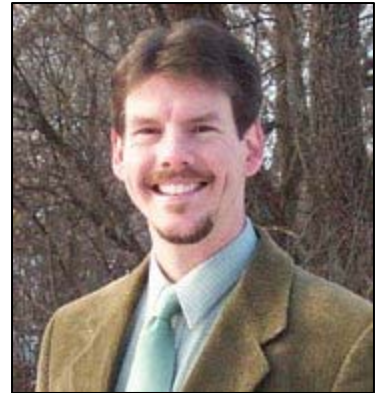


Green ideas

Brent Wood's commentary on politics and policy appears every Monday, Wednesday and Friday from mid-August until after the October 10 provincial election.

Monday, September 3, 2007

The twisted history of Trent Rapids



On the campaign trail I often found supporters of the Conservative Party intrigued by Green policies but confusing the ideas of “conservative” and “conservation”. The fiscally-responsible side of the Green Party platform appealed to them, and Green conservation policies spoke to a sense they had that the Conservative party had some connection to “old-time” values such as frugality and modesty.

Once upon a time “conservative,” in the world of partisan politics, meant an adherence to established values and a cautious approach to social change. But ever since the Harris government’s Orwellian-named “common-sense revolution,” in Ontario “conservative” has meant finding every possible way to use government to facilitate private profiteering and keep our economy in overconsumption mode – the exact opposite of “conservation”.

The Trent Rapids hydroelectric project is a direct result of the Harris government’s sly attempts to artificially stimulate unsustainable but profitable private development by starving public institutions of funds. And the McGuinty government’s refusal to reverse those policies has allowed them to keep doing their dirty work years after their originators were voted out of office.

Worse, the Liberals’ apparently progressive policy of subsidizing “green” energy development has backfired and is now causing an underfunded Trent University to back an absurd and unnecessary scheme to build a huge new hydroelectric project in its Nature Areas.

One of the Harris government’s most damaging smoke-and-mirrors tricks to cut taxes and free up consumer dollars for electronic gadgetry, minivans and monster homes was to abdicate any responsibility for the well-being of Ontario’s post-secondary education system.

The Harris government took millions out of the high school budget by axing OAC, and pushed OAC-bound students to take out loans to continue their education at the post-secondary level. At the same time, the PCs cut funding to universities, forcing small institutions like Trent to the point of bankruptcy, obliging them to grasp at any opportunity for the injection of dollars to help the school stay afloat.

This policy has had wide-ranging repercussions that we are still dealing with. The Trent Rapids hydroelectric project is but one among many.

Trent's desperation for funds has led to its accepting many more students than its facilities can accommodate, its decision to contract out its bookstore to an American corporation, a steady exodus of disenchanting faculty members, the closing of Peter Robinson College, and the resulting historic lawsuit from its own professors, the verdict on which effectively put all power to govern Trent in the hands of an unelected, unaccountable Board of Governors. This decision violated the original Trent Act, which had set up a bicameral governance system in which the Board shared power with the Senate, a body composed of faculty members, staff and students, and set a terrible precedent for universities across the country.

Trent's Board of Governors has been hoping to find some way to turn Trent's Nature Areas into revenue for years. Golf courses, condos, and shopping malls had been suggested but didn't have good optics. But a deal to lease its property to a hydroelectric firm to produce so-called "green power" – now that would be a winner, wouldn't it?

No matter that the proposal to bulldoze thousands of trees and destroy a shoreline to create an 8 megawatt hydroelectric station completely disregards the Trent Nature Area Stewardship plan developed thoughtfully over a number of years by Trent's own professors and approved by the Senate. Thanks to the historic ruling in the *Kulchyski vs. Trent* case, the Senate's power has been utterly nullified. And the reason why the court ruled against the Senate in that case? Trent's financial exigency - brought on by the Ontario government's own policies.

No matter that there's nothing "green" about the destruction of a natural environment for the sake of a few megawatts of electricity. The McGuinty government, desperate for ways to add generation capacity to allow it to finally fulfill their campaign pledge to close Ontario's coal-fired plants, is willing to accept any form of renewable energy as "green" without even so much as environmental assessment.

No matter that the City of Peterborough's own Official Plan does not allow for such a development on that property. All it takes is for one public-private partnership, Trent University, to team up with another one, Trent Rapids Power Corporation, which is 50% owned by Peterborough Utilities Inc., and evade the City's regulations by invoking section 6.1 of the Zoning bylaw, which exempts the PUC from having to obey bylaws which would apply to any private applicant.

No matter that there are several dams already in existence on the river north of Trent which could be retrofitted with turbines to produce additional electricity without further disrupting the ecology of the place.

The McGuinty government refuses to provide adequate funding to support Trent University directly. But it's more than willing to put up taxpayers' money to subsidize Trent Rapids, which will turn over some of this same money to Trent University in return

for a long-term lease on the land, and keep the rest for profit.

It's quite frightening when you boil it right down, isn't it?

If a private landowner teamed up with a private developer to create such a project, it would have to go through a major environmental assessment and an appeal to City Council and the public to modify the Official Plan. A fully public institution would never have had to go down this road in the first place. But in the shady world of public-private partnerships, neither an environmental assessment nor a presentation to City Council is considered necessary for a multi-million dollar investment of public money in drastically modifying what is essentially public space.

As shameful as the project appears from these angles, it's even worse when one considers that the power from the station is estimated to provide electricity for about 2,000 residences. That's only about 5% of Peterborough's residential demand.

An equal amount of electricity could be freed up if the PUC simply recalled all its inefficient water heater tanks and replaced them with tankless models, which consume 75% less energy, and put smart meters in every residence.

The McGuinty government's offer to pay more for electricity to private suppliers than it charges to consumers is typical of Liberal policies which attempt to make everyone happy without any actual economic rationale. By going down this road, we are using tax dollars to increase an already-abundant electricity supply while providing no incentive to anyone to conserve energy, ensuring that our consumption will never decrease.

In other words, projects like Trent Rapids will only make our eco-problems worse.

For a thorough review of the Kulchyski vs. Trent case and its historic and legal background, go to <http://www.ourtrent.com/docs/pdf/short-history-of-kulchyski-v-trent.pdf>.

I'll discuss the OMB hearings on the Trent Rapids project on Wednesday.