

## Harb seals

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*Senator Mac Harb’s bill to end the seal hunt provides us an opportunity to look at the international political economy of the seal trade—with emphasis on the political.*

On May 2, Liberal Senator for Ontario Mac Harb [introduced a bill](#) to ban the commercial seal hunt in Canada. This is his third such attempt. His previous bills of 2009 and 2010 didn’t pass first reading, as none of his fellow senators were willing to entertain them. Harb’s latest bill, however, is now proceeding to debate.

[According to Harb](#), there is a “strong and rational economic argument” that Canada’s tiny commercial sealing industry is unviable. [Figures from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans](#) show that the total pre-processed value of the seal hunt tumbled from an historic high of \$34 million in 2006 to \$1 million in 2010. The number of pelts taken—currently the most important Canadian seal product, far ahead of oil and meat—dropped 80% over the same period, as did pelt prices, from \$100 to \$20. Exports of seal products also fell precipitously, from \$18 million to \$2 million.

Faced with a flatlining market for goods produced by some of its poorest citizens, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador elected [to subsidise stockpiling](#) of pelts in the hope that prices will rise in future. The Government of Nunavut [has done the same](#). But Harb predicts that the end of the commercial sealing industry is now inevitable. In his view, “It’s time to take the politics out of the debate and simply acknowledge the facts.”

As Harb goes on to point out, the facts are essentially that most large importing countries have simply banned the seal trade. The United States has had a ban in place since passing its *Marine Mammal Protection Act* in 1972. The European Union [adopted its own ban](#) in 2009, citing “serious concerns by members of the

public and governments sensitive to animal welfare.” In 2011, Russia, which once took 90% of Canada’s seal pelts, [banned trade in harp seals](#) less than one year of age, and then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin denounced the seal trade as “bloodthirsty.” Other countries such as Mexico have also acted to ban or restrict the trade in seal products. While Asian countries such as South Korea and China remain important markets for seal oil, which is used in Omega-3 supplements, they have yet to take up the slack for pelts.

Harb isn’t the first to assert that the Canadian sealing industry is in terminal economic decline, but one wonders how to follow his advice to “take the politics out of the debate” if one of the principal reasons for the industry’s collapse is legislation against trade—and on conservationist or animal-welfare grounds for that matter.

Conservative MP for Nunavut and Regional Minister for the North Leona Aglukkaq took exception to Harb’s suggestion that commercial sealing is a dead end. On May 8, she [released a statement](#) in which she invoked the importance of sealing to northern communities and the northern way of life, and called on Harb to withdraw his bill. She also put the politics straight back into the debate, accusing Harb of acting as a spokesperson for animal-rights activists conducting an “international smear campaign,” and the Liberal Party of being out of touch with the North.

In fairness to Harb, he says little to nothing about animal rights when promoting his bill. He also recognizes that a ban on commercial sealing would affect northerners. His bill provides aboriginal treaty beneficiaries with an exemption from the ban, and it specifically refers to aboriginal rights to hunt seal under the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, and the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. Harb doesn’t clarify, however, what value this exemption would have in a market so restricted it can barely function.

In any case, this sort of exemption doesn’t seem to work well where it’s been tried. According to *Sermitsiaq News*, a [new study has found](#) that only 20% of Danes know that the European Union’s (EU’s) seal-trade ban specifically exempts traditionally harvested Inuit seal products. On May 1, the very day before Harb introduced his bill in the Canadian Senate, [angry Greenlanders picketed](#) the Copenhagen department store Magasin du Nord after its management [bowed to pressure](#) from animal-rights advocates and stopped selling furs from any wild animal, including seals. Rather than shielding the

“fundamental economic and social interests of Inuit communities,” as the EU put it, its ban seems to have helped convince consumers and retailers that all seal products are too hot to touch.

They can't seem to take the politics out of the debate in Denmark either. While Magasin du Nord's communications director Jan Helleskov stressed a simple lack of demand for seal products, Inuit Ataqatigiit Member of the Danish Parliament for Greenland Sara Olsvig insisted the “Inuit exemption” to the EU seal-trade ban clearly doesn't work. Her colleague Doris Jakobsen, who also represents Greenland in the Danish Parliament, [went further](#), saying that Greenland should demand that the EU recognize sealing as a legitimate industry entitled to free-trade treatment before it receives any support for its application to join the Arctic Council as a permanent observer.

Harb would have none of this brand of brinkmanship back in Canada. He has called on Ottawa to withdraw its own “futile” World Trade Organization (WTO) challenge to the EU's seal-trade ban, promoting the EU's “right” to ban trade to which it is opposed. He has also criticized Ottawa for risking on-going negotiations for a \$12-billion Canada-EU free-trade deal in order to protect a minuscule and failing industry.

Considering that no member of the WTO can have an [unqualified right](#) to ban trade in specific products, it's not at all clear that Canada's WTO challenge is futile. But many of Harb's European counterparts seem to agree with him about the risk to the Canada-EU trade deal, despite its presumable mutual benefits. Last year, over 100 members of the European Parliament [signed a statement](#) that Canada's WTO challenge is an “attack on European democratic processes” and that the European Parliament should withhold its support of the trade deal until Canada withdraws it.

This is pure politicking. Indeed, however much Harb would like us to believe that cool economic reasoning should lead us inevitably to conclude that the commercial seal hunt is finished, it's very hard not to think that the issue is largely political. Whatever the environmental ethics of the seal trade, it is active prohibition by governments that has delivered the knockout blow to the industry. What economic sense would it make to ban products if consumers didn't want to buy them in the first place?

What's more, all this political grandstanding obscures an important underlying economic story. Aglukkaq's attack on Harb went well over the top, but at least

she mentioned northern communities as economic places, and northerners as economic actors trying to make the best livelihoods they can out of their available resources. Olsvig got closest to the heart of the matter: “This is not just an animal welfare issue, it is also about a people’s right to live off the resources we have.”

Harb, too, [has professed concern](#) for the livelihoods of northerners who would be affected by his bill. His solution? He suggests that Ottawa help Canadian Inuit “to take advantage of their special exemption under the European ban” rather than “choosing instead to lump them in with the commercial seal industry and its doomed fate.” He should hear what Olsvig and the Greenlanders have to say about their special exemption.

The Canadian North is an inextricable part of the global economy, and northerners have participated in bringing their resources to the global market at least since whaling days. The real debate here revolves around the familiar tension between the idea that many of the North’s resources should be protected no matter the costs, and the fact that most of those costs would fall disproportionately on many of the North’s people. And you can’t take the politics out of that.

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