

Water resources raped:

Industry Winning Pollution War

By Stephen Kimber

When water pollution is the topic of discussion in Nova Scotia, the name E. L. Rowe is always mentioned at some point or another. Usually the connotation is not friendly.

Rowe is the Chairman of the Nova Scotia Water Resources Commission — the government appointed body that is assigned the task of looking after Nova Scotia's water.

To reporters he is an enigma, a puzzle that they have never bothered to piece together. When they need the government side of a story on pollution they invariably contact Rowe. Yet, while his name now appears almost daily in the press and on the radio, few reporters know anything about him. "I've called him dozens of times", a Halifax reporter confessed when I asked about Rowe, "but I've never met him and I really don't know anything about his background."

On the downhill side of forty, Rowe is a physical chemist. Balding and showing most of the signs of middle age, he was appointed Chairman of the Nova Scotia Water Resources Commission after a lengthy stint with industry and a year on the technical staff of the Water Authority (forerunner to the present Water Resources Commission).

In his cramped office above a Barrington street store, Rowe talked to me the other day about the Commission and its role in pollution control for close to two hours.

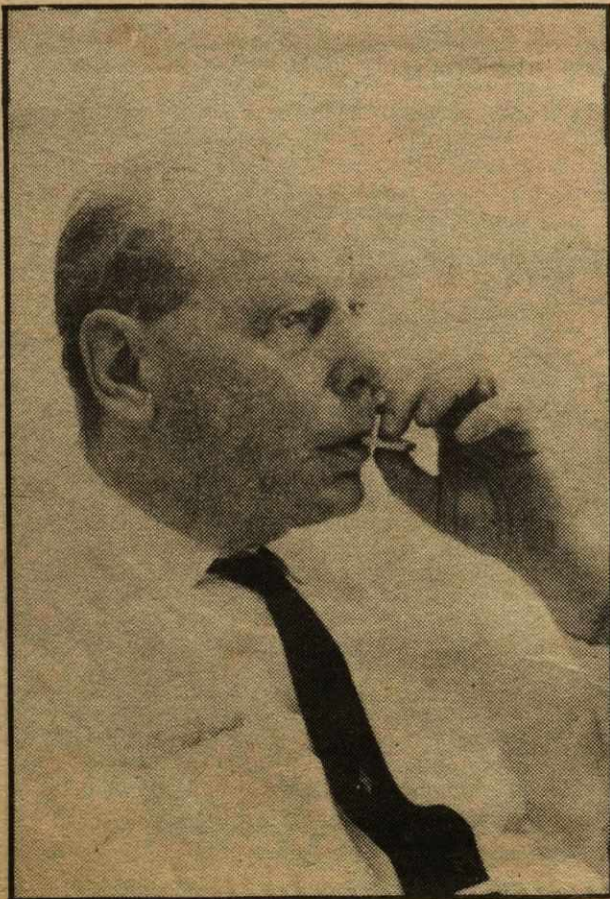
Money Big Problem

Rowe's approach to his job is summed up in dollar signs, a hangover from his long years in business. ("In industry you didn't have to worry about the public image, you were out basically to make a profit").

Before joining the Commission he worked as a Technical Director for a company in Hamilton, with Dupont, and the Aluminum Company of Canada and this experience has severely limited his view of the pollution problem. "All pollution abatement is basically a financial problem. If it was cheap, everyone would do it."

That, in part, serves to explain his attitude that negotiation is a better tactic than prosecution when you're dealing with industry on the pollution question. The Commission gave two extensions to the Anil Hardboard plant at East River to clean up their effluent — the first time knowing full well that they would need the second one. They could have prosecuted Anil for polluting the waters and killing the fish. The fine if convicted could have been \$500 a day.

Yet they hesitated at the Water Resources Commission, because they don't want to prosecute.



Rowe admits that, in retrospect, their attitude may have slowed solution of the Anil situation but he is still basically opposed to prosecuting industries who neglect pollution control devices.

"In the final analysis, fines or prosecution are intended to solve a problem where all other reasonable avenues have been explored and there is a very definite case to be made for a stubborn attitude."

Under the "Water Act", pollution is described as "any alteration of the physical, chemical, biological, or aesthetic properties of the waters of the province... which will render or is likely to render the waters harmful to the public health, safety, or welfare, or harmful or less useful for domestic, municipal, industrial, agricultural, recreational, or other lawful uses, or for animals, birds, or aquatic life." Fines for various offences range from \$50 to \$500 a day.

No Interest in Fines

The Commission has no interest in fines however. They have yet to use that last resort, even in the case of an obviously recalcitrant company like Anil.

It comes through almost every sentence — Rowe wants to tread softly because pollution control is an expensive

"My belief is based on the ancient English riparian rights: Common Law. You're entitled to all the water you need so long as you return it to the water course, undiminished in either quantity or quality."

- Professor Pete Ogden
Dalhousie University Biologist

proposition. "You can't afford to be bullheaded and say you'll go your own way come hell or high water." "We need more research into the cost-reduction aspect of pollution control." "Anything you levy on industry comes back to hit you in the pocketbook."

While it is true that pollution control is a financial hardship is it conceivable to sluff off the problem with excuses about economic difficulties? A prominent U. S. Ecologist Dr. Paul Ehrlich has predicted the death of the oceans in 1979, and while scientists admit that such time hypotheses are merely conjecture, most are agreed that on our present course it is only a matter of time before the ecological time bomb goes off in our hands.

Nova Scotia — A Mess

A Dalhousie Marine Biologist, Dr. Eric Mills says that in Nova Scotia, our problem is no less serious in the long run than that facing other provinces and countries. "Considering the size of the province and the relatively few industries and cities we have here, it is sort of a mess."

Nova Scotia's problems are not limited to industrial pollution either — the Federal Government, in a recent report, cited Halifax as one of three Canadian cities without any sewage disposal treatment, and another study issued two weeks ago warned that within several years, fish and marine life would only be able to exist on the upper layers of Bedford Basin.

It's a frightening prospect, but it hasn't ruffled the feathers of the Chairman of the Water Resources Commission. "No one can say if it's too late to solve the Basin problem. It may have been too late the day before yesterday. It's not going to be solved quickly, or very readily or very cheaply, (that word again) — Halifax is an old city and this has developed historically." As in every other case, he is opposed to fining Halifax for its failure to install sewage treatment facilities.



Be Easy On Industry

But Rowe's preoccupation with financial problems that come with pollution control is not the only consideration. Nova Scotia is in the difficult position of having to attract industry in order to move out of the Canadian economic basement, and pollution control is expensive.

There are signs that pressure has been applied both within and outside government to get the Water Resources Commission to lower its standards to avoid losing industry. Rowe admits that there have been discussions with IEL, the province's industry promoting agency although he wouldn't call them pressures. "They understand that we have a job to do," he said, the creases in his normally furrowed brow deepening. "There are always pressures, in such a regulatory endeavour, to wait a while, to be easier on someone or other, but I would emphasize that these are from many sources and to be expected."

When asked if the sources were mainly governmental he merely replied, "Not today" and declined to elaborate, although it is believed that the former President of Industrial Estates, Frank Sobey, may have been the man turning the screws to keep the Water Resources Commission from performing its assigned function.

When asked who had won the battles with the sources of pressure, Rowe just shrugged his shoulders: "Who do you think," he asked?

Eric Mills says that it appears to be industry. "They're winning out, if you like, in the short run, but it's no long run solution for anyone — it's just creating an environment that is less and less livable."

Mills is right, but there is little that can be done if the Water Resources Commission persists in its reluctance to use its power of prosecution to prevent industry and municipalities from polluting the environment. It's a power they hardly seem inclined to utilize.

Rowe in spite of this, views the future with optimism: "I think it can be solved. We of the Commission have maintained that there are no water courses including coastal waters that cannot be recovered from a polluted state." With the present attitude permeating the Commission, that's a difficult optimism to share.