

EXPROPRIATION WITHOUT COMPENSATION

After 12 years of public debate the Ontario government awarded to itself, in the 1970s, full control of the Niagara Escarpment. In contrast, the current Queen's Park administration imposed state control on almost 2 million acres of land, much of it privately owned, in less than 12 months. Named the Golden Horseshoe Greenbelt, this latest manipulation of private assets purports to improve the Greater Toronto Area with all the alleged benefits of centralized land use planning – no more urban sprawl, sweeping vistas of protected crop lands, claimed environmental cleansing, happy campers and contented farmers everywhere in evidence.

Between Escarpment & Greenbelt legislation, similar restrictions were placed on the Oak Ridges Moraine, ecologically sensitive real estate mostly in private ownership, on Toronto's northern perimeter. Regulatory blending of the Moraine, the Escarpment and the Greenbelt is not emphasized by provincial authorities. No landowner compensation or any appeal against Ministerial decrees in these interconnected "provincially significant" areas is likewise soft pedaled. But Greenbelt press releases from Ontario's Ministry of Municipal Affairs, the agency responsible for what looks like a massive re-distribution of wealth, are instructive. Research and public education is assigned to a 5-member Foundation which has already received a government grant of \$25 million. Interpretation and implementation, arguably the most ominous words in government Newspeak, is assigned to a Council consisting of 9 members. Appointments to both these tribunals are entirely at provincial discretion, not by municipality recommendation or citizen vote.

In public meetings convened as the fast-tracked Greenbelt program evolved it was stated the views of affected farmers should & would carry weight proportionate to their number and occupation. But representation imbalance is not uncommon where rural land use is franchised exclusively to urban planners & environmental extremists. Farmers complain they're not consulted before, during or after their lands, a primary asset on which their livelihood, life style and retirement prospects depend, are fed into a regulatory meat grinder by government "experts" who haven't planted a crop or mucked out a cattle barn since Pontius was a pilot. They like hundreds of rural landowners equally at risk but who don't farm are angry that not a single representative from the "greenbelted" rural community has been appointed to the Foundation & only two in any way associated with agriculture are named to the Council. Thus, by government decree, it seems citizens at greatest risk of Greenbelt social & economic impacts are disqualified for proportional representation when their own future is at stake.

Accordingly, landowners are demanding a closer look at those folks evidently pre-approved for a place at the Greenbelt table. Some of these are seen to move effortlessly between senior positions in elected government and equally prestigious assignments with unelected Non Government Organizations (NGOs). Such co-mingled relationships suggest that restrictions on private land proposed by one partner will be enthusiastically endorsed by the other. That such alliances might improve the career prospects of their chief protagonists at the down-stream expense of affected landowners is a suspicion not yet investigated but hard to dismiss.

Observers point to the Natural Heritage Information Centre (NHIC) at Peterborough as evidence of a mutually beneficial alliance between government bureaucrats and special interest lobbyists. That facility operates a mammoth database in which is recorded any land believed to be the habitat of allegedly endangered plant, animal, bird, aquatic or bacterial life as sighted by professional biologists or, as sometimes suspected, by week-end hikers and amateur bird watchers. This sophisticated surveillance tool belongs to The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a powerful American environmental conglomerate once described in *Outside* magazine as "Century 21 with a built-in buyer" because it assembles vast acreages of land for eventual sale at substantial mark-ups to regional and national governments.

With claimed status as a non-profit charity & a perceived reputation as a global real estate operator, TNC is a very large and very wealthy operation under either description. Its Ontario land holdings alone are said to total 45,000 acres. With about 1500 employees, its U.S. net worth is estimated at more than a billion dollars and its annual budget at \$300 million. Its membership, including thousands of supporters who don't believe corporate profit is the TNC chief objective, exceeds 700,000 world-wide. This powerful organization is a partner with government in many NHIC locations across North America, including several Canadian provinces, notably Alberta.

On these multiple databases thousands, perhaps millions, of acres of private property are listed for future designation without knowledge or consent of affected landowners. Public access to certain database material such as total acreages so far recorded requires advance NHIC permission and an assigned Internet password.

In 1996 the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) gifted \$600,000.00 to The Nature Conservancy of Canada, a clone of its American parent, to “design a program that would enable the Ontario government to acquire more land for public parks”. At TNC’s direction & under supervision of a senior MNR ecologist the NHIC was thereafter established as a partnership of the MNR, a government agency, with TNC & the Federation of Ontario Naturalists (FON), both non-government special interest groups. Five years later the MNR ecologist was named to the Oak Ridges Moraine Advisory Panel, an appointment simultaneously extended to TNC & FON. Two years later the same ecologist was vetted to the Niagara Escarpment Commission where TNC was immediately awarded “public body status” in Escarpment land use planning. A speculative explanation for that award lies in an MNR proposal that quickly followed it. The proposal, later approved, recommended provincial acceptance of a “conservation land” designation on property adjacent to public lands and owned by a “recognized conservation organization”. That such designation automatically exempts “approved” conservation organizations from municipal property taxes wasn’t mentioned. Thus the tax base in some Ontario municipalities is significantly decreased leaving area landowners outside the MNR/NGO loop to make good the resulting shortfall in municipal revenues. Tax juggling aside, another two years later, in 2005, the same MNR scientist was named one of the Greenbelt Foundation’s 5 members.

Other Foundation appointees seem at home on both sides of the patronage street. Its Chair is a former Ontario Cabinet Minister, one member is a high profile lawyer associated with an Ontario government program, one a current MNR deputy Minister, another a former policy advisor to an Ontario premier. The fifth delegate provides an especially cogent link between public service and private interests. He’s reported to be the former executive director of the Environmental Defense Fund of Canada (EDF), another American based lobby group, this one with a 1967 founding intention to “discover new strategies to influence the political system” and a penchant for initiating litigation to that end. He’s also a former Canadian director of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), yet another U.S.-based professional lobbyist with a multi-million dollar war chest chiefly known in Canada for its aggressive opposition to the East Coast seal hunt and its successful campaign to end Ontario’s spring bear hunt. With an annual U.S. budget approaching 20 million dollars, the Canadian office of the EDF is said to be coordinating the Ontario Greenbelt Alliance, a coalition, & rumored government front, that says it represents some 80 groups all claiming to be “united in their support for a world-class Greenbelt in the Golden Horseshoe”.

Many “greenbelted” residents are wondering about what is being facetiously called the MNR/TNC/FON/EDF/IFAW Land Company, its intertwined directorate and its first \$25 million taxpayer gift. And about unrepresented farmers & marginalized non-farm rural landowners, defeated, demeaned & perhaps one day ruined by unproven environmental science and land planning overkill on the Escarpment, the Moraine and the Greenbelt.

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