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Chair

Mr. Rodney Weston

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Monday, March 26, 2012

• (1650)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rodney Weston (Saint John, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

We'll deal with the motion that was tabled by Mr. Donnelly on February 29:

That, because fleet separation and owner operator policy is critical to coastal communities and protecting independent fishers in the inshore fishery, the Committee reaffirms its support for fleet separation and owner operator vessels in the inshore fishery and opposes any move to eliminate this policy.

That motion has been moved by Mr. Donnelly. Is there any discussion?

Go ahead, Mr. Kamp.

Mr. Randy Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission, CPC): I think we want to come to the question on this. The motion calls for the committee to reaffirm its support, so we would have to have some sort of historical summary of when and in what context this committee has supported these policies. I the motion would require further study for us to say these are policies that still make sense. If 10 years ago the committee supported these in some report, which I'm not sure is the case, then I think we'd have to go and take a look at it and see if that's still the case. I think we're going to have to vote against this motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kamp.

Go ahead, Mr. MacAulay.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Cardigan, Lib.): At this time I would fully disagree with Mr. Kamp. I think he's well aware of what we're hearing throughout the country and the great concern there is for the inshore fishermen, particularly in Atlantic Canada. I think that if the government would support this motion, it would bring a lot of relief to a lot of people who are very concerned—not only the fishermen, but also the people in the communities who are so concerned. They know what will happen if the owner-operator policy is removed, and if we could just reaffirm that commitment, it would be a help in order to convince the minister. We are here for advice.

That does not mean they have to do it, but I pray to God they do listen to us if we reaffirm our support. I would certainly support this motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacAulay.

Go ahead, Mr. Cleary.

Mr. Ryan Cleary (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I strongly support this motion. From the studies I've read, I think that if the owner-operator and fleet separation policies are removed, the big concern will be about where we move and what system we implement. If we implement the system that B.C. has right now for the B.C. herring fishery in terms of individual transferable quotas, one big fear and concern that I've seen expressed in studies from the west coast is that big companies or processors can accumulate ITQs to the extent that fishermen and crewmen lose their independence and make less. Their incomes are lower because of the resource rent they would have to pay for the lease.

That is probably the number one concern. Then if you look at what happened in New Zealand, for example, where you have foreign vessels and foreign companies hired to come in and fish the quotas because it's the cheapest alternative, that's a real concern as well.

On the one end of this country you have a system of ITQs, and we think that if they remove the policy, they're going to implement ITQs on the east coast. If they do that, we'd end up with a system of more or less slipper skippers: people or companies would own multiple licences but wouldn't have to fish them, and our fishermen and our crewmen would end up a hell of a lot worse than they are now.

Our rural communities in eastern Canada, specifically Newfoundland and Labrador, are already suffering. They are already desperate. As the fishery minister has said before, the fishery is broken. It is broken and it has to change in a whole bunch of ways. I'm not personally against change, but the change has to work for our coastal communities, it has to work for our culture and what we're based on, and it has to work for the people. It can't just work for one side, in this case big processors or big companies. It can't just work for them. It has to work on an economic basis, but it has to work for everybody.

That's why I strongly support this motion and I encourage the members opposite to support it as well.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cleary.

Go ahead, Mr. Donnelly.

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On where this motion came from, the minister has been out consulting about the government's plan to modernize the fishery. There is a huge concern on the east coast about the way in which this consultation process has unfolded. There was a huge concern about the invitation-only, behind-closed-doors consultation. Many of the fishermen, independent and otherwise, felt left out. They felt they hadn't been included in the consultation process, even though it was extended a couple of weeks or a few more days.

I asked the minister in committee to please share the list, if he felt there had been adequate consultation with fishermen. I asked the fishermen when I went to the east coast just recently—I was in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland—if they felt they had been adequately consulted. The overwhelming response was that they absolutely had not been. They don't feel they were included in the consultation process, and more importantly, they feel that if the minister had listened to what they had to say, there's no way he would go down this path of eliminating this policy.

They're very concerned about losing this fleet separation and owner-operator policy and essentially moving to what we have on the west coast, which is intensified corporate concentration through moving to an ITQ system, as Ryan mentioned, or moving from a crown public resource to a more owned resource in the form of allocation and ITQs. They're moving to individual transferable quotas, a system whereby those with the deepest pockets are able to control the outcome of the allocation of the resource. Certainly on the west coast that has resulted in fewer jobs and fewer livelihoods being part of the fishery. That is the fear I was hearing on the east coast.

In order for those communities on the east coast to not feel that this is the direction the government is going—to feel that they are not going to be left out and that they are going to be included and consulted if there are significant changes—we have to demonstrate that support, at least through the fisheries and oceans committee demonstrating its support for this policy. We should recommend to the government that it maintain this policy.

The word “reaffirm” is in there because it has been a long-standing policy. Barring further studies or research, the assumption is that the committee has never had a problem eliminating the policy because they haven't addressed it, dealt with it, or wanted to change it. The assumption is that they have felt this policy has been fine.

I feel as strongly as my colleague who spoke earlier that this is a policy that must be maintained. We're talking about a way of life. We're talking about livelihood, jobs, and employment. I have talked to people specifically on the east coast, although there has been a large amount of input from not just Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, but also New Brunswick, Quebec, and P.E.I. Even British Columbia has come in to say that in their experience, if we modernize by eliminating or losing this policy and allow further concentration of corporate involvement in the fishery, it will have a very negative impact.

That's the nature of why I hope we'll see this committee support this motion.

• (1655)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Donnelly.

Mr. Kamp is next.

Mr. Randy Kamp: To clarify one or two things on that, I haven't been around too many years—seven or eight now—but to be frank, I haven't seen a single change that has been proposed or made over which you couldn't find people who felt they hadn't been consulted. You'll always find some people who, unless the fisheries minister went up to them on a particular day and said, “What do you think about this?”, are going to feel they haven't been consulted.

Mr. Donnelly, when you were talking to these fishermen in Nova Scotia and other parts of the Maritimes and in Newfoundland and Labrador, I hope you asked them if they took the time to respond to the consultation process that was online for a number of weeks. Nobody was without an opportunity to make a well-reasoned, compelling case on how the fishery should be modernized. If these people wanted to state their case that they felt these policies should be maintained, they certainly had the opportunity to do so. They weren't left out of this process.

The fact is, though, there are many, many fishermen—and I think you were probably talking to some of them—who are making a poor living. I don't think that's a great thing. Given that fact, the consultations were about whether there are changes that could be made to the way we manage these fisheries that would allow individuals to prosper and not just barely make it by, or in many cases have to depend on fisheries EI. I think those are valid questions to ask, and that's why the consultation was held.

It's not clear to me, but one could infer from this motion that Mr. Donnelly is in favour of reversing the practices in British Columbia, where there is no fleet separation policy and no owner-operator policy being applied. For that reason alone, I think I would not be able to support this motion. We will be opposing it.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kamp.

Go ahead, Mr. Cleary.

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to take Mr. Kamp up on a couple of statements. The honourable member said that fishermen have been consulted. The way I understand it, these consultations were by invitation only.

In terms of fishermen taking part in a consultation process via the Internet, I can tell you that I know a hell of a lot of fishermen in rural Newfoundland and Labrador who don't have access to the Internet. That was one of the chief complaints: it was by invitation only. Yes, there was the Internet, but in rural Newfoundland and Labrador, where these fishermen live, so many communities still don't have access to the Internet that effectively they could not take part.

As well, you talk about how many fishermen make a poor living right now. That's a fact. You are absolutely right. They don't make a great living. The other big problem we have is that young men and women don't want to go into the fishery for the most part. It's a rare breed of young Newfoundlander and Labradorian who wants to go into the fishery these days.

However, I can tell you that if these owner-operator, fleet separation policies are lifted and we go to what Mr. Donnelly said—the ITQ system in B.C.—then mark my words: fishermen and crewmen will be even poorer than they are now. They will be even poorer. By the time they pay the resource rent for the licences that will be accumulated—because we've seen that happen in other jurisdictions—they will be worse off.

Fishermen are poor. How the economic equation works right now has to change. The fishery is broken, but this is not the way to fix it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cleary.

Is there anything further on the motion?

Go ahead, Mr. Donnelly.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Could this be a recorded vote?

The Chair: Yes. We will have a recorded vote.

(Motion negatived: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: I'll ask the clerk to distribute the next motion we have on the floor. It is moved by Mr. MacAulay. We have to make more copies.

• (1700) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1705)

It was moved by Mr. MacAulay: That, because fleet separation and owner-operator policies form the backbone of the inshore and midshore fisheries on the east coast of Canada and that the removal of said policies would do irreparable damage to the fisheries along with hundreds of coastal communities, the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans immediately undertake a study, including travelling to hold hearings with affected stakeholders across Atlantic Canada, on what the removal of the policies would mean in economic, social, and cultural terms, along with a comparative analysis of other jurisdictions where similar policies are not in place or have been removed such as British Columbia, New Zealand, and Norway.

You've heard the motion by Mr. MacAulay.

Is there discussion on the motion?

Go ahead, Mr. MacAulay.

• (1710)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I certainly would hope I would get the support of the committee in order to make sure the fishermen on the east coast of this country have a chance to be heard.

The fact is that I have travelled, of course, in my own province and met numerous groups in Nova Scotia and in Newfoundland. Yesterday I attended the MFU meeting in New Brunswick and talked to a lot of fishermen and fishermen's organizations. I understand 35 different fisheries organizations have signed a petition to signify that they are totally opposed to the removal of the owner-operator fleet separation policy.

I do not know of one fisheries group that supports the removal of this policy. What fishermen tell me is they find that corporate leaders seem to be fully aware of what's taking place. They're even writing letters to newspapers to indicate the importance of getting rid of these policies, which certainly makes fishermen quite nervous that

the decision has been made. In fact, what fishermen tell me is that they have something that the corporate sector wants and they hope and pray this government will not give it to them.

They've heard about this consulting to modernize the fishery. Well, here's one chance. If this committee or this government wishes to hear how the fishing community or the communities at large or the people who live in the eastern end of this country feel about the elimination of these policies, then I would see no reason not to travel, and I can see a major importance to travel before the decision is made.

This committee is put together to advise the government on what decisions it should make. It certainly does not compel the minister or the government to make the decision this committee advises, but what we can do as a committee is go and listen to the people who are directly affected. There's much more involved than just the people who are involved in the fishery. What this would mean in my area, should it happen—and we're very hopeful it will not happen—is the elimination of communities, because we know what happened on the west coast.

Also, although I don't want to take large exception—I'm looking for support for this motion—I am not going to state that the fisheries are totally broken. There are people who make a good living in the fishery and do not wish to have this taken over by the corporate sector. The problem you have if you give it to the corporate sector is it can control a small portion of the fishing industry and all of the retail part in the fishery, which means in the end that it will have control of everything. If you have control of the price and control of some production, you will soon have control of all the production. That is what I have heard when I have travelled across Atlantic Canada, and they certainly....

The MFU is willing to discuss many things, as they have been over the years, but yesterday they indicated quite clearly that fleet separation and owner-operator are not on the table. They also indicated that fisheries over the years have made a lot of changes and had a lot of changes, such as in the lobster fishery with the trap limits, escape mechanisms, trap size, and many things that have been done by the fishermen. If there are things that need to change, rationalization is something that can take place in the fishery.

It's inappropriate and dead stone wrong to take the fishery from the private entrepreneur in eastern Canada and give it to the corporate sector, and if you take the fleet separation and the owner-operator policy out, that's simply what you're doing. Therefore, I beg of this committee: can we not at least hear what these people have to say?

As has been stated, and as Mr. Sopuck indicated on another subject, economic development is vitally important in these areas. Well, I can assure you that where I come from, as long as I'm alive and as long as anybody is alive in this room, if this policy is removed, you'll never have the economic development policies put in place to put us even halfway back to where we are now. It will mean the closure of everything.

• (1715)

I beg the committee to take a strong look at this and at least listen to the people.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacAulay.

Go ahead, Mr. Kamp.

Mr. Randy Kamp: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate Mr. MacAulay's comments. Obviously he feels strongly about this.

Let me say at the outset that with regard to both the previous motion and this one, on this side we're not advocating for or against these two policies or any others.

I have two problems with this motion. First, the main verb in the motion is "undertake" a study. I'm always reluctant to undertake a study when I'm told what the result should be. That's what this motion says: if these policies are removed, there will be irreparable damage to coastal communities, so let's study that.

It seems to me that a study needs to have something of an open mind for it to be valid. This motion doesn't communicate that to me. If this motion were about the issue of economically sustainable fisheries, prosperous fisheries, the challenge that many fishermen and fisherwomen are facing of not being able to earn a living without help from the government, that's a study I would be interested in at some point when our schedule allows it to be undertaken. However, it doesn't do it for me to simply say that these are great policies and we need to keep them, so let's go out and talk to people about them.

The second problem I have with this motion is that it presupposes the outcome of the minister's consultation. It was completed just a couple of weeks ago. We don't even know what the result of it might be.

Given these things, we're going to vote against this motion; however, when the consultations have been wrapped up and processed, if Mr. MacAulay still has some concerns about this, I would advise him to bring back a better but similar motion that allows us to look at a study that includes this aspect but doesn't necessarily presuppose the outcome. I would encourage him to do that.

In the meantime, we're going to be voting against this motion.

•(1720)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kamp.

Go ahead, Mr. Donnelly.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I concur with Mr. MacAulay's remarks. I certainly support his motion and I thank him for bringing it forward at this time. I would add that I think the number is now up to 39 fishing organizations that are now supportive of this motion and supportive of seeing this policy stay in place. They represent roughly, if I'm not mistaken, about 25,000 people from Quebec, Newfoundland—Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, P.E.I., and now even British Columbia, coming in.

It's not just MFU; it's FFAW, it's the Eastern Shore Fisherman's Protective Association. There's a long list of organizations that are extremely concerned with not only the threat and the possibility of

losing this policy, but also the lack of consultation. I can't stress that enough. They do not feel that they were included.

Mr. Kamp, I understand your earlier comments about how there will be some who feel they have not been included in the consultation process. I agree that there will be those folks who always say that they didn't feel they were adequately consulted or given an opportunity, but when the overwhelming majority of people I talk to say in unison that they don't feel listened to, that they don't feel they were adequately consulted, as a politician, I listen to that very carefully, because that is a very important and strong message.

For me, when I did my recent tour to the east coast, that is what I heard loud and strong. They are extremely concerned about losing this policy, about losing their way of life, about participating in the economy in the way that they feel they are contributing.

Some of them do make a good living, but others make a modest living and others struggle. Still they want an opportunity to participate in this way of life that has been passed on for generations. They want to continue in that way of life, and I think it's our challenge as government, or as members of this place, to encourage and seek policies that would seek to improve that way of life, not the opposite.

I fear that if we remove this policy, if we go in the opposite direction from what this policy is in place to do, we will move in the opposite direction from the people who I spoke to, and certainly from that of the message from these 25,000 people, and there are many more. I know there are more, because this is just the beginning of the organizing against this move to so-called "modernization" of the fishery.

The comment I've heard is that there's nothing modern about the feudal system. That's how strongly some of the folks I have talked to feel. They believe this is the direction we're heading if we move to a system of corporatizing. These folks believe they are going to be the serfs that are a part of a corporate plan. That is strong language. That is how strongly and passionately these folks spoke to me when I listened to them over my days visiting in their communities, a number of communities in Nova Scotia and a number of communities in Newfoundland.

I know there is more consultation that I could have done, but just in that small amount of time in just those few places, that's the message I heard loud and strong, and I don't know how the minister could not have heard it if he did a legitimate consultation. If he did do that consultation, how could he not come to the conclusion that we need to maintain this policy and keep it in place?

•(1725)

If the direction the government is considering is to eliminate the policy and move away from the owner-operator, independent fisherman's way of life, then I think we do need to do a study, and it is imperative to do that study now.

I agree with the motion in front of us, and we'll be supporting it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Donnelly.

Go ahead, Mr. Cleary.

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I fully support the motion. I think it's a good, solid motion and I think it needs to be done. I would like to echo a lot of things that Mr. Donnelly said as well.

When it comes to the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery, I'm pretty emotional. I shouldn't be as emotional as I am; it should all be about facts and it should be clinical, but I get emotional.

The reason is that prior to becoming a politician, I was a journalist. I grew up in outport Newfoundland in Riverhead and Harbour Grace. I graduated school in 1984. Below my yearbook photo was "ambition"; mine said "journalist", and that's what I became.

In journalism you have beats: you cover different courts, or health, or.... I covered fisheries. Covering fisheries was all I wanted to do, because it was where I came from.

When I was a child, poverty smelled like fish, and I had a problem with that. Of course, now there is no smell at all, because there's no fish.

I became a journalist and I got the fisheries beat. I remember being in the room with John Crosbie in 1991 when he shut down the northern cod fishery. I was sitting right up front next to him, right in front of him. I was always the type that sat in the front row, especially with things I really cared about, and I watched Crosbie shut down the fishery as the fishermen from Petty Harbour, which is a community in my riding, tried to beat into the room. They couldn't get in because there was a door in between the metal bars. They couldn't get in.

I remember Crosbie saying that the fishery shutdown would last two years. What the fishermen were most upset about was the amount of compensation they were getting. I believe when it was initially announced, it was \$215 a week. That's what fishermen who had worked all their lives as fishermen would get. They were frustrated.

There came a point in my journalistic life when I wanted to become a politician. The reason I wanted to become a politician was that I didn't think the politicians who came before me were doing the job, so I wanted to see if I could do better. That's why I became a politician.

So here I am. It's 20 years after they shut down the northern cod fishery. We lost 80,000 people; that's how many people we lost—80,000 people. We've got communities now that are destined to die; there is nothing there. It has been 20 years, and there has been absolutely no recovery of the fishery. The stocks are in as bad a shape now as they were 20 years ago.

I made a point earlier about there being no rebuilding plan and no recovery targets. That's ridiculous. I put out a press release last week from Dr. Jeff Hutchings, one of the leading cod scientists in Canada. He talked about how he agreed with my call for an inquiry. There should be a rebuilding plan and there should be recovery targets. It's ridiculous that there are not.

Here we are today, and there's been no recovery of the fishery, none at all. We've lost 80,000 people; our culture, our economic

base, the economic rock of rural Newfoundland and Labrador is not there. All we're thinking about is life after oil, because that's a big fat question mark. People don't know what life will be after oil. Outside of oil, for rural Newfoundland and Labrador there are Alberta jobs that have brought in a lot of money—if you see new homes and new cars, it's because of Alberta jobs—but outside of that, people don't know what our economy is going to be based on after oil. We don't know.

Now here we are today. I know the minister was here a couple of weeks ago. Last week he talked about how this is hypothetical, but it's more than hypothetical. We know that the Conservative government is giving serious consideration to it.

If you remove the owner-operator and fleet separation policy and we go to a system of ITQs similar to the one in British Columbia, it will spell the end of what's left of the fishery. It will take away the independents. That cannot be allowed to happen. It cannot be allowed to happen.

Mr. MacAulay has talked about a study. I understand what you say, Mr. Kamp; you don't like the fact that the beginning of this motion basically makes a conclusion that if you take this away, it is going to do irreparable damage, and I can see your point there, absolutely: it makes a conclusion before we even go out to study. However, this has to be studied.

● (1730)

As I said before, the consultations that took place were by invitation only. Fishermen cannot use the Internet. A lot can't, in rural Newfoundland; they don't have the Internet. If you remove this policy, it's going to be as much an impact as the shutdown of the cod fishery.

The Chair: Mr. Cleary, can I ask you to bring your comments to a conclusion? We're running short of time, and Mr. MacAulay is on the list of speakers. I'd like to give him a chance.

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Are there time limits for me to speak, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes, there are. We have a time limit for our committee. We have to call the question before the committee ends.

Mr. Ryan Cleary: I'm sorry. It's only 4:00, right?

The Chair: No, it's not.

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Just to sum up, I think I have been pretty clear in terms of why this is important. I do implore the members opposite to reconsider. If you are going to vote against this motion, please reconsider.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cleary.

Mr. MacAulay, I ask you to be brief.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I know time is short, but there is a difference between the cod fishery and some of the inshore fishery, particularly in Prince Edward Island—area 24 lobsters are in good shape, and area 26A was much stronger last year. All this can do is take the fishery—some very lucrative fishery—out of the hands of the owner-operator policy and put it in the hands of the corporate sector. All I would ask is that the committee listen to the people who directly depend upon these two policies.

I thank you, Mr. Chair, for your time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacAulay.

Are you ready for the question?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I'd like to have a recorded vote, too.

The Chair: Yes, I anticipated that, Mr. MacAulay. Thank you.

(Motion negatived: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: There being no further business, this committee stands adjourned.

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