

Anthony Britneff: B.C. needs to restore 'adequate public oversight' to protect the environment

ANTHONY BRITNEFF Updated: June 29, 2018



The collapse of the Mount Polley mine's tailings dam in 2014 allowed toxic contents from the tailings pond to flow into Hazeltine Creek, with some reaching Quesnel Lake. JONATHAN HAYWARD / CP

When a dam holding back a massive amount of highly toxic water gave way at the Mount Polley mine in August 2014, it triggered more than one of

the worst environmental disasters in Canadian history.

It exposed the dark underside of the B.C. government's policy of drumming large numbers of public servants out of the business of protecting our environment and turning much of that work over, instead, to the private sector.

The Mount Polley spill unleashed a million cubic metres of contaminated water and sludge into a once quiet two-metre-wide stream, which created a raging torrent of mud 50 metres wide that sent toxins flowing unchecked into Quesnel Lake for days on end and polluted one of the deepest and cleanest lakes in the world.

Essentially, professionals employed by the mine's owner, Imperial Metals, made decisions that triggered an unmitigated disaster, one that dramatically underscored the pitfalls of the province's "professional reliance" model.

On a daily basis, professionals working in natural resource industries across B.C. make all kinds of decisions. When things function properly, those decisions are effectively scrutinized by professional associations and by registered professionals working for the government, both there to protect the public interest.

The Mount Polley disaster underscored that such oversight was not happening. In fact, as the government relied increasingly on outside professionals, it gutted the ranks of public servants whose primary jobs were to ensure that outside professionals properly discharged their duties.

I saw this gutting of the public service firsthand, especially in my latter years with B.C.'s Forest Service. But something else also happened during those years that concerned me equally as much. And that is how the agency I worked for fired whistleblowers and effectively drummed a contractor out of business — an expert who saw that the government itself had mismanaged and corrupted the information it needed to properly manage publicly-owned forests.

Because the government lacked credible information, it had no real ability to assess whether professionals inside or outside government were properly discharging their duties.

That contractor was Martin Watts. Watts ran a consulting company that specialized in modeling forest growth and carbon. When he told the government that the models it relied on were deeply flawed, he soon found himself excluded

from government business opportunities. Government simply did not want to hear that the fundamentally important decisions it was making — such as the rate at which our forests were logged and its purchase of forest carbon offsets — were based on faulty data.

It is no coincidence that the government recently introduced legislation on public-interest disclosure, commissioned a review of professional reliance and initiated a review of forest inventory and growth models.

Denied his livelihood, Watts eventually, and at great personal expense, launched a civil suit against the province for essentially blacklisting him. The case, before the B.C. Supreme Court, resumes in early July in Victoria. It is being closely watched by senior civil servants.

The Watts case highlights another disturbing aspect of the “professional reliance” model, and that’s the degree to which senior public servants and professional associations may squelch the views of an outside expert or professional if those views cast doubt on how other professionals conduct themselves.

At the core of Watts’ criticisms is that, for years, experts and professionals inside and outside government used corrupt, out-of-date and incorrectly compiled data for modeling purposes, an allegation that raises countless questions about how sustainably our forests are being managed.

Government now has before it the report it commissioned from an independent expert on professional reliance. Disasters like Mount Polley, and the disdain with which past governments dealt with people who spoke uncomfortable truths to power, both highlight why such a review is long overdue.

Now we must await action — action that restores adequate public oversight and values all expert opinions, not just those that conform to what the powers that be want to hear.

Anthony Britneff worked for the B.C. Forest Service for 40 years, holding senior professional positions in inventory, silviculture and forest health.

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