

James Bay project: hoodwink public, destroy environment

By BOYCE RICHARDSON

As we can see by watching television any night, many advertisers work on the assumption that if you repeat a load of old rubbish often enough, eventually somebody — perhaps many people — will believe it. The James Bay Development Corporation operates on the same principle. Their advertising man is Jacques Gauthier. And he never tires of repeating the same old rubbish about how much concern the corporation has for the environment (most recently in The Gazette, Sept. 17).

Gauthier's spiel never addresses itself to the problems that are being, and will be, created by the gigantic project that they have started to build; but always relies almost exclusively on the report knocked together in a couple of months after the project was announced by a busy group of federal and provincial civil servants, the report that is grandiloquently referred to as the federal-provincial task force inquiry into the environmental effects of the James Bay project.

Propagandizing

The main object of this report appears to have been to provide propaganda material for the James Bay corporation in the difficult years ahead — difficult because as they are creating a vast wasteland, Gauthier's job is to convince the public that they are really making it nicer. (This double-think is everywhere now: in Ontario the creation of a huge garbage dump on a pretty wilderness area is being sold to the public as a possible future tourist attraction!)

The federal-provincial report was carefully

Dialogue A column open to readers who wish to express viewpoints on topics of interest. Mr. Richardson is a Montreal journalist, broadcaster, film maker, and author of the recently released Sierra Club book *James Bay: Plot to drown the north woods*.

worded to provide an umbrella of justification for the project. The single phrase that the corporation repeats over and over again, that the new ecosystem could prove as satisfactory as the original system, certainly did not spring spontaneously from the scientists who were involved in this very sketchy study.

So let us examine some facts about the James Bay project:

- The international experience with huge man-made lakes has led the scientists who study them almost unanimously to the conclusion that the problems are not technological — after all, plenty of people know how to build a big dam — but biological. The prevailing opinion is that three to five years of intensive biological study should be done before a decision is made whether or not to intervene in a natural system on the scale proposed in James Bay. The fact is that the James Bay project was decided before a single minute of biological study was done. And everything that has gone on since is an attempt to justify this fundamentally untenable position.

- The project is designed for one purpose

only: to produce electricity. Nothing else matters to its builders. Even if it were possible for a modified environment to stabilize and become as good as the natural environment, that could not possibly happen behind single-purpose dams. The water levels will fluctuate from month to month and year to year. No plant or animal life can adjust to this.

- The government, and the James Bay Corporation, have been utterly intransigent in refusing even to discuss possible modifications of the scheme to take account of other needs besides those of producing electricity. The Indians asked for such changes, were rejected out of hand, and were forced into court.

- Work has begun on the scheme but nobody knows exactly what the environmental effect will be. Even the corporation's witnesses in court, many of them provincial civil servants, could not say for sure. Witnesses for the Indians, including many of the most respected experts in their fields in North America, said that the biological knowledge does not exist to enable an intervention to be made on the proposed scale without running grave risks.

- Not to exaggerate the matter, it can be said with certainty that the James Bay project will overturn an environment which is adjusted to an enormous spring flood every year, and that to flatten this tempestuous natural cycle into a managed, level run-off throughout the year will certainly have drastic effects on the plant and animal life: that the ice regime in James Bay will be changed in ways that are unknown (Prof. Max Dunbar, of the Marine

Sciences Laboratory, for instance, said that it would take him two years of intensive work with two ships before he could answer any questions about the likely marine effects of the project); that enormous areas of dead trees, of an extent which no one can guess but in all reaching over an area equivalent to that from Montreal to Windsor, will be created; and that at many times of the year there will be great areas of mud flats.

- In view of these uncertainties, the federal government's complicity — especially at the level of the environment ministry — in the James Bay project as it is presently conceived, is regarded by many of the most concerned scientists working in the federal government as a disgrace.

- The entire Canadian political structure has proven inadequate to deal with a government that doesn't care what happens to the environment. In effect, the nation has acted like a banana republic. Not until the Indians and Inuit of the area were forced to go to court did the James Bay scheme come under intensive public analysis — and then, of course, it happened in quite the wrong forum, for the environmental quality of the work done in James Bay appears not to be an issue before the judge. The analysis is work that should have been done in the three to five years before the decision was made by Premier Bourassa in April, 1971.

Like all advertisers, Gauthier has immense cheek. It is shocking that he should go around saying that not one Indian will be displaced by the project. As the Indians have said over and over again, the key issue is what will happen

to the animals. Since a very high percentage of their wetland habitat is to be destroyed, the Indians fear for the effect. And if the animals are displaced, the Indians will not be able to hunt them in land which they have continued to use for many thousands of years until the present day. But Gauthier's offhand treatment of the problem of the Indians is perhaps not surprising in a corporation whose lawyers argued in court (a) that the Indians have no rights in the land they have always occupied and (b) that they have no right to their culture.

Contradiction

Gauthier, however, really should not have mentioned the Canispiscou river. The only firm environmental recommendation made by the famous task force was that the Canispiscou river should not be dammed. I heard with my own ears two members of the Quebec government (Goldbloom & Massé) say that the government accepted the report and would implement it. Two or three months later, Phase I of the scheme was announced, including a huge dam on the Canispiscou.

What happened to all federal and provincial defenders of the environment, who had recommended against that dam? Where were their protests? What action did they take to enforce the recommendations of their report?

... Nothing happened. Because in James Bay, Robert Bourassa has shown that he can get away with anything, and that all the governmental talk about the environment is strictly lip-service designed to hoodwink the public.