



Denial

Why the powerful and the desperate ignore the No Exit signs.

THROUGH the last half of the 1700s, traders at Hudson's Bay Company posts on James and Hudson Bay reported taking thousands of caribou for meat and skins every year. By the early 1800s, relentless hunting had pushed the caribou into steep decline. Hunters responded by intensifying the harvest until, for all practical purposes, the caribou were gone.

Sixty years later, the same thing happened to the bison on the Canadian prairies. Hunters and traders serving the market for meat and "buffalo" robes maintained hunting pressures as bison numbers fell. In the early- and mid-1870s, so many robes were produced that prices declined. Nevertheless, native and Métis hunters responded by killing even more of the remaining bison to maintain their livelihoods. By the end of the 1870s, the bison too were mostly gone.

In both cases, the human participants could see what was happening. But they had built their survival strategies, skills, trading relations and patterns of behaviour around exploiting an initially rich resource. They had come to depend on a doomed enterprise. Change was too difficult. Desperate hope that all the signs were wrong was more attractive.

The same phenomenon darkens many points of human history, and much of our present behaviour. Sumerian irrigation and Easter Island tree cutting, the whaling industry and the North Atlantic cod fishery, tobacco smoking, urban sprawl, groundwater depletion and greenhouse gas emissions have all sailed past their best-before dates, in part because people with power and people with no other options favour denial over change.

Dependency on a doomed agenda is a much bigger problem today than it was for the hunters who supplied the fur trade.

Dependency on a doomed agenda is a much bigger problem today than it was for the hunters who supplied the fur trade. Our economic drivers may be increasingly erratic, but they are deeply entrenched and globally powerful. What's at risk is also global. Depletion of key social and biophysical resources – ocean fisheries, ground water reserves, traditional knowledge sources, local food capacities, biodiversity, climate stability, etc. – now threatens all of us, at least indirectly.

Perhaps that is the proper context for considering the current federal government's extraordinary moves to hide environmental problems and gut protective legislation. The government has been firing scientists and muzzling the ones it has not fired. It has ended most multi-stakeholder consultations and eliminated bodies providing independent advice.

Bill C-38, the omnibus budget implementation act passed in June, was mostly devoted to eviscerating federal environmental law. It shrinks federal protection of fish habitat, weakens protection for species at risk and reduces water quality monitoring. It also replaces the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* with a new set of unpredictably discretionary

requirements that are narrowly focused, secretive, politicized and initiated too late to be effective or efficient. The new approach will be applied to maybe five per cent of the projects now subject to federal environmental assessment. The other 95 per cent will get no federal assessment.

In his speech launching Bill C-38 in the House of Commons, Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver stressed that the driving idea was faster resource exploitation. Nonetheless, he also claimed to be committed to environmental responsibility. "Even though we are making many changes to ensure that the process is efficient," he said, "we also want to make the environmental protection more effective."

On the surface, Mr. Oliver's statement is merely an example of political spin crossing the line into lying. More deeply, it is a case of double denial. Mr. Oliver is refusing to face the history of environmental harm that can result from ill-informed government decisions, and he is closing his eyes to the signs around him. Severe climate change may be looming and other stresses on planetary systems may be growing, but facing that would be too hard. Better to hope that all the signs are wrong. Better to sweep aside environmental constraints in the interests of even speedier resource exploitation.

The old caribou and bison hunters found this to be a losing strategy. Sooner or later, so will Mr. Oliver and his colleagues. 🐾

Robert Gibson is the chair of Alternatives' editorial board, and a professor of environmental studies at the University of Waterloo.