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CONSERVATIVES USE BUDGET TO DISMANTLE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTIONS

OTTAWA – The Harper government is using the budget implementation bill to force through comprehensive changes to the environmental protection regime for Canada's waterways, charged the NDP's Environment Critic Linda Duncan and Transport Critic Dennis Bevington.

Included in the bill meant to implement the budget are changes to the *Navigable Waters Protection Act*. These changes will allow the minister to, without consultation or prior notice, change the level of environmental protection for a river or lake. The change will allow the minister of transport to create classes of waterways to which environmental protection laws will no longer apply. Additionally, the changes fly in the face of Supreme Court of Canada decisions which require the federal government to consult with Aboriginal people before allowing projects to proceed.

"It provides a triple whammy", said Linda Duncan. "First the federal government avoids public consultation by ramming these changes through in a budget bill, despite recommended consultations; second, it grants broad discretion to exempt any project or class of projects that could impede navigation, absent any duty to notify or consult people affected, including First Nations. Third, it sets the stage for exempting projects from environmental assessment- what the Harper government considers `red tape`."

"Stephen Harper said the budget was too important to play political games with, yet this is exactly what he is doing by including these non-economic changes to a vital piece of environmental protection law," said Bevington. "This is a government which sees consultations with Canadians as a waste of time. These changes show a total lack of commitment to accountability and an attitude that making money is more important than protecting Canada's natural heritage. What we are seeing here is exactly the same kind of underhandedness that we saw with changes to the immigration system included in the previous budget bill."

Friends of the Old Man River, a Supreme Court of Canada precedent setting case that clearly established federal jurisdiction over the environment, was based on violations of this Act. These measures deal one more blow to the ability of the federal government to protect Canada's environment.

During the 39th Parliament, Stephen Harper tried to pass these changes as a stand alone bill, but failed following opposition from the NDP. The Harper government has chosen to ignore the Transport Committee and use the cover of economic stimulus to pursue its agenda.

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