

Looking at ourselves through water

by Charles Caccia

This retrospective on Canadian-US relations is in the form of a script for an environmental bad — if not worst — case by the Liberal Member of Parliament for Davenport riding in Toronto, and former Minister of the Environment. Mr. Caccia considers himself a “left-of-center Liberal,” who believes, particularly in Canada’s case, that “the economy depends on the environment.”

TIME: *The year 2025*

PLACE: *Around the fireplace of a cottage on Meach Lake, near Ottawa.*

CHARACTERS: *An External Affairs official reminiscing to a junior colleague.*

..... yes, we have to recognize it, the climatic changes Environment Canada predicted then, the “Greenhouse Effect,” remember? Well, it did become a reality, temperatures in Canada did go up 3 degrees Celsius. That was nice. Now we grow more crops, and grow them farther north. And our winters must be less chilly than they were then.

But in the South deserts have spread. In addition, the “warming up” trend — along with a doubling of the population — led to greater demand for water. Contamination of ground water spread. The “leaching” of toxic chemicals from the dumpsites into the Niagara and St. Clair Rivers has made Lake Ontario water expensive, both for domestic and industrial use, because we had to install costly filtration systems. Air pollution and acid rain brought along further costs turning water into an expensive commodity. What is the point of having large quantities of water if you neglect the quality? But, lulled by quantity, we agreed first to exports and then to diversions. Actually, it started in a rather harmless way — a request by the United Arab Emirate to purchase water by tankers. To most it seemed good business, a drop in the ocean.

Then came another request, from Mexico, and again the prevailing thought was that we should export, it made good business sense, we had so much anyway, creating dependency or not, and as to the consequences of the “Greenhouse Effect,” few paid attention.

It was not until 2010, when negotiating trade in Washington, that the matter of water came up. Here we were,

listening to our immediate neighbor and powerful ally, asking for water. How could we say “no,” having said “yes” to others? They needed water in large quantities, to make up for increased demand, decreased supply due to mismanagement of their groundwater and widespread contamination. How could we say “no” to our largest trade partner?

The natives? Oh yes, we had to deal with them too because the Grand Canal scheme caused a lot of headaches. For instance, that dam built across the mouth of James Bay prevented fresh water from flowing into Hudson Bay, and over the years the salinity in Hudson Bay went up and up, destroying aquatic life that depended on the regular flow of fresh water.

Also, we had to pay the natives large sums to compensate for the changes to their lifestyle, thus — an old story — repeating past mistakes. We hit them again, on their ability to sustain themselves with hunting and fishing.

Actually, there were those who argued in favor of keeping water in Canada, using water to attract and keep investment at home. They said that water represented a great asset for future generations of Canadians rather than looking at it as just another commodity; value should be added in Canada rather than letting others use our water for their industrial activities and economic growth. But they were few.

In fact, we were in a bind: we had started with small exports; Ottawa never has had constitutional power to stop water exports, although it could prevent exports by applying pressure on the provinces. Once started on that slippery road, it became hard to apply the brakes. In addition, we did not seize early enough the importance of looking after water quality and realized only too late that all the quantity in the world was of little value if not matched by a scrupulous management of quality. To make things worse, there were those who laughed at the idea of “zero discharge,” used by some environmentalists and civil servants here in Ottawa. They spoke of the necessity of adopting ways of returning water clean once used by industry, as already being done at that time in Europe. Environmentalists also spoke of environmental damage both upstream and downstream when you allow water to be taken out by tankers, continuously. They pointed to the fact that tankers have to clean up the holds each time they fill with water, if the last load was other than water. They spoke of ecological