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Delta-Richmond East Conservative MP John Cummins says Prime Minister Stephen Harper is doing an outstanding job on a number of issues and challenges, however, he opposes the proposed new Fisheries Act that he claims will privatize the fishery.

MP at odds with Harper, again

By Nelson Bennett

It is so fine a point, Conservative MP John Cummins (Delta-Richmond East) has a hard time explaining why it is worth risking his neck politically to oppose it.

Fish are a public resource. The government manages that resource to such an extent that it appears to own it.

But the government doesn't own public resources - the public does.

That will change under Bill C-45, a new Fisheries Act being championed by federal Fisheries Minister Loyola Hearn, says Cummins, who warns the new act will privatize the fishery, despite assertions to the contrary by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

"What the minister wants now is he wants to be able to name who will fish," Cummins told the News. "The fishery will become a privilege, which will be decided by the minister."

"It's designed to privatize the fishery," says Bill Otway, president of the Sport Fishing Defence Alliance.

"It is alarming," agrees Irvin Figg, president of the United

Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union-CAW. "It suggests moving toward privatization of the resource."

The proposed bill is similar to a new fisheries act proposed by the Liberal government a decade ago.

"We were opposed when the Liberals brought (forward) a similar act in 1996," Cummins said. "Now we're in government, the new minister, he says it's OK. Well, I don't agree with him. If the policy was bad under the Liberals, there's no reason why it should be good under us."

Cummins's opposition to Bill C-45 got him kicked off the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

"Hearn doesn't want to walk into the room and defend the act to John Cummins, who knows a thousand times more about fisheries management and the act itself," says Phil Eidsvik, executive director of the B.C. Fisheries Survival Coalition and "lapsed" Conservative party member.

"I don't know of a single commercial or recreational fishing group in the country that supports this act."

The "spanking" Cummins got will not stop him from criticizing his own government.

"I'm fully supportive of Mr. Harper," Cummins said. "I think he's doing an outstanding job on a whole host of issues and challenges that are facing this country. On this particular issue, I don't particularly agree. It's my right to speak out. I don't think people elected me to keep my mouth shut."

The new fisheries act would invest the minister of fisheries with unprecedented proprietary control over fish, the bill's critics say.

It would allow the fisheries minister to allocate fish to individuals, special groups (like aboriginal fishermen) and unions.

The fear is that the new power could be used to reward political friends. Otway also fears it would give Ottawa a blank cheque to settle treaties in B.C.

"There will be no non-native commercial fishery in British Columbia," Otway warns.

Environmental groups are also opposing the new act, saying it guts the conservation aspects of the existing Fisheries Act.

"The bill lacks language that requires the Minister of Fisheries to protect Canada's fish and fish habitat," says Bill Wareham, acting director for the David Suzuki Foundation's Marine Conservation Program.

Allan Macdonald, DFO's acting director of resource management, says the Fisheries Act is 139 years old and needs updating. He insists the new act, which is at second reading, does not water down existing protection of fish and habitat. "We're trying to explain to the environmental community it keeps the current provisions within the act in place," Macdonald said.

He also insists the new act does not privatize the fishery.

"The resource is still common property," he said.

Macdonald said the new act simply codifies many of DFO's current practices and procedures.

Some of those current practices are illegal, Cummins maintains. On several occasions, the government has tried to use fish allocations to fund make-work programs and other projects, Cummins said.

"It's illegal for the government to fund its ordinary and expected operations from the sale of fish it doesn't own," Cummins said. "The government doesn't own the fish - the people do."

The new act would allow the minister to issue allocations for up to 15 years. That would give fishermen the kind of certainty that they could, quite literally, bank on, Macdonald said.

The new act would also make decisions made by the minister more transparent, Macdonald said. It would also make enforcement more effective, he said, because tribunals could issue licence sanctions and penalties. Currently, fines issued by DFO have to be prosecuted in court.

"It would be much more efficient and more cost-effective," Macdonald said.

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