

Bjork is Our Green, Anti-Privatization Ally

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Wednesday, August 25, 2010

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It was a bittersweet day yesterday in the fight against neoliberal globalization. Bjork is helping fight green energy privatization in Iceland while Canada supports global neoliberal resource rape.

Prime Minister [Harper is sending \\$130m of our money to AbitibiBowater](#) after Newfoundland and Labrador premier Danny Williams nationalized their assets after the company threatened to bail on the province, contravening a generations-old agreement.

Williams is happy that Ottawa will reimburse AbitibiBowater for the assets, and why wouldn't he? It's an indirect wealth transfer of \$130m from Canada to Newfoundland and Labrador.

Harper's justification? *"This approach reaffirms the Government of Canada's commitment to maintaining a rules-based business environment that facilitates free trade and encourages investment."*

What does this mean? This means that a corporation can abandon its decades-old agreement with a province regarding resource management with impunity and with compensation.

"A rules-based business environment" is code for free trade trumping domestic sovereignty and autonomy. The rules that matter now are international neoliberal, pro-corporate rights agreements that encourage transnational corporations to buy and sell public assets without impediment.

Harper's justification continues: *"The Government of Canada is moving forward on an ambitious free trade and investment agenda—a cornerstone of Canada's strong economic position and future growth. The government will continue to stand up for Canadian businesses at home and abroad by securing greater access to the North American marketplace."*

It certainly is an ambitious free trade agenda in which our government supports Canadian businesses taking over foreign public assets by stoking the reciprocity of allowing foreign corporations to take over our public assets; that's the "securing greater access" part.

It also demonstrates the Canadian Con-Lib coalition's love of economic growth, a paradigm that is direct opposition to averting climate breakdown.

Meanwhile yesterday, across the Atlantic and up a bit, it turns out that [Bjork doesn't like privatizing](#) parts Iceland's almost completely green power grid, a move to protect measures to avert climate breakdown.

Good for her. And we should help her out. Read how at the end.

A Vancouver company called Magma Energy is close to finishing its purchase of a geothermal generator. 17,000 Icelanders have signed a petition calling for a referendum on the sale that would inject some cash

into the country after it was decimated by its lost investments in the sub-prime mortgage crash in the United States.

But it's just another Shock Doctrine tactic.

Bjork writes that 85% *"would like to regain the rights to their energy source."* That is a bold and insulting opinion to hold in this era of global neoliberalism where the Magmas and AbitibiBowaters of the world feel they should be able to buy what they want without those pesky citizens getting in the way claiming they have rights over the heat in the ground. Such nerve!

We learn that, *"Iceland's Chamber of Commerce says the move will scare off foreign investors, harm the island's business climate and hamper any recovery from its 2008 financial collapse."*

It should scare off foreign investors; they're a core part of the problem and most of the reason why Iceland, as a foreign investor in US sub-prime mortgages, is in financial difficulties.

The business climate to be harmed by not selling the heat under Iceland to a Vancouver company is the neoliberal climate that would allow our homegrown folks to extract whatever profit they wish from their energy provision instead of allowing those who live in Iceland to continue having cheap energy that they sit on, something that BC has enjoyed for half a century before Gordon Campbell's relentless assault on BC Hydro.

But when it comes to recovery from Iceland's 2008 financial collapse, since Iceland's energy is almost all green, ensuring that remains public and green is the most responsible way they could try to recover their financial stability.

Further, I find this political scientist's sense of referenda interesting: *"A referendum on a particular private contract isn't good politics," said Gunnar Helgi Kristinsson, a professor of political science at the University of Iceland. 'If the government wants to hold a referendum, it would have to pose a general question to the public, such as whether energy companies should be privately or publicly held.'"*

Considering the polling in favour of retaining public power, Bjork et al **should** push the government to have a broad policy referendum on public energy so the people can widely reject the Shock Doctrine model.

The best argument for Bjork and the public's anti-privatization agenda comes from the head economist of Iceland's Chamber of Commerce:

"Blocking foreign ownership of natural resources will hurt foreign investment in one of Iceland's most attractive industries, said Bjorn Thor Arnarson, head economist with the Chamber of Commerce. Iceland is 'trailing far behind other countries' in luring foreign investors, who may back away in coming years 'because they are scared politicians will meddle,' he said in an interview."

Hurting foreign investment seems like a good way for Iceland to protect its almost completely green power grid. Good for them!

And if Iceland is trailing behind in luring foreign investors, we should congratulate them.

But what is most galling is to characterize as meddling the mechanics of democracy. The implication is that the natural law of the universe is the free market and interventions by the government or the people to retain public ownership are compromises. I think it's the other way around. [Democracy should trump corporate interests.](#)

Finally, let's let Bjork inject some common sense into what ought to be the natural priorities:

"Icelanders have 'a unique relationship with geothermal energy--all houses in Reykjavik are heated this way,' Bjork said. 'It is cheap and has always been public property.'"

Now, what kind of public servant politician would sell out a good system for citizens in favour of global corporate interests? Shock Doctrine privateers.

Iceland had enough of them to get into their economic mess. They still have enough now to potentially cripple themselves further. And Canada? We've been card-carrying global neoliberal privateers for almost 30 years.

We suck and our politicians will continue to sell out our public assets and infrastructure [at fire sale prices](#) until we stop them.

And if you don't like the prime minister giving \$130m of our money to AbitibiBowater and you support Bjork and the citizens of Iceland who want to keep their green grid public, and you want the prime minister to stop Vancouver's Magma from trying to steal some of Iceland's power, you may want to email the blue sweater vest. [His email address is pm@pm.gc.ca.](mailto:pm@pm.gc.ca)

And tell him that citizens and democracy matter more than global corporate profitability in an era when green energy is a core element in the fight against climate breakdown.