

Tory senators grill seal-cull opponent

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Scientist's findings greeted with derision, disbelief



Sen. Donald Oliver (INGRID BULMER / Staff)

OTTAWA — Conservative senators gave a rough ride Tuesday night to a scientist who opposes a proposed seal cull. The tone at the committee meeting wavered from respectful to confrontational to downright bizarre.

David Lavigne of the International Fund for Animal Welfare presented evidence that culling thousands of seals in Atlantic Canada may not boost cod stocks as hoped, and could in fact hurt them.

"Just going out and culling, based on current knowledge, with all of the uncertainty, is risky and ill-advised, in my opinion," Lavigne said.

But most senators were having none of it. They grilled Lavigne on his organization's staffing levels, asked whether he is a vegetarian (he is not) and accused him of being in the pocket of the anti-seal hunt lobby.

Lavigne gave a technical and heavily notated opening statement but later struggled to maintain his composure as senators brushed off his arguments.

At one point, even his comment that overfishing was the cause of the cod collapse elicited interruptions of "No, it's not!" from Sen. Donald Oliver, a Conservative from Nova Scotia. The committee chairman had to call for order.

Sen. Michael MacDonald, another Nova Scotia Conservative, accused Lavigne of cherry-picking data.

"Sir, you make a lot of generalities, but you don't give us any empirical evidence," MacDonald said.

"Excuse me," Lavigne replied. "That's what all those footnotes are about. You have to read the footnotes."

After being hunted to near extinction decades ago, the grey seal population has rebounded to about 400,000. Some believe this population growth is depressing the stocks of groundfish like cod. Fisheries and Oceans Canada is considering a cull of up to 220,000 seals.

Lavigne argued that with so many species in play, removing one predator doesn't mean the numbers of one prey will rebound. He argued there is considerable evidence that a seal cull could hurt cod populations, and he presented a diagram depicting the complexity of the ecosystem.

"That is the real world we're dealing with," Lavigne said.

MacDonald responded: "That's a piece of paper, sir. That's not the real world. The real world are people down there and communities are falling apart and no one can make a living anymore and fish stocks won't repair themselves."

At one point, Sen. Ethel Cochrane, a Conservative from Newfoundland and Labrador, told an anecdote about being in Europe and seeing people shooting muskrats that were clogging up bridge culverts. She implied that Lavigne's group, IFAW, was in some way responsible.

A confused Lavigne asked why his organization would ever endorse shooting muskrats.

"But they were doing it," Cochrane answered.

"That's not IFAW. That's Europeans," Lavigne said. "That's like saying Canadians are IFAW."

"Yeah, but you're international," replied Cochrane, eliciting more confusion.

The senator then asked whether Lavigne was lobbying to stop the muskrat cull. He said he was unaware of the issue.

"Muskrats don't raise enough money," MacDonald heckled.

"That's pretty cynical," Lavigne said.

"Well, it's true," MacDonald shot back.

MacDonald later told The Chronicle Herald that he found Lavigne's whole presentation disingenuous.

"It's all misdirection," he said. "It's all a shell game with these people. It's all about avoiding the issue."

Lavigne said after the meeting that it was actually the most polite response he's had in three appearances before parliamentary committees.

"You're going to get misinformation, you're going to get misrepresentation of the science, in some cases you're going to get fabrication of the science," he said. "We saw a bit of that in there."

"If I was 30 years younger, I mean, I can remember when I was shocked by all this."

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