

James Bay II

Megadisaster for the Planet

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1992

James Bay II—the so-called “Project of the Century”—is on hold this winter in Quebec, snarled by legal and political obstacles, but a furious battle looms again in a year’s time. On one side is Hydro-Quebec, a goliath of an electricity utility, and its owner the provincial government; on the other, a fast-growing coalition of native Cree people, aboriginal rights solidarity groups, environmental activists, economic policy critics, alternative energy advocates, and a few no-growth libertarians, too.

At stake are the watersheds of the Great Whale, Little Whale, Nottaway, Broadback, Rupert, and numerous smaller rivers flowing into the eastern side of James Bay and Hudson Bay in northern Quebec. Hydro-Quebec plans a series of diversions and dams that would impound most of the water into new or expanded lakes covering some 1,200 square miles and affect an area twice the size of Connecticut. All of the land falls within the traditional hunting and fishing territories of the Cree and Inuit (Eskimo) peoples.

If the main battle in the trenches is over wilderness, wildlife, and the aboriginal way of life, the wider war is over conflicting views of the new Quebec and its “civilization”.

WHAT IS THE LATEST NEWS?

The opposition to James Bay II won a lot of victories in 1991. At the end of the summer, the New York Power Authority announced its decision to reconsider its Hydro-Quebec contract. This was quickly followed by Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa’s concession to allow a one-year delay in the construction at Great Whale so that environmental reviews could be carried out, and finally by a major court decision mandating additional reviews under the James Bay I Agreement.

Much of the pressure for environmental review is coming from the United States, where major environmental groups including the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society, the National Wildlife Federation and the Rainforest Foundation have made James Bay a priority issue. The American environmental movement has good reason to be involved: a large share of the power from the new dams will be sold in the U.S. Power commissions across the American Northeast are being asked to insist on full environmental review as a condition for electricity purchases. If the contracts are not approved, the dams may never be built.

Thanks to the Cree’s success in the courts and the American lobbyists’ success in New York, the movement against James Bay II suddenly finds itself in a much better position than it could have hoped for, having probably gained 12 to 30 months of breathing space. Better, by the time all the appeal courts and environmental review boards have been heard from, the political and economic context is likely to be quite different from today’s climate—one much less favorable to debt-laden megaprojects.

WHY MORE ELECTRICITY?

The philosophy that more is better still prevails in Quebec. More transformations of energy and raw materials mean greater welfare for people, according to this argument. There is little need to account for the destruction of the ecosphere; it is a mere resource for the human species. As the Premier of Quebec, Robert Bourassa, put it: "Every day millions of potential kilowatt hours flow downhill and out to sea. What a waste!"

The equally mammoth James Bay I, which destroyed the watersheds of the La Grande and Eastmain rivers and is now nearly complete, was built on this premise. It came on line just as the "energy shock" of the early '70s caused most North American utilities to try reining in electricity consumption. Hydro-Quebec, on the other hand, offered subsidies and low long-term rates to attempt to force up consumption. Energy-intensive industry was coaxed to the St. Lawrence valley by tax giveaways and below-cost electricity.

Hydro-Quebec began exporting power to the United States.

Quebecers now use more energy per person than anyone on earth—some 24,000 kilowatt-hours per person per year of electricity alone. A significant part of the Quebec north has been ravaged. A dozen giant aluminum and magnesium smelters now pollute the lower St. Lawrence valley in order to supply non-Quebec industry with very cheap metal ingots. Quebec is an important supplier of electricity to the United States. At home, the boom is over and unemployment is back to a chronic 12%. Hydro-Quebec makes huge payments on its immense external debt.

The utility insists that in the long run the proposed James Bay II facilities are for Quebec, not for exports. The minister for energy has threatened that Quebec will "sit in the dark" in the year 2000 if the dams are not built. The opposition points out that Hydro's projections do not allow for energy conservation measures but rather assume that new energy-intensive industries will be built. Quebecers meanwhile are voting with their switches; domestic demand for electricity has fallen for the last several years in a row.

HOW CAN HYDRO-QUEBEC GET AWAY WITH IT?

No capitalist corporation would double its debt to produce a commodity that they cannot sell at a profit. However, Hydro-Quebec does not operate under the rules of profit and competition that govern most business. It does not have to answer to ratepayers or shareholders or bondholders, nor is it regulated by any agency.

It is clear from the way Hydro-Quebec is responding to the growing controversy over its James Bay projects that it did not expect to ever have to defend its plans. There has never been any comprehensive review of the environmental and social impacts of James Bay I, and Hydro-Quebec and the Quebec government fought furiously if unsuccessfully to avoid a comprehensive review of James Bay II. They have used the threat of separatism to keep the federal government at bay, suggesting that any move by Ottawa to assert its environmental responsibilities will only push Quebec into the arms of the separatists.

Hydro-Quebec is entirely owned by the Quebec government. It answers to the cabinet, not the National Assembly. Its bottom line is not to make money, although it does, nor even to generate and deliver electricity, although it does.

Its real bottom line is to be an agent of the economic, social, and political policies of the government of Quebec. That means economic nationalism, expansion, industrialization, and the assertion of Quebec sovereignty wherever it might be in doubt. Twenty years ago Premier Bourassa wrote, "Quebec must occupy its territory; it must conquer James Bay."

THE TERRITORY OF JAMES BAY IS ALREADY OCCUPIED

It is five hundred years after Columbus. Industrial society is discovering the northern wilderness and its resources. Water, minerals, landscapes, trees, animals are all seen as awaiting transformation into products.

There is a difficulty. The land is occupied. The Cree live there, the Inuit live there and the caribou live there, all since time immemorial. Today the Cree comprise some 10,000 people linked by language, culture, and kinship.

They are clustered in a dozen permanent villages and spread out across the territory in hundreds of seasonal encampments. Most Cree families now lead lives that are partly modern—electric heating, schools, VCRs—and partly traditional hunting, fishing, gathering, and storytelling around fires.

The traditional way of life knew nothing of conquering nature or exploiting resources. As Bill Namagoose of the Cree nation patiently explains to non-Cree, “We call the land our home.

We don’t own that land; we use that land. We inherit that land from our parents; we borrow it from the children. This is Cree land; it is used for Cree culture, for the Cree nation. It has been used like that for thousands and thousands of years.”

When Hydro-Quebec began building fifteen years ago, there were strenuous objections from the Cree and from the somewhat fewer Inuit. They fought hard against James Bay I in the courts, but in the end they had no choice but to come to a settlement with the government. The Northern Quebec/ James Bay Agreement of 1975 sharply curtailed native rights over the region in return for substantial compensation.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE IMPACTS OF JAMES BAY I?

For the Cree and Inuit, homes and traplines have been flooded and wildlife breeding areas disrupted, all as foreseen. No one, however, foresaw the release of soluble methyl mercury into the dammed-up water. The fish in the reservoirs are now seriously contaminated with mercury released by the bacterial decomposition of millions of acres of flooded forest. The same will occur in the new dams if they are built.

Hydro-Quebec insists that it can “mitigate” the damage, but in fact there is nothing to be done except to warn people not to eat fish. Since the Cree cannot survive in the bush without eating fish, the result is to accelerate the destruction of their traditional life. The mercury factor is a clear and present warning that more dams must not be built, and the one which hones Cree opposition to a stubborn edge.

There have been countless other impacts, both great and subtle, as forest has disappeared under water, as riverain habitat has been altered or destroyed, as the winter-summer seasonality of flows has been reversed with corresponding changes in temperature and salinity, as greenhouse gases and mercury have been released by rotting organic matter, and as water levels have been raised and lowered by Hydro managers seeking to adjust their electricity production.

The most poignant incident so far has been the drowning death in 1984 of 10,000 caribou, trapped when Hydro suddenly and inexplicably released a tidal wave of water from its immense Caniapiscau reservoir. “They shouldn’t have been there,” said the energy minister. “An act of God,” said the government report. At first some of the carcasses were flown to meat-packing plants in the south where they were turned into dog food, but this proved not to be profitable.

WHY DON’T QUEBECERS OPPOSE JAMES BAY II?

Quebecers remain ambivalent about the new dams, caught between concern for the environment, worries about future energy needs, resentful feelings towards the Cree, and nationalist pride in “their” Hydro-Quebec.

Support for Hydro-Quebec is deeply rooted in the unique place the government-owned corporation occupies in Quebec’s history. It is just 30 years since Quebec began to emerge as a modern industrial society; Hydro-Quebec is widely viewed as being the motor behind the economic growth of the past 20 years. The product of Quebec’s nationalization of the English-Canadian-owned electric companies in the 1960s, it also represents Quebec’s rebellion against British and English-Canadian colonialism, an old and deep resentment.

Thus, the energy minister can call Hydro “the crown jewel of the Quebec economy” and be believed, and columnists for Montreal’s *La Presse* can equate criticism of Hydro-Quebec with disloyalty to the country. “On guard for Hydro-Quebec,” ran one headline this year, “On guard for Quebec.”

This confounding of emerging Quebec national pride with Hydro’s dams is the single greatest danger the opposition movement faces. The whole region is heating up with conflicting nationalisms and ethnic loyalties as Canada,

Quebec, and the Cree territory inch towards separation from one another. Normally serious people speak darkly of an alliance against Quebec led by English-speaking Canada; a leading Quebec writer recently prominently published a letter in *Le Devoir* newspaper resigning from Greenpeace and openly accusing the James Bay opposition of collusion with this alliance.

WHO IS THE OPPOSITION TO JAMES BAY II?

First, of course, are the Cree. Theirs is an impassioned self-defense, in part a not-in-my-back-yard response, in part a cultural survival response, and in part a wilderness preservation response. Their local councils are grouped into a regional self-government, the Grand Council of the Crees of Quebec. It is this body, whose revenues ironically come from the Quebec and Ottawa governments under the terms of a James Bay I agreement, which has organized the successful administrative and legal battles to delay new construction.

The Cree have also been waging a successful public relations battle in New York State, wooing the elite and attracting sympathetic media attention. The aim is to have the state cancel its long-term purchase contracts with Hydro-Quebec, a goal which may well be won. The Quebec establishment finds having its environmental record exposed in the seat of corporate influence and finance particularly galling.

In Quebec the Cree have not really tried to win over public opinion. It is doubtful that they could. In the most recent heated public exchange, the Cree threatened to secede from Quebec if Quebec secedes from Canada. Lack of sympathy for the Cree point of view has been reflected in the relatively few and poorly attended street demonstrations on their behalf. It is not for want of trying; the well-organized and hardworking *Regroupement de solidarite avec les Autochtones* does as-well as it can in an unsympathetic Quebecois milieu. The Cree have much more support among the anglophone (English-speaking) and allophone (immigrant) communities, but they are relatively small, and are concentrated in Montreal.

THE QUEBEC OPPOSITION MOVEMENT

The long-term good news of 1991 is that at last the first cracks have begun to appear in the ranks of the Quebec establishment concerning further hydroelectric expansion. Important sectors of mainstream Quebec society are now arguing for a full, public debate on energy and a moratorium on new construction. Dissenting voices can be heard even at the highest levels saying that megaprojects, electricity exports, and cheap electricity for energy-intensive industry will not lead Quebec to its long-desired goal of economic autonomy. Self-serving, capitalist, and nationalist arguments to be sure, but ones that may help save the northern wilderness.

Grassroots opposition helped bring about these first cracks in the official line. The *Coalition pour un Débat public sur L'énergie* now counts about 60 member organizations representing half a million members. Its member groups include many citizens' organizations generally aligned with either the Quebec left or the nationalist movement or both. Although mainstream environmental groups have provided much of the Coalition's energy and have steered it away from militancy and confrontation, Greenpeace and grassroots activists have prevented it from being coopted into a phony "environmental review" process being promoted by the soft middle.

Apart from the Cree, there is little philosophically hard opposition. Radical ecologists and wilderness defenders scarcely exist in Quebec. The few who do have had to walk a line between openly espousing no-growth principles and keeping in step with the Coalition which believes in "sustainable development." Libertarians and social radicals have steered clear of the Coalition altogether, although they have been supportive of the Cree solidarity demonstrations and the grassroots "Lights Out" campaign.

Activists in and out of Quebec feel frustrated by the unhurried pace of the local opposition movement. But this is a society where environmental advocacy is still marginal and vaguely associated with subversion. Last month an energy executive lashed out at alleged "ecoterrorists"—some suburban homeowners who oppose a gas storage facility because it would be in their backyards! Sadly, perhaps, real ecoterrorism still awaits its birth here.

DOES JAMES BAY II HAVE A FUTURE?

Yes and no. History is weaving a rich irony into her fabric here. Five hundred years after Columbus and fifty thousand years after the caribou, the fate of the northern wilderness that gently slopes down to the eastern edge of James Bay is almost certain to be settled by the descendants of European immigrants living thousands of kilometers to the south. These city-dwellers are in profound ignorance of the wilderness, but know that it is another hostage to be held and a pawn to be played in the never-ending ethnic game that is Quebec.

What can actually stop James Bay II? A Quebec people not too distracted by nationalism, a people that rejects further megaprojects, a people self-confident enough to be generous towards others—other ethnicities, other ways of life, other species.

Will it be stopped? Yes, probably, but only just barely, and only because the Cree went to court to use the system against itself and the electricity appeared not to be profitable in old-fashioned capitalist terms. So, with the gift of time thus received, the James Bay opposition movement may yet succeed in sparing a small bit of the planet from-further ravage.

For more information on the opposition to the James Bay projects, contact: Earth-roots Coalition, 19 Mercer St., Toronto Ontario, M5V 1H2, Canada. This is a reform environmental group, but they can put local activists in touch with the Cree and suggest targets for demos, direct action, etc.

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