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The Islands Trust Story: Act III - Peter Lamb

The Story So Far

Acts 1 and 2 described the formation of the Islands Trust in 1974 and subsequent amendments in 1977 to make the organization more 'mature and responsive'. The Trust priorities are to prepare official community plans and zoning bylaws on each island and a Regional Plan for the whole Trust area.

In the late 1970s, the Trust resists pressure from the provincial government to support specific development applications, notably projects on Denman, Salt Spring, Bowen and De Courcy Islands. In addition, serious concerns are raised about a proposed mining venture on Gambier Island and an airfield on Mayne Island.

It is now 1980 and the future of the Trust is in question.

Scene 1: A Review of Local Government

The Social Credit government undertakes a review of the regional government structure which has been in place across the province for over a decade. The regional districts, municipalities and the Islands Trust are made aware of the government's proposed direction in a discussion paper released in September 1980.

In a November 29, 1980 letter to Islands Trust Chair, John Rich, Minister Vander Zalm assures him that the Trust will continue to exercise essentially the same planning responsibilities. With that assurance, the trust relaxes and carries on with its preparation of a regional plan for the islands involving extensive consultation with provincial ministries and the public.

However, events are not unfolding as expected.

Scene 2: The Trust's Role Is Threatened

Throughout 1981, there is much debate across the province about the government's proposals for local government. In November, the Minister introduces *Bill 72, the Land Use Act*.

To provide clarification of the proposed legislation, the Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs addresses a meeting of all Trustees in December 1981. Once again, he assures Trustees that there are no substantial changes foreseen regarding the role of the Trust. However, the full implications for the Trust are not clear since the transitional section of the Bill has not been introduced. Trustees wisely ask for a staff report.

Three months later, a senior official from the Ministry tells Trustees that, under Bill 72, no local government, including the Islands Trust, would be able to adopt an Official Regional Plan. The Trust's proposed Regional Plan would be advisory only and have no legal effect. That was bad enough but trustees are really angry that Bill 72 also proposes to give a committee of unelected civil servants overriding authority over local plans.

Trustees quickly pass a resolution 'to record our utter dismay at the prospect that the role of the Islands Trust and the process of achieving our objectives would be severely eroded and diminished...' and urgently request clarification from the Minister. Over the next few months, the Islands Trust naturally mounts a concerted campaign to oppose those provisions in the Act. Trust Chair, John Rich, is tracked down at a northern fishing lodge to deal with the worsening threat.

Scene 3: Proposed Abolition Of The Trust

On July 27, 1982, Minister Vander Zalm moves second reading of Bill 72 with more unexpected changes—the gloves are off. The Minister notes that 'this Bill has undergone a great public process' but recognizes the 'considerable controversy' with respect to the Islands Trust.

While acknowledging the work of the Islands Trust in putting bylaws and community plans in place, he says 'this process can be carried through very effectively by the Regional Districts.' Toward the end of the proposed Act,

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section 190 states simply 'The *Islands Trust Act* is repealed.' In other words, Vander Zalm now proposes to abolish the Islands Trust.

The NDP Opposition, led by Charles Barber, leaps into action. He expresses anger over the introduction of a number of new features introduced into the proposed Act including the new clause that would abolish the Islands Trust without any prior consultation with the organization or with the residents affected. He argues at length that it is a loss for local government and a loss for local control. 'The islands will be treated like any other piece of real estate in BC.' In an emotional defence of the Trust, he denounces the government for its actions and says that 'destruction of the Islands Trust will lead to the destruction of the Gulf Islands as we know them.'

The Minister is clearly facing strong and widespread opposition to the Bill 72. Editorial opinion condemns the proposed destruction of the Trust. The *Vancouver Sun* declares, 'Abolishing the Islands Trust would be like removing the Beefeater guard from the Crown jewels in the Tower of London. It would be an invitation to plunder a one-of-a-kind treasure house.' The *Times Colonist* adds its vigorous opposition to the government position on the Trust. 'To abandon the islands now to the varying and uncertain mercies of seven different regional districts is reckless and foolish.'

In a last ditch attempt to delay the Bill, the Opposition demands a referendum on the islands to see if the residents favour retention of the Islands Trust. It never took place. Faced with the criticism in the legislature and actively opposed by the Islands Trust, regional districts, the Union of BC Municipalities, the press and the public, Bill 72 is allowed to 'die on the Order Paper,' in other words, the proposed legislation does not proceed any further and the Islands Trust continues in business.

The curtain falls to loud applause.

The entire 'Island Trust Story: Celebrating 30 Years' is available in booklet form from the following bookstores: The Island Book Shoppe on Gabriola, Watermark Books and Black Sheep Books on Salt Spring. ✉

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