investing in Islanders rather than in corporations and foreign interests. Yes, it takes money. But just last week the Island government loaned 4.5 million to an Island corporation to make capital equipment purchases. Considering the named corporation, it is not likely a bank loan was an issue. If that same 4.5 million dollars had been used to buy Island farm land at an average price of three thousand dollars, approximately 1500 acres could have been bought, banked in a land bank, and rented back, at the going rental rate, to individual farmers, who yes, do create jobs and keep rural communities intact. Not only would it be a sound economic investment, but it would be an investment in Islanders and their futures. Our government should be able to see that if outside interests are so eager to grab up our land, it is a valuable investment. They should be making the investment to protect our land in

whatever ways necessary. The NFU is sure Islanders working together can come up with other productive solutions.

Island politicians of all parties have not addressed the land grab issue happening on PEI. The NFU would argue some have even stood in the way of its enactment. While time is running out, hopefully some of the wrong can be undone as Islanders lay claim once again to their land. Strong, creative governmental leadership is needed now. We are going into an election. The land grab issue needs to be front and centre and only Island voters can put it there. The two land forums the NFU has held in recent months' shows awareness and concern is growing. We need to keep putting the truth out to people so they in turn can start questioning those running for election and asking for accountability on the issue from them. We need to increase the discussion among Islanders for solutions on putting a stop to the land grab on PEI, and making it an accessible resource for Islanders.

Standing against the land grab, large land consolidation, unfair practices of corporations is not about keeping legitimate people out of PEI. It is about ensuring Islanders can live in their own province, and afford to own, work, and care for the land, and water.

