

Don't Call them NIMBYs

NIMBY or “Not in my back yard” is the label often given to those who oppose disruptive facilities to be located near their homes. Such things as noisy and dirty industrial plants, homes for the disadvantaged, or recycling centres. The term is a “put down” that can obscure real and legitimate concerns by casting objectors as insensitive to human needs or selfish in wishing their neighbourhood to be maintained in the condition in which they found it when they moved there in the first place.

All over the world we have been told of stories of communities displaced by dam projects, forest clearances or foreign purchases of farmable lands. We usually deplore these as evidence of rapacious colonial systems, corporate greed or imposed programs attached to international loans. In British Columbia we have many such historical and current examples, like the flooding of the Arrow Lakes for hydro-power and flood control, the displacement of aboriginal peoples from their traditional territories or the imposition of smart meters in homes. In some instances the case for public benefit is very compelling, but in such circumstances decent and fair compensation is necessary.

It is truly backward that we continue to do this kind of displacement under the guise of environmental progress. In the name of “green” development we appear in our own community to be determined to impose a recycling centre on a group of fellow citizens. We are expecting them to agree to have their living environment degraded for the convenience of the rest of us. We, of course, get the benefits but do not have to bear the negative consequences. This is fundamentally unfair. When they object to the imposition, we label them NIMBYs to belittle their objections and force them to object. We then say they are standing in the way of progress and should just stand aside. We tell them that the imposition will be carefully minimized which is cold comfort when they know well enough that the imposition will be major.

Our system of local governance has got to do better than this. The primary consideration in development of infrastructure has always got to be sensitivity to the impositions on people who are directly affected. That is the first issue to be addressed and not the last. If we have no compassionate interest in those whom we ask to sacrifice for the common good, it is only a matter of time before the knock will be on our own door.