

“The federal government so badly botched the rollout of its signature act of reconciliation, Ottawa had no choice but to kill it.”

FROM ONE COLUMNIST TO ANOTHER

ON A LEAF-BLOWN November morning the day after Americans finally, thankfully, balloted an end to the most toxic mid-term election in memory (only to launch what will almost certainly be among the most brutish, divisive, negative, nasty, racist, vile, fact-free and hate-filled presidential campaigns in U.S. history), *Atlantic Business Magazine’s* November-December issue quietly thudded into my virtual inbox. And, with it, John Risley’s always-provocative, ever-intriguing backpage Devil’s Advocate column.

In “Give Trust a Chance,” Risley wrote the breakdown of trust within our society and, with it, the loss of respect for our institutions, “is at the heart of the country’s—and indeed the world’s—current challenges.” I could sing that tune. But then he lost me.

“When an elected government wants and authorizes a project it deems to be in the national interest,” Risley asked, “is that not enough?”

Risley was talking about a project he supports: the Trans Mountain pipeline to transport Alberta oil to markets other than the United States. He wondered why citizens and environmental groups were allowed to use the courts to derail the project. (He conveniently forgets an also-elected government in British Columbia opposed the pipeline too. But let that be.)

“Do we not have the ability as a society to say enough is enough?” he asked. Before we answer that, consider another project our elected federal government also clearly wanted, and authorized, and deemed to be in the national interest.

In fall 2017, Ottawa unveiled one of its “signature acts of indigenous reconciliation.” The government would take back one-quarter of the lucrative \$92-million Arctic surf clam quota from its monopoly rights holder and offer it instead to an indigenous-controlled bidder to create “middle-class jobs” for the region’s First Nations. That monopoly rights holder was Clearwater Seafoods, a company founded by one-and-the-same John Risley.

According to the CBC, Clearwater employed “remarkably blunt language” in “confidential dealings” between Clearwater and the federal department of Fisheries and Oceans over the licence. Risley “secretly offered... to give up two of the company’s four clam licences on the condition DFO ensure whoever took them over would have to use Clearwater to harvest,

process and market the product.” Wrote Risley: “If the policy objective is to... satisfy those who seek to grow their own interests at our expense, we have a problem.”

When the government ultimately awarded the quota to a consortium that did not include Clearwater, the company immediately threatened to sue. In the end, Clearwater didn’t have to. In July, Ottawa—without explanation—canceled the surf clam licence. For now, Clearwater maintains its monopoly.

One could argue Ottawa’s decision had nothing to do with Risley’s correspondence. The federal government so badly botched the rollout of its signature act of reconciliation (can you say conflict of interest, corruption and an opaque bidding process?), Ottawa had no choice but to kill it.

But it’s hard not to note Risley—a well-connected billionaire with a Rolodex reaching into the prime minister’s office—used his access, along with threats of legal action, to pressure an elected government not to proceed with a project it saw as in the national interest. Risley’s view of what’s in the national interest is no different—though perhaps more self-interested—than the citizens and environmental groups challenging the pipeline.

In his column Risley acknowledged the issue of growing income inequality and the need to do something about it, but he didn’t dot-connect it to the reality that economic inequality creates access-to-power inequality. How can ordinary citizens—from globalization’s victims suckered by the false god of Trumpism to environmentalists watching their elected government’s pipeline paradise—trust those entrusted to look out for them?

It’s always more complicated than a column. We need to trust, but we need reasons to trust too.

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FEEDBACK

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