

The Coast, Editorial

By: Bruce Wark, June 1, 2006



Atlantic Superstores lobbed a stink bomb into the provincial election campaign last week when the giant retailer announced that part of its Barrington Street outlet would soon be open on Sunday. Starting on June 11, two days before the provincial election, the Barrington emporium will be peddling turnips and tangerines, dead flesh and fish, face paint and pills in a bid to woo Sabbath shoppers away from Lawton's and Lockett's. Tory premier Rodney MacDonald declared that's OK by him as long as Superstore skates around the law the same way other businesses do. And the NDP's Darrell Dexter told voters that like it or not, Sunday shopping "is going to become a reality" even though a majority voted against it less than two years ago. Thanks Darrell!

The Superstore story broke as I sat down to write about how weak all three main political parties are on preserving what's left of our natural environment. Oh yes, the Tories have a patchwork of promises, including more "protected green spaces," a new agency to promote energy conservation and more support for public transit. Ditto the Grits, who also promise to spend a million dollars a year to clean up litter and another million fighting the effects of acid rain by adding lime to watercourses and farm fields. The NDP is pushing something called "a competitive, sustainable economy" based on "clean, renewable energy" and more protection for "Nova Scotia's natural habitat."

But none of these parties seems to realize that it will take much more than band-aids and environmental cliches to overcome the entrenched effects of an economic system that depends on ever-increasing rates of consumption. Getting and spending are the centrepieces of the modern economy. No wonder that soon after 9/11, George W. Bush, fearful of an economic downturn, urged Americans to do their patriotic duty and go shopping. A 2004 study from the GPI Atlantic think tank points out that the richest fifth of the world's population consumes 84 percent of the world's paper, while the poorest fifth consumes just one percent. The richest fifth drives 87 percent of the world's vehicles, while the poorest drive less than one percent. And it's not simply that rich folks (you and me) are greedy pigs. Far from it. It's just that our secular religion has convinced us that consumption and convenience bring pleasure and profits. No Sunday shopping? How outrageous! "I'm from Toronto," a young man told CBC TV last week. "I've been here three years now and the idea of stores not being open on Sunday is terrible. It kinda kills the day."

If Darrell Dexter is right and Sunday shopping is inevitable, the big box stores in the 580-acre Bayers Lake Industrial Park will soon be humming seven days a week. Ironically, the car-friendly BLIP is within sight of

the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area, a 4,300-acre paradise that Raymond Plourde of the Ecology Action Centre and other activists are struggling to save. Plourde says that aside from its many recreational uses, the area is home to migratory birds and other wildlife, including the endangered mainland moose. The city wants the province to designate the wilderness as a park. But the provincial department of transportation is proposing to punch a four-lane highway through it to ease traffic congestion and save eight precious minutes of driving time between highways 103 and 102.

The wilderness is a real asset to our city," Plourde says. "It would be so easy to just have it carved up into more sprawling suburbs and roads and just to lose it." Easy indeed. We're destroying other wilderness areas on the city's fringes with monster homes, strip malls and acres of asphalt. Development pressures will continue to shape policy until mainstream politicians recognize that wilderness, fresh air and clean water are essential to our survival and that mega-shopping complexes like the BLIP and the new Dartmouth Crossing project actually threaten it.

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