

Local NPO For A New Earth Holds General Meeting with Politicians, Academics and the Public; Establishes Action Plan

Kyla Bruff St. John's

Local, newly established NPO For A New Earth (FANE) held its inaugural General Meeting at the Cochrane Centre on Thursday, February 8th, 2018.

FANE is a not-for-profit organization with the aim of pushing ecological discussions and action to the fore of public awareness and policy decision-making in Newfoundland and Labrador.

FANE's General Meeting was a follow-up to the very successful public lecture at held at the Ship Pub on November 7th, 2018, during which the three Co-Directors of For A New Earth, Dr. Sean McGrath, Dr. Barry Stephenson, and Kyla Bruff all attempted to individually answer the question "Do We Really Care About Climate Change?" Over 200 people attended and the response was overwhelming. The ensuing discussion and responses from the crowd made the need for a public meeting evident. Marine Institute student Simon Hofman publicly stated during the General Meeting that the public lecture at the Ship was so moving that it inspired him to start his own ecological organization with fellow students at the Marine Institute, which has now reached a membership of 37 people.

The General Meeting opened with speeches from NDP MHA Gerry Rogers, St. John's Deputy Mayor Sheilagh O'Leary, lawyer and politician Ches Crosbie, Memorial University Professors Dr. Barry Stephenson (Religious Studies), Dr. Josh Lepawsky (Geography), Dr. Reade Davis (Anthropology), Dr. Sean McGrath (Philosophy). The main question they sought to answer was "What is to be done concerning the ecological issues facing Newfoundland and Labrador?"

Memorial University Philosophy PhD Candidate Kyla Bruff then provided a wrap-up of the six major points of action and concern which emerged from the seven talks. These points were (1) protected areas in NL, (2) potential policy changes, (3) the role of academics in public, ecological discussions, (4) political leadership and democracy in the province, (5) alternative energy sources in NL, and (6) developing alternatives to local patterns of consumerism.

A public discussion followed.

Regarding protected areas in NL, Rogers emphasized the need to identify exactly what areas of land in the province Newfoundlanders and Labradorians want to protect. Davis also encouraged Newfoundlanders and Labradorians to slow down and reconsider their relationship to nature – which, although it may not be pristine and pure, requires that we seriously consider what we value about the land we share together.

O’Leary identified specific practical, hands-on, environmental issues that she has made part of her political mandate, including protecting wetlands and regulations surrounding mandatory tree planting on new development lots. Bruff added the need to consider how to pair our efforts with those of C-Paws Canada, and to think about whether promoting eco-tourism on the island could help land protection initiatives.

O’Leary’s personal story of entering politics and the political work she has done since 2009 inspired those in attendance to mobilize their efforts to instigate real change in the province. McGrath emphasized that policy change should not seem so impenetrable to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and presented the imperative that we work together to defeat the despair many people feel in the face of the environmental crisis. In a similar vein but in reference to the issue of waste management, Lepawsky highlighted that collective action on a large scale, rather than a focus only on individual responsibility, will be the key to changing the ecological scenario of the province together.

The proposal for a provincial ban on single-use plastic bags, led by O’Leary, was the most prominent policy issue raised and discussed at the meeting. FANE, along with many of the meeting’s attendees (including Rogers), publicly declared their support for it. O’Leary reminded the crowd that plastic bags break down into smaller, microfibers which animals, including human beings, ingest. O’Leary also accentuated the need for the city of St. John’s to be aware of and uphold existing wetland preservation contracts, such as Lundrigan’s Marsh.

Rogers underlined the public need for academics to help clarify the stakes and details of current environmental issues in Newfoundland and Labrador, which, she stated, are “complex, but not insurmountable.” Bruff, McGrath and Stephenson all voiced a commitment to publicly mobilizing different academic voices from various disciplines in jargon-free language to help clarify the ecological issues of the province. This was reiterated as one of FANE’s goals. The issue was also raised of the responsibility of professors and researchers at Memorial University who study ecology in particular to give back to the province.

Crosbie, along with Rogers, used the term “democratic deficit” to describe the present state of affairs in the province. Many of the meeting’s participants, in the wake of Muskrat Falls, expressed their desire for a debate on the possible restructuring of democracy in the Newfoundland and Labrador. The potential relationship of proportional representation to moving ecological issues to the forefront in Newfoundland and Labrador was also considered. During the discussion, Memorial University economist James Feehan underlined the need to elect leadership in Newfoundland and Labrador that is both willing and wants to be informed. He emphasized that if politicians during the inception of the Muskrat Falls project were truly environmentalists, they would have focused attentions to the Holyrood Thermal Generating Station. Feehan also reminded the crowd of the lack of transparency regarding the sources of Nalcor’s financial and environmental reports and assessments on Muskrat Falls. Other participants questioned whether the pressing problem in this regard is truly leadership, or rather the general mentality of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

The debate was also raised regarding whether collective action on social media has the potential to be politically effective.

The need to move forward economically in Newfoundland and Labrador without depending on fossil fuels was voiced by Rogers. The debate surrounding sustainable energy sources continued with a discussion of where and under what circumstances solar energy could be efficient in the province. Bruff additionally raised the issue of the shift in the portrayal of the environmental consequences of Muskrat Falls (from positive in 2010 to negative in 2018) as an important issue of consideration.

Lastly, the primary point of action for combating the detrimental effects of a “throw away” consumer culture in Newfoundland and Labrador was reiterated to be the plastic bag ban. In addition to the ban, O’Leary also spoke about the aforementioned tree planting regulations and referenced products such as the “Waterlily” from St. John’s company Seaformatics Systems Inc., which uses a water current or wind to generate power to charge devices. Many asked for specific instructions on how they could support O’Leary on her projects.

Phil Coates from Island Compost was present and also informed attendees of his residential compost pick up service, Island Compost. Furthermore, the need was identified for local ecologically and environmentally oriented organizations to meet together, including FANE, Climate Watch, Iron and Earth and The Green Rock (with which FANE already collaborates), to establish a plan to combine their efforts and support one another. This collaborative meeting will happen in the near future.

Finally, Lepawsky identified the need to make waste “strange” to us, and to come together in groups to identify the main sources of our environmental impact in the province.

The General Meeting, along with FANE’s overall vision, was promoted and discussed on VOXM’s Nightline on Wednesday, February 7th, 2018. FANE’s next major public event is a Public Symposium on the Muskrat Falls Project at the Lawrence O’Brien Centre in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, from 21-23 February 2018. They are organizing the event in collaboration with the Royal Society of Canada, the Labrador Institute and the Memorial University Department of Philosophy. The goal of the Symposium is to give all voices a structured space to be heard and to tell the story of Muskrat Falls in all of its economic, social and political complexity. This will not only be an opportunity for researchers, Land Protectors, community members, industry representatives and the general public to hear each other, and for the active facilitation of a critical discussion. Please get in touch with For A New Earth at www.foranewearth.org if you are interested in this event.