

Written by Scott Parsons
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Government insiders have indicated that the pressure is on to conclude negotiations of a Canada-EU free trade agreement within the next month or two. These negotiations have been ongoing for years. The Harper government has made securing this agreement a policy priority. Indeed, to achieve this they were prepared in 2009 to ignore vital Canadian interests and rushed to ratify a flawed set of amendments to the NAFO Convention. Little attention has been paid to the potential implications for Canadian fisheries of the proposed agreement. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives recently released a report, prepared by researcher Scott Sinclair, which has brought these concerns into public focus.

According to this report, the proposed Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) threatens the sustainability of fisheries and fishing communities. The proposed treaty could undermine the ability of Canadians to pursue public policies that curb domination of the fisheries by large corporations and help spread the benefits of the fishery more widely among independent fish-ers and coastal communities.

Leaked documents reveal that the EU is pressuring Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec to abolish minimum processing requirements for fish. Minimum processing requirements provide provincial governments with critical leverage to maximize local benefits. Sinclair notes that "without such regulation, these decisions would be left to large fish processing companies to make with no consideration for any other factors than how it affects their corporate bottom line."

With respect to the inshore fishery and coastal communities, there are many clear conflicts between the new treaty rules and Canadian fisheries regulations and regulatory authority. Sinclair opines that one of the first casualties is likely to be minimum processing requirements, which remain an important policy lever for provincial governments in eastern Canada. Witness the recent controversy in Newfoundland over Ocean Choice's proposal to ship unprocessed fish to China. But the adverse implications for sustainable development of the fisheries are much broader, "largely because of the inherent limitations of the reservations to protect regulatory authority, especially at the provincial level". Agreements such as CETA are designed to eliminate public policies that favour local or national control and, under the guise of free market forces, to subordinate public policy to the interests of multinational corporations.

When the Harper government thumbed its nose at Parliament in December 2009 by ratifying NAFO amendments that gave the EU everything it had asked for the day after Parliament adopted a motion calling on the government to reject the amendments, many wondered whether the government's unseemly haste was linked to the CETA negotiations. There is now no doubt that this was indeed the case. The Harper government shamelessly traded away Canadian sovereignty over fisheries in order to facilitate agreement on a trade and investment treaty with the EU. It makes one want to weep.

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