

Bill 82 – Offshore Licensing Policy Act
Friday, November 5, 2010

MR. SPEAKER: The honourable member for Queens.

MS. VICKI CONRAD: I am so pleased to be standing in my place speaking to Bill No. 82, the Offshore Licencing Policy Act. I'm pleased to give my full support to this minister and this government for making the right decision in placing an indefinite moratorium on oil and gas exploration and drilling on Georges Bank.

I have a deep respect, appreciation, and love for our oceans and waterways. For most of my 50-some years I lived near the water in St. Margaret's Bay, and now I'm fortunate to live close to a wonderful freshwater river system. As a young girl, one of my favourite programs was *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*, and as we all know, Jacques was one of the world's most famous oceanographers and undersea explorers.

I didn't grow up in a fishing family, but I had many friends and neighbours who were fishers and I spent a lot of time hanging around on some of the wharves in the communities of St. Margaret's Bay. Even though we weren't a fishing family, my dad had a small cape boat and we used it for recreational fishing. I spent many summers on the weekends - usually on a Saturday or Sunday, the family would pack up and get in the small cape boat and we would go off into St. Margaret's Bay, sometimes hours at a time, to reach some of the fishing grounds that were historical in my grandparents' generation. My dad was very familiar with some of those fishing grounds.

On my dad's boat he had what we called a tuna stand and it was a stand that extended at the bow of the boat. My parents would allow each of us to take turns, myself and my siblings, to stand out on that tuna stand. Our job was to keep an eye out for tuna, whales, sunfish, porpoise, dolphins, and sea turtles. When we finally reached the fishing grounds, and I'm not sure if we ever made it to the Georges Bank, but I'm sure we fished in and around the area of Georges Bank, we spent many hours hand lining for haddock, cod, and halibut - of course we can't hand line today.

I also spent many years of my young life snorkeling and swimming around the shores of Moser Island, and I was always absolutely fascinated by the underwater living ecosystem of seaweeds, eels, crabs, flatfish or flounder - sculpin, which I was very afraid of. It was a beautiful ecosystem. In my early 20s I received my certification for scuba diving, and during some of my underwater dives, I saw, up close and personal, an amazing, diverse, intricate environment of sea life. I also had the opportunity, a few years ago, to snorkel around a coral reef in the Caribbean and the beauty of sea life there is just absolutely stunning. So, Mr. Speaker, the question around whether or not drilling and exploration for oil and gas on Georges Bank would be permitted was of great concern for me.

Mr. Speaker, I want to give you a glimpse into Georges Bank, and I know many of the previous speakers have also given this House a glimpse into Georges Bank. A bank is a huge shoal; it is a plateau submerged in relatively shallow ocean waters, a series of immense banks stretching from Newfoundland to southern England on the edge of the North American continental shelf. The northernmost banks off Newfoundland and Labrador are called the Grand Banks, but the Georges Bank is on the southern coast.

Georges Bank is an oval-shaped bank 240 kilometres long and 120 kilometres wide, and it lies at the southwestern end of the chain. About 11,500 years ago the sea rose high enough to isolate the area, creating Georges Island. It was home to many large prehistoric mammals including walruses, mastodons and giant sloths, traces of which are sometimes found in fishing nets. Legend has it that the first European sailors found cod so abundant that they could be scooped out of the water in baskets. These banks were one of the world's richest fishing grounds.

We know that the fishery is already stressed and that's why it's so important to have this moratorium in place for Georges Bank, which is still a prime breeding and feeding ground for fish and shellfish, in particular cod, haddock, herring, flounder, lobster, scallops and clams. Georges Bank is home to more than 100 species of fish, as well as many species of marine birds, whales, dolphins and porpoises.

Mr. Speaker, as you can see, Georges Bank is a fragile but flourishing ecosystem, and it is extremely important to the continuing sustainability of our fisheries. It is extremely important that its health is protected for future generations.

I represent many fishers in the constituency of Queens. Many of my friends and neighbours are fishermen and I can tell you that they will be very pleased with this indefinite moratorium, for some of their livelihoods depend on it. So I thank the minister, and I thank the government, for being responsible to the fishing communities and for making the right decision in protecting Georges Bank. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.