CLASS AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE POLITICS IN THE DEMOLITION OF NATAL AND MICHEL, 1964-78

TOM LANGFORD*

> We wait week by week for news of something to happen better for us, but alas, no one seems to be interested in us – while all the time the dust and the smoke becomes worse, enveloping all and sundry.
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> – Reverend J.D.E. Watts, St. Paul's Church, Michel, to Premier W.A.C. Bennett, 25 September 1966[1]

THE IDEA OF DEMOLISHING the East Kootenay coal mining communities of Natal and Michel was first publicly broached by Dan Campbell, British Columbia's minister of municipal affairs, on 29 October 1964. On a visit to the area with his deputy minister J. Everett Brown, Campbell outlined a scheme that had been hatched by the provincial and federal governments in close consultation with the long-established coal mine operator in the region, Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company (CNPC): "a re-location of the entire town site of Natal" to an area adjoining the existing village of Sparwood, a mere five kilometres away at the confluence of Michel Creek and the Elk River. The scheme implied the simultaneous demolition of the residential properties in Michel, an unincorporated community just upstream of Natal, where the coal company owned the vast majority of the dwellings.[2]

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1 British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA), GR 0239, box 16, file entitled "Incorporation and Change of Status," 1966.

2 Natal, minutes of village council (hereafter NM), 19 October 1964 and 29 October 1964. Unless otherwise noted, documents cited in this article were found in the electronic records of the District Municipality of Sparwood and are available from the author on request.

Figure 1. Michel, 1952: Beehive coke ovens and washing on line. *Source*: Glenbow Archives, NA-3663-14.

The initial reactions of the Natal and Sparwood village councils to the plan encouraged Everett Brown to return to the region for follow-up meetings four days later. In his meeting with the Natal council, Brown suggested "that within two to five years the entire town site [of Natal and Michel] should be reestablished in Sparwood and this area used only for industrial purposes." He promised that the current owners of houses and small businesses in Natal and Michel would be "offered a fair price for their properties[] and [that] land [would] be available to them in the new Sparwood urban area for re-establishing themselves." He further promised that, "for old-age pensioners or people wishing to rent[,] the necessary accommodations [would] be constructed by the different levels of government."[3]

This plan to relocate the 1,225 residents of Natal and Michel to Sparwood (which had a population of 360 in late 1964) was supported without reservation by the councils of Natal and Sparwood in the middle of 1965 and received near unanimous support (95.6 percent) in a district plebiscite the following April.[4] The inhabitants of Natal and Michel

[3] NM, 2 November 1964.

[4] *Fernie Free Press* (hereafter FFP), 19 November 1964, 24 June 1965, and 28 April 1966. Residents of Michel and Middletown (the tiny cluster of houses between Natal and Michel) were not allowed to vote and instead submitted a petition in favour of the relocation scheme; it "was subscribed to by almost 100 percent of the residents in those areas" (NM, 21 April 1966).

were particularly eager to relocate because of two pollution crises. The first stemmed from the close proximity of residential housing to coal production facilities (see Figure 1). Fine coal dust often permeated the air, coated the ground, and seeped into homes. The dust problem was considerably worse in the 1960s than in previous decades because the coal company's major customers at that time, Japanese steel makers, required coal of "a very fine texture," unlike the major customer of bygone decades, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), which had burned lump coal to power its steam engines. The quality of the air was further compromised by "coke ovens [that] spew[ed] forth a quantity of dust, smoke, gasses and other noxious elements."[5] The second pollution crisis involved the contamination of Natal's well water by septic systems. Hence, resettlement was also welcomed as a panacea for a water pollution problem that might otherwise cost a great deal of money to solve.[6]

However, initial enthusiasm for the relocation proposal gave way to frustration as progress stalled and air pollution intensified. The excerpt from Reverend Watts's letter to Premier Bennett, quoted at the beginning of this article, captures the extent to which, by the fall of 1966, the people of Natal and Michel felt abandoned by the provincial government and abused by the coal company. Residents' unhappiness and anger would grow over the next two years as it appeared that the promised relocation to Sparwood would never materialize. Even after new development in Sparwood was finally approved in the spring of 1968, the disillusionment of a large proportion of the residents of Natal and Michel persisted since the terms of the government's scheme created financial hardships and split the community: a large proportion of the citizens of Natal and Michel simply could not afford the cost of new housing in Sparwood and were forced to move elsewhere. Indeed in a final protest, a few recalcitrant residents of Natal delayed moving as long as they could, and, as a result, the destruction of the community was not complete until 1978.

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[5] Letter from A.T. Campbell, CNPC lawyer, to the minister of municipal affairs, 16 May 1966, Glenbow Archives (hereafter GA), M 1561, Crowsnest Resources Ltd. Fonds, file 180, Sparwood 1966-68.

[6] Natal was incorporated as a village in 1960, although CNPC first sold lots in the area to miners and others in 1907 and a privately owned water system was installed that same year. See Regional Planning Division, Department of Municipal Affairs, Province of British Columbia and Underwood McLellan and Associates Ltd., *Natal – Sparwood Urban Renewal Scheme Report* (Vancouver: Province of British Columbia and Underwood McLellan and Associates Ltd., 1966), IV-3. The village bought the water system in 1962 (*FFP*, 19 April 1962). Details of this water pollution crisis were established from: author's interview with Loretta Montemurro (hereafter LM), 31 July 2013; *FFP*, 19 August 1963, 7 November 1963, 16 January 1964, and 23 January 1964; and NM, 2 November 1964.

The central question I address in this article is: How did a simple, straightforward resettlement plan, with support from virtually all stakeholders, become so convoluted, drag on for so many years, and result in the dispersal of a large number of the original residents of Natal and Michel? To answer this question I present an analytical chronology that identifies why key decisions were made at various points along the way. The dispersal of a large proportion of the residents of Natal and Michel was yet another 1960s Canadian urban renewal project in which a working-class or minority community lost out to corporate expansion.[7] "Place annihilation" and "domicide" are among the concepts that have been coined to highlight the brutality that often characterizes the destruction of entire communities.[8] The problem with such blanket, normatively charged terms, however, is that they foreclose the possibility that a forced relocation may preserve or even strengthen a community. Such was the case in the wholesale relocation of North Bonneville (population around five hundred), Washington, in the 1970s after the original townsite was needed for the construction of a second powerhouse at the Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River;[9] and in the comprehensive relocation of Allenville (population fewer than fifty families), Arizona, between 1978 and 1981 due to severe seasonal flooding of the Gila River.[10] My goal is to explain why the demolition of Natal and Michel, which began with much promise, drifted towards "domicide."

The demolition of Natal and Michel is also historically significant because it spawned unique environmental protest actions that would not become commonplace in North America until the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the spring of 1967, the opposition to coal smoke and dust

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[7] For a range of examples, see John C. Bacher, *Keeping to the Marketplace: The Evolution of Canadian Housing Policy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 213-27. And for a reappraisal of the destruction of Africville in Halifax, see Tina Loo, "Africville and the Dynamics of State Power in Postwar Canada," *Acadiensis* 39 (2010): 23-47.

[8] Douglas J. Porteous and Sandra E. Smith, *Domicide: The Global Destruction of Home* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); J.E. Windsor and J.A. McVey, "Annihilation of Both Place and Sense of Place: The Experience of the Cheslatta T'en Canadian First Nation within the Context of Large-Scale Environmental Projects," *Geographical Journal* 171, 1 (2005): 146-65. Porteous and Smith define "domicide" as "the deliberate destruction of home by human agency in pursuit of specified goals, which causes suffering to the victims." See Porteous and Smith, *Domicide*, 12.

[9] Donald E. Comstock and Russell Fox, "Participatory Research as Critical Theory: The North Bonneville, USA, Experience," in *Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada*, ed. Peter Park, Mary Brydon-Miller, Budd Hall, and Ted Jackson, 103-24 (Toronto: OISE Press, 1993).

[10] Ronald W. Perry and Michael K. Lindell, "Principles for Managing Community Relocation as a Hazard Mitigation Measure," *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 5, 1 (1997): 49-59.

in Natal and Michel was invigorated by a large group of women who used contentious political tactics to try to get some action from those in positions of authority. This was prototypical "environmental justice" activism, even though it occurred over a decade before the wave of localized protest actions that are seen to mark the birth of the environmental justice movement.[11]

The environmental justice movement (EJM) includes all those local groups who protest and try to remedy environmental problems in their communities. Luke Cole and Sheila Foster depict the EJM as "transcending the environmental movement – as a movement based on environmental issues but situated within the history of movements for social justice."[12] There are two branches to the EJM, differentiated by the type of disadvantaged community that has mobilized to demand justice in the face of environmental inequalities. In communities of colour, the movement is depicted as a protest against environmental racism, thereby foregrounding the social justice dimension of movement demands. In white working-class communities (such as Natal and Michel in the 1960s, or Love Canal, New York, in the late 1970s), however, protests are more often associated with immediate environmental threats such as coal dust and smoke or toxic waste. Nevertheless, the class injustice behind such environmental threats is typically very well understood.[13]

Four general features of the EJM can be identified from the literature. First, "the notion of 'environment' for environmental justice groups and networks has come to mean home and community. These are the places that need to be preserved and protected from pollutants and other harms." Given this definition, the EJM's conception of environmental harm goes beyond the contamination of air, soil, and water to take in social and social psychological consequences such as "the reduction of community cohesion, the feeling of powerlessness, and socioeconomic

[11] Protests about the environmental degradation of working-class neighbourhoods located in close proximity to factories and mines, however, have roots that go back to the late nineteenth century. Robert Gottlieb has documented the environmental activism of Progressive Era movements in the United States, including the settlement movement in Chicago and lead and silver miners in Coeur d'Alene organized by the Western Federation of Miners. See Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, rev. ed. (Washington: Island Press, 2005 [1993]), 101-6.

[12] Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 31.

[13] David Naguib Pellow and Robert J. Brulle, "Power, Justice, and the Environment: Toward Critical Environmental Justice Studies," in *Power, Justice, and the Environment: A Critical Appraisal of the Environmental Justice Movement*, ed. David Naguib Pellow and Robert J. Brulle (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 8; David Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 46-48.

damage that result from the loss of businesses, homes, and schools."[14] The next two characteristics are linked to the EJM's community-centred sense of environmental harm. Activists are usually strongly motivated to participate in the movement because of their personal stake in the outcome. Furthermore, they tend to see any contamination of their physical space not as an isolated problem but, rather, in systemic terms – "as just one of many ways their communities are under attack."[15] At a deeper level, environmental pollution and other attacks on a community are attributed to "a lack of recognition and validation of identities" that stems from a "general lack of value of the poor and people of colour."[16] The fourth and final characteristic is the one that is most often remarked upon: in struggle after struggle, the vast majority of activists and leaders of the EJM have been women.[17] This has broadened the impact of the EJM since women activists not only "challenge the political and economic power structure" that creates environmental problems but also confront "the gendered boundaries of behavior in their communities and in their families."[18]

Three explanations have been offered for women's dominant participation in the EJM. The first points to the extra domestic labour burdens created by an environmental hazard like coal smoke and dust (e.g., extra cleaning, not being able to open windows, etc.).[19] Since such extra labour burdens usually fall upon women, their high level of participation in the EJM is seen as a simple reflection of the gendered impact of community pollution. The second explanation stresses differences in gender roles. According to Phil Brown and Faith Ferguson, women are more likely to be involved in the EJM than are men because their gendered role as the primary caregiver in the family creates a distinctive world view that emphasizes the preservation of family and community.[20] In this perspective, women in the EJM have been provoked by environmental threat to extend

[14] Cole and Foster, *From the Ground Up*, 16-17.

[15] Ibid., 33.

[16] Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice*, 59-60.

[17] Pellow and Brulle, "Power, Justice, and the Environment," 8; Phil Brown and Faith I.T. Ferguson, "'Making a Big Stink': Women's Work, Women's Relationships, and Toxic Waste Activism," *Gender and Society* 9, 2 (1995): 794; Shannon Elizabeth Bell and Yvonne A. Braun, "Coal, Identity, and the Gendering of Environmental Justice Activism in Central Appalachia," *Gender and Society* 24, 6 (2010): 794.

[18] Brown and Ferguson, "Toxic Waste Activism," 146.

[19] Angela Gugliotta, "Class, Gender, and Coal Smoke: Gender Ideology and Environmental Injustice in Pittsburgh, 1868-1914," *Environmental History* 5, 2 (2000): 166, 175, 183; Vanesa Castán Broto and Claudia Carter, "Environmental Justice within Local Discourses about Coal Ash Pollution in Tuzia, Bosnia and Herzegovina," in *Managing Environmental Justice*, ed. Dennis Pavlich (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2010), 210, 214.

[20] Brown and Ferguson, "Toxic Waste Activism," 147.

their mothering role into community life. They are practising "activist mothering."[21] The third explanation problematizes men's relatively low participation rate in the EJM, arguing that the hegemonic masculinity found in working-class communities depicts living with dangerous and unpleasant conditions as "manly" and as a sign of strength, just as complaining about those conditions depicts them as "effeminate" and weak. As a result, men whose identity incorporates this hegemonic masculinity tend to distance themselves from the EJM.[22]

I identify the protests against coal dust and smoke in Natal and Michel in the 1960s as an early example of the contemporary environmental justice movement. I also show how the activism in Natal and Michel deviated in some interesting ways from the EJM in general.

A COAL DISCOVERY THROWS SPARWOOD'S FUTURE INTO QUESTION

In late 1964 and throughout 1965 it looked as though the Natal-Michel to Sparwood relocation proposal would proceed without a hitch as support from the two senior levels of government was strong. In December of 1964, even before a feasibility/planning study had been initiated, the provincial government gave its approval, with Minister Campbell announcing: "Homes and businesses … will be torn down and alternative accommodation built at Sparwood." The Columbia River Treaty (CRT) had been ratified and proclaimed just three months earlier, thereby enhancing the W.A.C. Bennett government's reputation for bringing large-scale projects to fruition. The CRT focused new attention on the East Kootenay region and was expected to generate growth in tourism after a dam at Libby, Montana – eventually operational for storage purposes in 1973 – created a long and narrow artificial lake extending sixty-eight kilometres into Canada in the Kootenay River Valley.

With coal-mining families living in a blanket of dust and noxious smoke, and coal production spilling over into living spaces in Natal and Michel, the first impressions of British Columbia garnered by westbound travellers along Highway 3 contradicted the provincial government's image of a place at the leading edge of modern industrial development. Instead, it evoked comparisons with the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, then, the provincial government jumped at the opportunity to "beautify" British Columbia's southeastern gateway, especially when

[21] Bell and Braun, "Gendering of Environmental Justice Activism," 797.
[22] Ibid., 797-98, 806-9.

50 percent of the funding for the scheme would come from the federal government through its recently revamped National Housing Act. The chair of Natal's village council, Orlando Ungaro, captured the province's logic in his remarks to a public meeting held in early 1965, noting that one impetus for the scheme was the negative impression created by "a devastated, run-down, mining community."[23] All of this suggests that there was an element of "province building" behind the Bennett government's initial, active promotion of the scheme. However, corporate priorities soon trumped province building in steering provincial involvement.

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) was likewise enamoured by the proposal, describing it as "visionary" and "experimental" in the first issue of its new journal, *Urban Renewal and Public Housing in Canada,* early in 1965. The visionary part of the scheme stemmed from its capacity to simultaneously meet three objectives: (1) "[to] improve the area's housing environment," (2) "[to] beautify one of the principal road entrances to the Province," and (3) "[to] provide lands for commercial and industrial development, vital to the strengthening of the long-term economic base of the area."[24] Each objective in this list appears to have been specified by one of the scheme's promoters, with CMHC behind the first objective, the provincial government the second, and the coal company the third.

As the project moved towards implementation, two aspects unfolded more or less as expected in the first half of 1966. First, a feasibility/planning study unambiguously supported the demolition of Natal and Michel and mapped out the projected boundaries for an expanded Sparwood (see Figure 2). At the same time it offered (for reasons discussed below) a less than wholehearted endorsement of Sparwood as the site for resettlement, pointing to the small city of Fernie, located about thirty kilometres to the southwest along Highway 3, as a potential alternative.[25] Second, since the local government would be responsible for 25 percent of the buyout and demolition costs, the new District Municipality of Sparwood was created, encompassing the communities of Natal, Michel, and Sparwood as well the rural areas to the north and southeast.

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[23] *FFP*, 10 December 1964; Neil A. Swainson, *Conflict over the Columbia: The Canadian Background to an Historic Treaty* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979), 22, 281. The language of "beautification" as a rationale for provincial sponsorship of the scheme is recorded in CMHC, "Natal, Michel, Sparwood – Municipalities on the Move in British Columbia," *Urban Renewal and Public Housing in Canada* 1, 1 (1965): 3; and *FFP*, 4 March 1965, 17 June 1965, 4 August 1966, and 11 April 1968.

[24] CMHC, "Natal, Michel, Sparwood," 2-3.

[25] Regional Planning Division et al., *Natal – Sparwood Urban Renewal*, chap. 8.

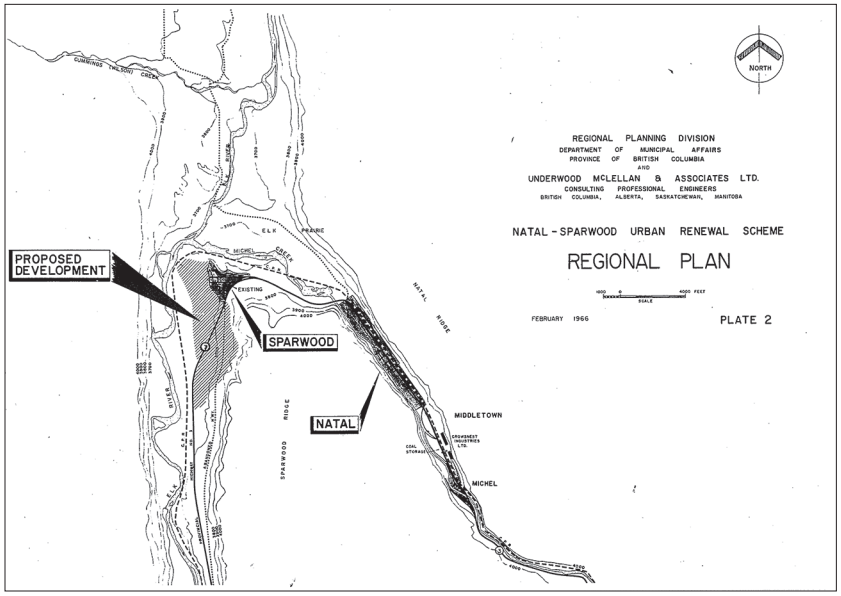

Figure 2. Regional Planning Division, Department of Municipal Affairs, Province of British Columbia and Underwood McLellan and Associates Ltd., *Natal – Sparwood Urban Renewal Scheme Report* (Vancouver: 1966).

The province's pre-eminent concern, presumably because it wanted to limit its own financial exposure, was that the municipality responsible for the local government share of the urban renewal costs have a large enough tax base to meet them. The letters patent for this new municipality was filed on 13 May 1966. Deputy Minister Brown journeyed to Natal to mark the occasion and indicated that he expected the project to be completed expeditiously, with the sale of lots in Sparwood to commence at the end of 1966 and the demolition of Natal to begin in 1968.[26]

When the urban renewal plan was first conceived in 1964, CNPC was expanding its underground mining and coal-cleaning capacity at Michel in order to increase its output of metallurgical coal for Japanese customers from 300,000 to 400,000 tons annually. Increased production of fine coal meant more coal dust pollution as well as the need for more land on which to pile coal and coal slack (fragments of rock, often mixed with coal). Resettling all residents from the Natal-Michel area to Sparwood fit perfectly with CNPC's coal production plans.[27]

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[26] *FFP*, 7 April 1966; NM, 21 April and 2 May 1966; *FFP*, 19 May 1966.
[27] *Coleman Journal*, 11 March 1964; *FFP*, 6 February 1964 and 7 November 1963.

Those plans changed dramatically in 1965 when geologists "discovered an extension of the Balmer coal seam northward of Natal." Extensive exploration work that year identified more than 50 million tons of accessible "premium grade, low volatile coking coal which [was] in short supply throughout the world and [was] essential to the blends used in Japanese steel mills."[28] The coal company, renamed Crows Nest Industries Ltd. (CNI) in August 1965 to signify its increasing investments in the forest products and petroleum industries, sent two executives to Japan in October 1965 to propose a fivefold increase in annual sales of metallurgical coal. Anticipating a major new coal contract with Japanese steel makers, CNI identified a need to build a new $15 million coal preparation plant on the edge of Natal and a new rail line from Natal to Montana to link to the Great Northern Railway, along which coal bound for Japan could be shipped to the coast more cheaply than on the CPR.[29] With the prospect of these developments there was less reason to relocate residents of Natal and Michel to Sparwood.[30]

CNI began to lobby the provincial government to resettle the residents of Natal, Michel, and Sparwood to Fernie.[31] Failing this, the company demanded contentious concessions for making available the land necessary for the expansion of the Sparwood townsite. These were: (1) exemption from municipal taxation on production facilities and (2) exemption from any municipal bylaws that might attempt to control pollution. Meanwhile, the debilitating blanket of coal dust and smoke continued to plague the residents of Natal and Michel, prompting Leo Nimsick, the New Democratic Party's MLA for the area, to write to Minister Campbell: "It would appear that CNI is forcing people out relocation or no relocation."[32] This raised the disturbing possibility that CNI increased pollution to pressure the residents of Natal and Michel.

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[28] Regional Planning Division et al., *Natal – Sparwood Urban Renewal*, III-5; *FFP*, 7 October 1965.

[29] *FFP*, 19 August 1965, 7 October 1965, 24 June 1965, and 14 October 1965.

[30] Regional Planning et al., *Natal – Sparwood Urban Renewal*, VI-6-7.

[31] On 4 May 1965, planner W.J. Tassie was the first provincial civil servant to learn about the coal discovery and CNPC's new plans for developing the resource. The coal company's lobbying of Tassie was quite effective since that same day he wrote to his deputy minister, advising: "The best alternative is to 'move' Sparwood, along with Natal-Michel, to Fernie and undertake urban renewal there." Tassie also reported to Everett Brown that CNPC was worried that if the development at Sparwood proceeded, "the protests from local residents would be as great as they are now" (BCA, GR 0239, box 12, file entitled "Municipal Affairs, Dept. of Planning - Planning," 1965). This suggests that, in addition to any genuine concern about the health of the residents of Sparwood, the proposal to relocate all residents to Fernie was intended to eliminate the bothersome environmental justice protests.

[32] A.T. Campbell, letter, 16 May 1966, GA, M 1561, file 180, Sparwood 1966-68; Sparwood, minutes of council (hereafter SM), 6 September 1966; *FFP*, 13 October 1966; SM, 19 September 1966 includes a report on Nimsick's letter.

In April 1966, the province's assistant deputy minister of municipal affairs apparently told a CNI lawyer that "there would be no difficulty whatsoever in obtaining a provision in the Letters Patent … prohibiting the municipality from passing bylaws adversely affecting the operation of the existing plants and mines of Crows Nest and similarly preventing any claim through the municipality for dust or other nuisance."[33] Ten months later, the provincial government thought better of this concession. Sparwood's lawyer interpreted this as a refusal to contradict the commitment, made in the most recent Throne Speech, to "the preservation for all times of the blessings of clean air, pure water and fertile soil."[34]

CNI's application for a tax concession won greater favour. Knowing that any corporate tax break would undermine Sparwood's capacity to pay the municipal share of the urban renewal program, in August 1966 Everett Brown convinced Fernie to begin its own urban renewal program and to join with Sparwood and the surrounding rural area in taking on joint responsibility for the local government share of the costs. Sparwood agreed to this arrangement after the deputy minister "issued … a statement which in essence said that unless … [they] approved a financing scheme encompassing the city of Fernie and outlying areas," the Sparwood project would languish until the economic future of the town could be determined. All of this slowed progress on other parts of the scheme for a number of months in 1966.[35]

In consequence, Sparwood council took a more adversarial position in its dealings with both CNI and the provincial government. In early December, Orlando Ungaro travelled to Vancouver to get legal advice on whether the residents of Natal had grounds to sue CNI for damages caused by pollution; a few days later the council retained the services of John Taylor Associates. Early in 1967, local MLA Leo Nimsick became, in effect, the council's mouthpiece in the legislature.[36] This was a sea-

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[33] Memorandum for the file by CNI lawyer E.S. Thorn, 21 April 1966, GA, M 1561, file 180, Sparwood 1966-68.

[34] Everett Brown to J. Drysdale, Sparwood lawyer, 10 February 1967; J. Drysdale to A.T. Campbell, 15 February 1967, GA, M 1561, file 180, Sparwood 1966-68. Mr. Drysdale was closely following provincial action on air pollution, aside from his work representing Sparwood. On behalf of the BC section of the Canadian Bar Association he drafted a sample pollution control act and submitted it to Minister Campbell on 25 January 1967. See BCA, GR 0239, box 25, file entitled "Pollution Control - Air, 1967."

[35] *FFP*, 1 August 1966; SM, 6 September 1966; *FFP*, 29 September 1966 and 4 October 1966. This financial reorganization was for naught since Fernie withdrew from the partnership a couple of years later (*FFP*, 24 October 1968).

[36] SM, 5 December 1966, including notes on the legal advice secured by Ungaro in Vancouver. SM, 20 February 1967, reports on a letter sent by Ungaro to Nimsick that had "voiced council's dissatisfaction with all the delays and changes which took place to the original proposition."

change from 1965-66, when local civic leaders had attempted to ingratiate themselves with politicians in hope of securing speedy implementation of the project. Shortly after Fernie council had refused in 1965 to make W.A.C. Bennett a "Freeman" of that city, Natal councillors voted "that Premier Bennett be honoured by being made a Freeman of Natal upon his first visit to the village."[37]

The next bump on the road to resettling the people of Natal and Michel at Sparwood occurred early in 1967. Although the federal government had approved over $1 million in CMHC spending for the purchase and demolition of homes and businesses in Natal,[38] and the provincial government had rejected CNI's conditions for the sale of land for the Sparwood townsite, Sparwood council was unhappy that CMHC had divided the Natal-Michel-Sparwood project into two administrative parts: (1) demolishing Natal (urban renewal) and (2) developing an expanded Sparwood townsite (land assembly). Their unease reflected the fact that the urban renewal project was supported by a 50 percent grant from CMHC and a 25 percent grant from the province, while the land assembly project, with the exception of its public housing component, only qualified for CMHC loans (with a provision for partial loan forgiveness on the new sewer system). Sparwood council requested a 50 percent federal grant for land assembly in late February 1967 and was summarily rejected. In the meantime, Minister Campbell in Victoria ordered a complete halt to all aspects of the project following a provocative speech in the legislature by Leo Nimsick, in which he claimed that Orlando Ungaro had described the provincial government as "dragging its feet and throwing sand in the gears of the SNM project." The council was informed that it had to accept the current financial terms or see "the entire project be dropped." On 6 March 1967, Sparwood council accepted "the terms of urban renewal and land assembly as previously agreed upon," and the project restarted on 21 March 1967.[39]

Meanwhile, on 31 January 1967, Deputy Minister Brown advised the Sparwood council "to leave the matter of public housing in abeyance for the time being until it is known what demand there is." Yet it was already clear that a large proportion of those in Natal and Michel would require subsidized housing to move to Sparwood. In the words

[37] NM, 20 April 1965; *FFP*, 22 April 1965.

[38] SM, 3 January 1967; *FFP*, 5 January 1967.

[39] SM, 7 November 1966, 20 February 1967, 6 March 1967, and 24 May 1968 (on loan forgiveness). Ungaro to Minister John Nicholson, 21 February 1967, and reply from Nicholson, 2 March 1967, District of Sparwood Archived Digital File (hereafter SADF), 330-001.tif, 132, 135-36. The District of Sparwood created two large digital files containing archived municipal records of relevance to this project. They are available from the author on request.

of the feasibility/planning study: "Variety in the cost of housing to suit the needs of individual pocketbooks can only be achieved by subsidy." Brown's strategy left many low- and modest-income residents of Natal and Michel no choice but to look outside the area for alternate affordable housing.[40] From an environmental justice perspective this was a greater injury to the people of Natal and Michel than coal dust and smoke.

In March 1967, CNI was still vacillating between acquiescence and obstruction on the development of Sparwood housing. At a council meeting on 20 March 1967, "Reeve [Ungaro] reported that [CNI's vice-president, finance] Mr. [John] Cleeve had today informed him that the company had agreed to selling the land without any restrictive covenants concerning pollution or other nuisances." Two days later, however, in a telephone conversation with a CNI lawyer, Cleeve indicated that the "company prefers the concept of one town site at Fernie" and was of the initial opinion "to just do nothing in the way of making an offer to Sparwood." "On further consideration," wrote A.T. Campbell, "Cleeve phoned me back to indicate that he felt the company's image might suffer and that he was after all going to indicate that the company was prepared to offer its land at Sparwood." On 5 May 1967, the company offered to sell four hundred acres to Sparwood, reserving only a right-of-way for the proposed new rail line to Montana. Things seemed set for development at Sparwood.[41]

A CORPORATE TAKEOVER HALTS WORK AT SPARWOOD

Word of the rich extension to the Balmer coal seam attracted the interest of the California-based Kaiser Steel. On 12 May 1967, Kaiser secured an option to purchase CNI's entire coal operation at Michel and the coal reserves in the immediate area, "subject to those reserves containing what Crows Nest claims they do." Since the option expired at the end of January 1968, Kaiser undertook intensive explorations for coal in the summer of 1967 and pursued negotiations for a long-term contract with Japanese steel makers.[42]

By May 1967, planning of the new water and sewer systems for Sparwood was nearing completion, surveys of the new townsite continued, and urban renewal officials began making purchase offers for

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[40] SM, 31 January 1967; Regional Planning et al., *Natal – Sparwood Urban Renewal*, VI-7.

[41] SM, 20 March 1967; A.T. Campbell, "Memo. for the File," 22 March 1967, and Draft Land Sales Agreement, 5 May 1967, GA, M 1561, file 180, Sparwood 1966-68.

[42] *FFP*, 23 March 1967, 12 May 1967, 27 July 1967, and 14 September 1967; *Lethbridge Herald* (hereafter *LH*), 12 May 1967.

houses in Natal. But CNI's agreement to sell four hundred acres to the Sparwood municipality was set aside so that Kaiser's plans for coal production could be taken into account.[43]

Early in June 1967, representatives of Kaiser and CNI, along with provincial and CMHC officials, met the residents of Natal and Michel to deliver "the sad news" that "they would have to move to either White Spruce, about a mile from Fernie, or into a subdivision of Fernie." In the words of CNI's John Cleeve: "After the explanation of [Kaiser's] proposed stripping operation and plant location it seemed apparent that the choice of Sparwood as a site was an extremely risky one." The need to abandon any hope of resettlement to Sparwood was reinforced by Everett Brown and CMHC's regional director who stated, respectively, that neither the province nor CMHC would commit any money towards expanding settlement at Sparwood. Indeed, Brown anticipated that all existing houses at and near Sparwood would have to be moved, and he privately asked CNI and Kaiser to consider meeting the cost of moving these houses to Fernie.[44] The tone of the statements by corporate and government officials makes it clear that they expected the people of Natal and Michel to accept the version of reality delivered to them on June 6. In this they totally misjudged the mood of the people and their oppositional political capabilities.

The bombshell announcement came when the people of Natal and Michel were already extremely frustrated by persistently high levels of coal dust and smoke in their communities and CNI's continuing refusal to sell its land at Sparwood. At an April meeting of Sparwood council, called " solely to discuss … commercial planning," reported the *Fernie Free Press*, "councillors found themselves faced with another problem, twenty-five women of Natal and Lower Elk Valley areas who forcibly presented letters protesting the dust conditions in the area." In response, council sent a telegram of complaint to the CNI annual meeting in Vancouver. Later that week, the women confronted CNI officials directly.[45]

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[43] SM, 1 May 1967, 5 June 1967, and 11 October 1967. The deal with Kaiser occurred in the shadow of the death of fifteen miners and the serious injuries sustained by ten additional miners as a consequence of an explosion at CNI's Balmer North underground mine on 3 April. See *LH*, 4, 5 and 6 April 1967; and John Kinnear, "The Balmer Mine Disaster of 1967," in *The Forgotten Side of the Border: British Columbia's Elk Valley and Crowsnest Pass*, ed. Wayne Norton and Naomi Miller, 154-60 (Kamloops: Plateau Press, 1998). Within a month of the explosion, twenty other coal miners had quit their jobs and left the area (*FFP*, 3 May 1967).

[44] The two CNI officials in attendance were Cleeve and solicitor A. Fisher. They each wrote a memo reporting on the message delivered on 6 June (see Cleeve, 7 June 1967, and Fisher, 16 June 1967, GA, M 1561, file 180, Sparwood 1966-68).

[45] SM, 24 April 1967; *FFP*, 27 April 1967; *LH*, 28 April 1967.

When thirty-five local women attended the June council meeting, they were asked "what they would do if the project fell through. They replied with various answers such as suing the coal co., renting to anyone for any price and leaving town, [and] a march on Victoria stating the premier had backed out on them. CNI wants all the Valley but haven't paid anything." There was considerable support for marching on Victoria "and twenty of them definitely agreed to go." Still, the suggestion that some would leave town foreshadowed a common, individualistic pattern of out-migration in subsequent months and years. "No one truly wanted to move away," noted Arlene Gaal, "but they felt the inevitable may never come and life was too short to waste valuable years in almost continuous depressed spirits."[46]

Energized by these women, Orlando Ungaro was increasingly militant. "When industry hampers a community, it is time for the community to take a stand," he said early in May 1967. Speaking for council, he added: "We have been toyed and played with for years in this community."[47] In response to the "sad news" of June, Sparwood council hired a Fernie law firm to pursue a nuisance action against CNI's most polluting practices, began to draft an anti-pollution bylaw, and grew far more candid in its public criticisms of CNI. To this point, council averred: "[We] had cooperated with CNI … with hopes of forming good public relations. [We] had hoped that [we] would be granted the land at Sparwood more easily if there was cooperation." But this had evidently failed. "The pollution is steadily increasing and CNI always has excuses ready. Presently their scrubbers, which broke down some months ago, are still not repaired. They occasionally water the haulage roads when actually they had promised to oil or hard surface these roads and keep them as dust free as possible."[48]

On 13 July 1967, Everett Brown informed Sparwood council that it must immediately proceed with land assembly at Fernie or "leave the matter of land assembly in abeyance until Kaiser Steel has completed its master plan." Council members were unanimous in choosing the second option.[49] Still, the purchase of private homes in Natal proceeded apace: the first cheque was handed out on 2 October 1967, and, by the end of the year, the Regional District of East Kootenay (RDEK) had acquired almost half of the 310 eligible properties. The effects were immediate. With cash in

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[46] SM, 5 June 1967. Arlene B. Gaal, *Memoirs of Michel-Natal, 1899-1971* ([n. p.]: self-published, 1971), 182.

[47] *FFP*, 4 May 1967.

[48] SM, 22 June 1967.

[49] SM, 13 July 1967.

hand, Natal homeowners began to look elsewhere for accommodations. "This was truly the beginning of the end," wrote a long-time resident of Natal whose family relocated to the Okanagan. "Now we began to see the phasing out of the residents of Michel-Natal. The money was now available for their present homes, no building lots were available in Sparwood and restlessness was ever present."[50] In October 1967, Stan Grocutt of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) local noted that, "because of the lack of land at Sparwood," many retired union members were "moving away who might otherwise have remained." Businesses, reported the Chamber of Commerce, were having trouble "maintaining an income" since "more and more people [were] moving away because the lots [were] not available."[51]

Orlando Ungaro committed himself to "a full-scale attack with nothing being withheld from the press or the public." He criticized the coal companies on a number of grounds, including "a lack of interest in the welfare of their employees." Governments were indicted for "allowing industry to exploit the people of the community" and proceeding with urban renewal in Natal "without making arrangements or providing sufficient assistance for new accommodation."[52]

As opposition intensified, Stan Grocutt of the UMWA summarized the union's position and its unflinching support for the council. The union wanted land in Sparwood "for the use of present, future, and past employees" and some guarantee that the area "be kept free of pollution." Grocutt also chastised the Sparwood council for not asking the union for help at an earlier date, and he lamented that his Local had taken a "lax" approach to the pollution problem in Natal and Michel over the years. Appreciating Local 7292's strategic power, he stressed "that as a union they would have better opportunity to bargain with the Company than with the governments." Looking to the future, he expressed confidence "that the union would negotiate with Kaiser when the latter [was] in operation for good living conditions, free from pollution." The union had organized three highly successful strikes in the past twenty years (two in the last three years), and Grocutt " felt assured that if necessary a strike for better living conditions would not be considered trivial" by union members.[53]

Sparwood council also sought to build a broader regional awareness of the issues. Late in 1967, the newly formed pollution committee of the

[50] *FFP*, 4 January 1968; Gaal, *Memoirs*, 180.
[51] *FFP*, 5 October 1967; SM, 11 October 1967.
[52] *FFP*, 5 October 1967; SM, 2 October 1967.
[53] SM, 11 October 1967.

Association of Kootenay and Boundary Municipalities (AKBM) made a study of air pollution at Natal-Michel a top priority. On a subsequent visit members reported that a "heavy pass of smoke and gas … enveloped the area at the time of the inspection" and likened Natal-Michel to "the Black Hole of Calcutta."[54]

Then Kaiser Steel decided to locate its new coal preparation plant farther from Sparwood than first anticipated and to avoid trucking coal through the town. Under this new plan "key personnel" would be expected to reside in Sparwood, and residents of the lower Elk Valley would not have to move.[55] Consequently, it seemed the prospects of resettlement from Natal and Michel to Sparwood were greatly improved. When Kaiser acquired CNI's operations at the end of January 1968, it seemed quite possible that development of the Sparwood townsite would go ahead.[56] A month later, as detailed below, the provincial government again advocated for resettlement to Fernie but then, in short order, gave new development at Sparwood the go ahead.

EXPLAINING THE PROVINCE'S "COMPLETE REVERSAL"

Everett Brown's final pitch for resettlement to Fernie was made to Sparwood council on 26 February 1968, just three days before Kaiser Steel's new subsidiary, Kaiser Coal (renamed Kaiser Resources by May), began to manage CNI's coal mining operation. As in June 1967, representatives from CMHC, CNI, and Kaiser accompanied the deputy minister, but the dynamics of the meetings were very different. The earlier meeting included serious discussion of the need for existing residents of Sparwood to resettle in Fernie, while in February this was no longer considered necessary. This left a logical hole in the province's argument: Why, as Councillor Earle Tabor asked, was Sparwood "good enough for some to live [in] and not others?"[57] Second, although Kaiser initially aligned with CNI and Everett Brown on the Fernie option, by 1968 it stood apart from them. According to Kaiser Coal's PR officer, Gene Clemmer, speaking "for the benefit of the records and to clear up Kaiser's feeling in the matter," he claimed he had never said "there would be a great deal of pollution in Sparwood." Perhaps sensing that

[54] SM, 18 September 1967; *FFP*, 23 November 1967. An analysis of the many retellings of the story of the Black Hole of Calcutta, centred on the alleged suffocation of 123 Europeans in a cramped prison cell in Calcutta in 1756, is found in Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[55] SM, 11 October 1967.

[56] *FFP*, 29 February 1968.

[57] *Financial Times of Canada*, 5 May 1968; SM, 26 February 1968.

things had changed, Sparwood's elected representatives were also more assertive and critical than they had been at the earlier meeting. Orlando Ungaro insisted that any plan for resettlement at Fernie had to be put to a plebiscite; and Councillor Thomson informed the Kaiser officials that Local 7292 of the UMWA intended to negotiate for acceptance of the Sparwood townsite.[58]

Shortly thereafter three hundred local residents voted unanimously against relocation to Fernie. Many residents responded to the council's invitation to show their support for resettlement to Sparwood by writing to Minister Dan Campbell. Thirty-five of their letters were read out at the ensuing council meeting. The *Fernie Free Press* described them as "highly-emotional ... the thought of leaving friends and associations was mentioned by almost every letter." The Sparwood council also drew support from the Union of BC Municipalities, MLA Nimsick, MP Jim Byrne, the Church and Industrial Society of Toronto, and the AKBM. Shortly thereafter, the Kootenay Boundary Chambers of Commerce declared their support. Before the idea of urban renewal, they insisted, "Natal, Michel and the surrounding area was a self-sufficient pleasant little community with a pollution problem. Business, churches, elementary and high schools were adequate and the good spirits and community pride of the people of the area was a matter remarked upon throughout the Crows Nest Pass and the East and West Kootenays."[59]

In face of mounting resistance to the Fernie option, on 13 May 1968 Dan Campbell approved relocations to Sparwood. This, he said, turned upon a promise from Kaiser officials to limit noise, blasting tremor, and dust fallout in Sparwood.[60] Still, questions remain: What caused Kaiser to envision a new future for Sparwood? And what led it to lobby the provincial government for development there?

Here we can identify ultimate (or background) and proximate (triggering) causes. Among the former: by February 1968, Kaiser Coal had concluded that its operations would produce minimal dust and noise pollution in Sparwood; there was no longer a need for a rail line through Sparwood to Montana because the CPR had agreed to introduce one-hundred-car unit trains to transport metallurgical coal to a new Roberts Bank coal terminal to be built by the federal government near Vancouver;[61] Sparwood's councillors had gone out of their ways to cul-

[58] SM, 26 February 1968; *FFP*, 29 February 1968.

[59] *FFP*, 7 March 1968 and 11 April 1968. I have been unable to locate the letters sent to Minister Campbell in the archived records of the Department of Municipal Affairs.

[60] *FFP*, 16 May 1968.

[61] *FFP*, 8 February 1968 and 23 May 1968. *Financial Times of Canada*, 5 May 1968.

tivate good relations with Kaiser Coal's executive officers, recognizing their considerable power in this matter;[62] Kaiser officials were surely aware of the deeply felt and near unanimous public support for resettlement to Sparwood, especially given that approximately two hundred of their employees lived in Natal and Michel and that Local 7292 of the UMWA was publicly committed to the Sparwood site;[63] and Kaiser Coal needed housing for hundreds of new workers – both temporary housing for construction workers and permanent housing for the employees who would mine the Balmer coal seam from the top of the mountain downwards. Development of new housing at Sparwood was a way for Kaiser to keep a good part of its current unionized workforce happy and to aid in recruiting new workers for its open pit mine.

In separate accounts, Sparwood's long-time clerk (and later chief administrative officer), Loretta Montemurro, identified two events that led Kaiser Coal to lobby for an expanded Sparwood. First, Kaiser executives Balsley and Clemmer agreed to review all of the files on the expansion of Sparwood, "and if[,] in the end[,] their opinion was that Sparwood should proceed," they would support an appeal to the government.[64] The second story has more pizzazz. In this account the government approved new development in Sparwood

> because of Edgar Kaiser Jr. He came in and asked why everything was being held up … I said, "I know that they want us to move into Fernie but you can't force people to do that..." [He responded:] "OK, I'm going to look into it right way." And within 3 or 4 days we got a phone call that it was a go. He never came back to say, "I did it." He wasn't that kind of a person.[65]

Once Kaiser Coal committed to development at Sparwood, it was able, almost overnight, to convince the provincial government to change its position.

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[62] For example, on 2 March 1968, councillors held a meeting with Gerard Balsley (who would soon become the company's general manager) and Gene Clemmer and "attempted to prove there was no quarrel with them" (*FFP*, 4 March 1968).

[63] *FFP*, 13 February 1969.

[64] "Information Report on 'Shared Taxation, Urban Renewal, and Land Assembly,'" SADF, 330-001_Cont-d.tif, 197.

[65] LM interview, 31 July 2013.

WHY RESETTLEMENT TO SPARWOOD WAS PATCHY

When the province reversed its position, the District of Sparwood quickly moved ahead with land development. CMHC began selling building lots in the expanded Sparwood townsite in July 1969 (about two and a half years behind the original schedule projected by Everett Brown), and construction of Sparwood's first apartment building began that same month.[66] Still, many Natal and Michel residents moved away rather than relocate to Sparwood.

Many homeowners found it impossible to afford a home in Sparwood. The cost of buying a lot and building a new house there (at approximately $24,000 in 1970) far exceeded the purchase price for houses in Natal (in the $4,000 to $8,000 range).[67] John Desjardins, who served as Local 7292 union president for most of the urban renewal years, remarked that what Natal owners "were getting for their homes would barely build the doggone home basement [in Sparwood]."[68] Physically relocating houses from Natal to Sparwood was rarely an option as most did not meet current building standards. And wages were so low that, in spring 1968, Orlando Ungaro drew attention to "the economic plight of many of the people in the matter of building a new home." He noted: "The average income of a worker here is something in the vicinity of $5,000 annually … he now needs an income of over $8,000 to qualify for a loan."[69]

Dissatisfaction quickly spawned a homeowners' association, but urban renewal officials refused to negotiate with it. This proved to be a long, festering grievance. In 1972, Sparwood council reported that "a large number of relocated citizens from Natal" continued to complain about the economics of resettlement and suggested that, if "all relocated property owners were paid a minimum of 50 percent more in addition to their payout settlement, a more amicable state of affairs would result." No such across-the-board adjustment was ever made.[70]

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[66] *FFP*, 3 July 1969.

[67] Loretta Montemurro stated that her sister paid $24,000 for a new home on a 60-by-120-foot lot in Sparwood (interview, 31 July 2013). Seven Natal homeowners had their Natal properties expropriated on 22 October 1971 and subsequently appealed their compensation offers to an arbitration board that met in 1977. While three of the seven properties were valued at the time of expropriation in the range of $7,000 to $7,500, the other four were valued between $4,054 and $5,200 (SADF, 330-001_Cont-d.tif, 81-88).

[68] Michel-Natal Historical Society (hereafter M-NHS), interview on 2 July 1992 conducted by Janice Talarico and Butch Archibald. Transcripts of all M-NHS interviews were obtained from the District of Sparwood and are available from the author on request.

[69] *FFP*, 25 April 1968.

[70] SM, 8 October 1969; Gaal, *Memoirs*, 188; Mayor L. Ungaro to Regional District of East Kootenay, 7 September 1972, SADF, 330-001_Cont-d.tif, 140.

In a 1991 interview, Valerie Podrasky explained the financial difficulty faced by Natal householders who contemplated building in Sparwood:

> Originally we were very excited because we had heard they were going to give you a house for a house, and then when we found out what we were being paid for our homes and had to go out and buy a new home at two and three times, oh, three and four times the amount you got for the old one. It was difficult. It was difficult for people like my mom and dad who were older, older already, who had a very nice home, who were comfortable in that home, and he was getting close to retirement age and had to relocate and spend all that money building a new home ... We lost a lot of older residents at that time because they just couldn't afford to buy a new home or to build a new home in Sparwood. A lot of them bought up the Pass [in Alberta] or in Fernie or we lost a lot of them to Creston.[71]

Business owners were doubly aggrieved. Not only were their properties undervalued, there was no compensation for business goodwill lost when the plans to demolish Natal and Michel were announced.[72] Reflecting on similar developments elsewhere, urban theorist Jane Jacobs argues that owners of small businesses caught in an urban renewal area subsidize the scheme with the lost value of their businesses.[73] In the case of Natal and Michel, the subsidy eventually benefited Kaiser Resources, which was able to purchase the vacated land extremely cheaply.

Very few Natal merchants opened new businesses in Sparwood.[74] The operator of the BC Bakery, Joe Altomare, featured in a 1970 NFB documentary about Kaiser's coming to town (called *That's the Price*), was among the harshest critics of these proceedings. He continued to operate in Natal while serving the burgeoning population of Sparwood, and early in 1975, the BC Bakery was one of only three businesses left in Natal. "What they offered me for my home, my business and my land," remarked Altomare in mid-1975, "was less than 10 percent of what it would cost me to set up an operation in Sparwood."[75]

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[71] M-NHS, interview on 18 July 1991 conducted by Dan Tanaka and Christine Beranek.

[72] *FFP*, 4 January 1968.

[73] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 50th anniversary edition (New York: Modern Library, 2011 [1961]), 7, 408.

[74] Loretta Montemurro recollected one Natal merchant opening a convenience store in Sparwood. In addition, "Mr. and Mrs. Chow Woo," described as "Natal's newest residents" by Arlene Gaal, opened a café in Sparwood (Gaal, *Memoirs*, 53).

[75] LM interview, 31 July 2013; Status of properties in Natal, early 1975, SADF, 330-001_Cont-d.tif, 111; *Calgary Herald*, 28 June 1975.

Renters were the most vulnerable group in Natal/Michel. The seniors among them generally enjoyed respectful treatment since a seniors' housing project was an early priority in Sparwood's expansion.[76] Most others (many of whom had been renting company housing) were shunted aside by both the coal companies and the RDEK and had little choice but to relocate elsewhere.

The heavy pollution created by the expanding coal operations on the valley floor was a major problem for renters of coal company houses. Six families in Middletown found their properties "overrun by sludge" in 1968. "The huge slack piles had reached their fences and the roads were impossible to maintain." The situation was "absolutely intolerable." The coal company gave the families thirty days to vacate the houses; Sparwood council leased them vacant houses it held in Natal even though this contravened RDEK rules.[77]

The coal company also evicted tenants from houses in Michel, although no alternative housing was available in the area.[78] The plight of one couple with two school-aged children is revealing. In September 1970, they rented a house in Natal that was slated for demolition even as they sought permanent accommodation in Sparwood. Their income was limited since they depended on a Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) pension. The only subsidized housing available in Sparwood was the senior citizens project, and the couple could only qualify to live there by boarding out their children. There were few houses for rent in Sparwood "and what [was] for rent certainly [wasn't] for people in [their] position," wrote one member of this pair, who continued: "Senior citizens are being looked after. There are houses available for people who can afford them. Our only hope is public housing, is there any hope for that?"[79]

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[76] In the spring of 1969, the District of Sparwood sold six building lots to the Senior Citizens Society and also donated $23,000 towards the cost of housing development. Construction of a forty-unit senior citizen housing project began that year (SM, 14 April and 16 October 1969).

[77] L. Montemurro to the RDEK administrator, 24 May 1968, SADF, 330-001.tif, 47-48; SM, 8 May 1968 and 3 June 1968.

[78] M-NHS, interview with Bessie and Reginald Taylor on 10 August 1992 conducted by Butch Archibald and Niki Rothel; SM, 15 September 1969.

[79] SADF, 330-001_Cont-d.tif, 373. Brown had reinforced his 1967 advice in late 1968 when he recommended that Sparwood "go slow" on public housing development (SM, 4 November 1968).

CONCLUSION: LEARNING FROM THE DEMOLITION OF NATAL AND MICHEL

The enduring irony of the demolition of Natal and Michel is that, by the time the process was completed in 1978 (marked by the ending of water service in Natal on 1 May, the demolition of the "beautiful, three-story stone Michel-Natal school," and the controlled burning of Michel Hospital on 29 December), the coal company no longer had need of the land.[80] It is hardly surprising, then, that people who lived through the years of destruction sometimes looked back with ambivalence. When asked whether the move to Sparwood was "worth it," Valerie Podrasky replied: "I suppose it depends on the way you look at it. If you look at it, uh, from the point of view of what they did with the land that we had to be moved from, no, I don't." Francis Travis's complementary view on relocation is: "Yes, the town [Sparwood] is nice now but it could've been just as nice for the older section and history would've still been standing had it not been [for] a whim of a company that wanted the property."[81]

Although a handful of people continued to live in Natal until the shutdown of municipal services in 1978, most buildings were destroyed in the early 1970s. Loretta Montemurro conducted a survey in August 1970 of 115 houses that were scheduled for demolition: only 18 percent were owner-occupied, 37 percent stood vacant, and 45 percent housed renters. Residents in almost one-third of the occupied houses had made plans to move to Sparwood, but most of the rest were classified as "plans unknown."[82] For many of them, facing the same predicament as the DVA pensioner, the promise of "resettlement" to Sparwood proved to be false.

The Sparwood that emerged in the early 1970s was not the Sparwood envisioned in 1964-65: as new construction began in 1969, the focus quickly shifted from resettling the residents of Natal and Michel to housing the hundreds of new employees of Kaiser Resources' mountaintop mine. (Local 7292's membership would grow from five hundred in 1969 to eleven hundred in 1975.) In August 1969, Kaiser sought contractors to complete fifty detached houses, seventy-five row homes, and one hundred apartments by the end of the year.[83] But low-income residents stranded in

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[80] SADF, 330-001_Cont-d.tif, 65; D.M. Wilson, "Sparwood BC: History," available at http://www.crowsnest-highway.ca/cgi-bin/citypage.pl?city=SPARWOOD#5; Jim Bertoia, "Sparwood: A Community Transplanted," in Norton and Miller, *Forgotten Side*, 163.

[81] Podrasky interview, 18 July 1991; M-NHS, interview with Frank and Francis Travis on 1 August 1991 conducted by Dan Tanaka and Christine Beranek.

[82] Montemurro to F.E. Bertoia, 14 August 1970, SADF, 330-001_Cont-d.tif, 409-12. Only sixteen of the 115 houses were classified as suitable for a "possible move."

[83] Stanley Grocutt to President Arnold Miller, UMWA, 5 February 1975, GA, M 6000, United Mine Workers of America, District 18 Fonds, box 37-390; *FFP*, 12 August 1969.

Natal were left to their own devices. Not until 1971 did MLA Leo Nimsick manage to cajole the local government to investigate the need for public housing in Sparwood. Three years later a public housing project with eighteen units was opened. While this gave a few low-income residents of Natal a final opportunity to move to Sparwood, it came too late for the many who had moved away.[84]

Local 7292 of the UMWA provided an important thread of continuity between Natal-Michel and Sparwood. Indeed, Local 7292 grew in power in the 1970s, both because its membership more than doubled and because a spike in metallurgical coal prices gave it important leverage in negotiations with the company.[85] Perhaps the Local's most important contribution to the expanded town lay in its insistence that Michel Hospital be replaced prior to its demolition. Speaking for the union, MLA Leo Nimsick gave the minister of health an ultimatum: "The government builds the hospital or the mine goes down." Meanwhile, Ezner DeAnna (right-hand man to the union president) delivered a message to Gene Clemmer of Kaiser Resources:

> Make it clear Gene. The Japanese are going to forget what colour of coal it is from Western Canada if we don't get that hospital down there. You get Eddie [i.e., Edgar Kaiser Jr.] to go in and talk to that [expletive] that's there sitting as minister of health and get him on our side and get this hospital back. We're not going to rush. We've got lots of time. I'm going to get excited after about four weeks. And by the fifth week you're probably going to have a problem you don't like.

DeAnna recollected getting a phone message from Kaiser about three and a half weeks later, it said: "Don't worry. You're going to get what you want." Shortly thereafter the press carried a report that "Kaiser had donated a considerable sum of money to help equip the new hospital in Sparwood." Later, the minister of health announced that a hospital in Sparwood would be built after all.[86]

The intricacies of this story have broader significance when seen against competing theories of the role of states in capitalist societies. Did the provincial government act as an impartial arbiter of the conflicting class interests at play (between the working-class majority of Natal and

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[84] Nimsick to Montemurro, 26 March 1971, and Montemurro's reply, 7 April 1971; Montemurro to L. Nicolson, provincial minister of housing, 24 March 1975, SADF, 330-001_Cont-d.tif, 171-73 and 109-10.

[85] Thomas Gunton, "Natural Resources and Regional Development: An Assessment of Dependency and Comparative Advantage Paradigms," *Economic Geography* 79, 1 (2010): 69-94.

[86] Author interview with Ezner DeAnna, 7 July 2011. Opened in 1978, the Sparwood Hospital was closed during the round of provincial hospital closures in 2001.

Michel, on the one hand, and an American-owned coal company, on the other) as pluralist state theory posits?[87] Alternately, did the provincial government of W.A.C. Bennett pursue its own state-building agenda, which effectively overrode the interests of both labour and capital, as neo-institutionalist state theory predicts for a decentralized federation in which authority is concentrated in subnational parliamentary executives?[88] Or, finally, did the provincial government closely coordinate and align its actions with the coal company, thereby confirming a Marxist understanding of the pro-corporate bias at the heart of state actions in capitalist societies?[89] No single case can provide a definitive test of these theories (especially since such tests are well nigh impossible in social scientific inquiry because of the distinctive constellation of factors that make each case unique). Nevertheless, framing the destruction of Natal and Michel within these theoretical questions can enhance our knowledge of the nature of the relationship between governments and resource corporations during the "Golden Era" of capitalism following the Second World War,[90] over and above the specific insights we gain into the modus operandi of the W.A.C. Bennett government in the 1960s.

In its public pronouncements and frequent consultations with municipal leaders about the demolition of Natal and Michel, the provincial government tried to present itself – as pluralist theory envisages the state – as an even-handed arbiter of the competing interests of the coal company and local residents. This was a smokescreen, no less thick than the coal dust and smoke that enveloped Natal and Michel in the mid- to late 1960s, revealed as such by (1) the speed with which provincial government officials took up CNPC's idea of relocating everyone to Fernie after the riches of the Balmer coal seam became clear in 1965, (2) the provincial government's failure to approve the expansion of Sparwood until Kaiser Coal officials signed off on the idea in 1968, and (3) the inability

[87] Roger King, *The State in Modern Society: New Directions in Political Sociology* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Education, 1986), 115-18. While classic pluralists see "policy-making as *a priori* pluralistic," neopluralists contend that "whether a particular policy arena is pluralistic, in the sense of having many participants who have some chance of influencing the outcome, is an open question." I am therefore testing classic pluralist theory. See Martin J. Smith, "Pluralism, Reformed Pluralism and Neopluralism: The Role of Pressure Groups in Policy-Making," *Political Studies* 38, 2 (1990): 319, 322.

[88] Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 31-50.

[89] Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society: The Analysis of the Western System of Power* (London: Quartet Books, 1973 [1969]).

[90] Ronaldo Munck, *Globalisation and Labour: The New 'Great Transformation'* (London: Zed Books, 2002), 51-76.

of municipal government leaders to have their provincial counterparts address the inadequate purchase prices for the homes and businesses that were destroyed.

Does this mean that the provincial government was working as an adjunct to the two coal companies, as the simplest version of Marxist state theory postulates? At different points in this story, the provincial government firmly rejected corporate demands, and there is no record to suggest that provincial government support for company positions could ever be taken for granted. Neo-institutionalist state theory may come closer to capturing what was happening in that the provincial government always seemed to have its own state-building agenda (which included "beautification" of the southeastern gateway to British Columbia) and political priorities in mind as it managed this urban renewal project. Still, the Bennett government's agenda was frequently set aside in favour of corporate demands, and it appears that the economic might of CNPC and (especially) Kaiser Resources won them undue consideration from the provincial government.

Reflecting on these developments suggests that what transpired in Natal and Michel signalled the beginnings of an environmental justice movement in Canada. Coal dust and smoke may have been immediate environmental grievances in Natal and Michel, but the deeper issue was the threatened destruction of community life. This broader, sociological conception of environmental damage is a defining characteristic of the EJM, as is the second feature of the story of Natal and Michel's final years – residents' capacity to recognize that the pollution of their air, water, and landscape was part of a larger, systemic problem, which was that senior levels of government and coal companies ignored and/or trivialized their concerns. Reeve Orlando Ungaro's bitter remark in the spring of 1967 encapsulates this position: "It is the stand of this council that we have been toyed and played with for years in this community."

The important role of women in the Natal and Michel protests also resonates with the general characteristics of the EJM. Although excluded from the coal-mining industry (including UMWA Local 7292) and not represented in elected political offices, women organized contentious mass protests in Natal and Michel in 1967 – in the best tradition of activist mothering for working people.[91] This activism prodded two male-dominated pillars of the community – the District of Sparwood council and the leadership of Local 7292 of the UMWA – to heighten and extend

[91] Elliott J. Gorn, *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

their involvement in the EJM. More than this, women's engagement with the issues facing Natal and Michel sparked greater male involvement and made the EJM a community-wide project.

By taking up demands for environmental justice in the fall of 1967, the leadership of Local 7292 of the UMWA demonstrated that such demands need not automatically conflict with notions of working-class masculinity. At that time, Kaiser Steel was on the verge of purchasing CNI's coal-mining operation, and Stan Grocutt, Local 7292's secretary-treasurer, convincingly linked community-wide demands for environmental justice with the union's traditional workplace demands. This historical example suggests that male workers' aversion to joining the movement for environmental justice may well be due to contextual factors (such as the absence of a union to concentrate working-class demands and protect workers' political rights) rather than to an invariant element of working-class masculinity.

The residents of Natal and Michel suffered a number of indignities during the final years of their communities, ranging from CNI's intensification of its production of coal dust and smoke (an intensification that Leo Nimsick thought might have been deliberate) to the decision to make cash purchases of homes and businesses in Natal before new development at Sparwood had even received approval. Why were residents so frequently mistreated?

Ronald Perry and Michael Lindell identify three distinct rationales for the relocation of communities: "urban renewal and community development; mitigation of an environmental hazard; and … the construction of dams and other public projects." They further note that, when residents are relocated due to an environmental hazard, they tend to be seen as blameless and fully deserving of public support. In contrast, "for relocations that stem from other causes (highways, dams, urban renewal) citizens have a tendency to be identified as part of a problem to be corrected, or as people who must be moved to facilitate progress."[92] There was an unfortunate confusion at the heart of the

[92] Perry and Lindell, "Principles for Managing Community Relocation," 49, 53. An example in the latter category is the approximately two thousand residents of the Arrow Lakes District who were displaced by the rising waters behind the High Arrow Dam on the Columbia River in the 1960s. Tina Loo shows that the Arrow Lakes residents were strongly connected to a past that "lived on in the present as part of their identity" and that they operated with an alternative sense of modernity that prioritized independence, self-reliance, voluntarism, and the decentralization of settlement. To the high modernist planners employed by BC Hydro, they were "people in the way" of progress. See Tina Loo, "People in the Way: Modernity, Environment, and Society on the Arrow Lakes," *BC Studies* 142/43 (2004): 167, 191–96. See also J.W. Wilson, *People in the Way: The Human Aspects of the Columbia River Project* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973).

demolish/relocate scheme for Natal and Michel: an environmental mitigation project was mislabelled as urban renewal. As a consequence, residents were not treated sympathetically as the innocent victims of a polluting coal company; rather, they had their reputations tarnished by the "blight" of their polluted living environs. As Francis Travis notes, people driving past Natal and Michel in the late 1960s might well have remarked, "Oh, such a dirty place." She continues: "But do you realize that the washings on the line of Michel-Natal were probably the cleanest of anywhere around even though it was a coal mine? The sidewalks were scrubbed daily. They shone." Frank Travis adds: "It wasn't clean looking but it was … Their homes were nice." [93]

The demolition of Natal and Michel resulted in the relocation of about half of the residents to Sparwood and the dispersal of others far and wide. In the process, strong bonds of family and friendship were broken. This had a particularly deleterious impact on the women of the community, for whom the extended family and a tight friendship network served a role that paralleled that of Local 7292 in the lives of male coal miners. "The extended family was her trade union," state Michael Young and Peter Willmott in a study of a working-class neighbourhood in East London in the 1950s, "organized in the main by women and for women, its solidarity her protection against being alone."[94] Similar observations apply to women's lives in Natal and Michel. And, indeed, the collective protests in 1967 against pollution are a testimony to the deep bonds of solidarity across women's family and friendship networks. In the end, much of the social cohesion that defined everyday life in Natal and Michel for over sixty years was squandered when the provincial government failed to keep its promise to ensure a wholesale relocation to Sparwood.

[93] Interview, 1 August 1991.

[94] Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1962 [1957]), 189.