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OWNER-OPERATOR/FLEET SEPARATION: The racket over the owner-operator agreement and fleet separation policy continues.

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JOHN FURLONG: We've got our own storm to talk about. It's the racket over the owner/operator agreement and fleet separation policy. Ottawa is holding consultations and inviting comment on all aspects of the fishery and some have taken that to mean that the two policies, owner/operator and fleet separation, two sacred pillars of the fishery, may be under review and that's what has everyone talking. And because that's why that's what everybody is talking about because it seems so important, both pro and con, that's what we'll be talking about tonight. We'll start in a rather unusual place. That's with a British Columbia NDP member of Parliament. His name is Nathan Cullen. He's running for the federal NDP leadership. As part of his campaign, Nathan Cullen was in St. John's today to speak with supporters and talk about a variety of issues. As it turns out, he had some pretty strong views and some firsthand knowledge of owner/operator and fleet separation issues. I heard him speak about it earlier in the day as I managed to catch up to myself as he was about to board a plane to get his thoughts on the issue.

NATHAN CULLEN: I would only offer be careful. Be careful when you're dealing with these guys because we've seen what DFO does when it changes some of the policies that can actually end up hurting small and independent fishermen. We've had our fleet go from 750 boats on the north coast of British Columbia down to less than 100 operating, and that's over a very short period of time. So you know, the claims are often found great but then when you actually see the policy unfold. . .if it's not made by people in the communities then often it goes sideways very quickly.

JOHN FURLONG: So what happened in British Columbia? Is it that people bought up licenses and are able to sit home and lease them out to people who make profits for them?

NATHAN CULLEN: That's exactly it. So we end up with a lot of armchair fishermen who have millions upon millions of dollars worth of quota and licenses that they essentially use like they would a stock market issue. They make the money off the fishermen, fish and make a dollar per pound while the fellow who actually owns the license is making four or five dollars per pound. So you're working for somebody else at near starvation wages, and as a result, a lot of people don't end up fishing.

And so it's kind of one of those situations where the rich get richer and the folks stuck at the bottom stay there.

JOHN FURLONG: But if the rich people are looking to buy licenses and the licenses go to the highest bidder, doesn't that increase the value of the license to the individual independent harvester?

NATHAN CULLEN: Yeah, so it can be a transition out for people who are looking to get out of the industry. But for anybody, the kids who want to get into this business or anybody at the mid-point of their career, it becomes very difficult because what happens is there's fewer and fewer fish in the system and there's a need to go out and get more licenses just to make ends meet. And unless you happen to have a million bucks burning a hole in your pocket, you can't get at these other quota and it becomes a big problem. So again, without knowing what they're specifically going to offer you folks and whether (inaudible), it's difficult to know the ramifications. But all I'd say is make sure that you know exactly what you're getting into and make sure that you actually have a voice in the conversation because we certainly didn't. This was imposed upon us.

JOHN FURLONG: So why would DFO go that route, then? Would it be indifference to larger corporations?

NATHAN CULLEN: There is that. It's much easier to control the entire fishery and manage it if you just have a few rich license holders that you have to talk to every once in a while rather than all these troublesome fishermen that want to keep the stocks healthy and all the rest of that. Why else? I don't know. General incompetence? What's stopping DFO from doing bad things in the past? I don't mean to be cynical about it but we've seen some policy over the years that have just been tremendously hurtful to us and it's because there's a concentration of so-called knowledge in Ottawa, so little of it put out to the coast where the fish actually are.

JOHN FURLONG: What about the argument that independent harvesters now might like to add to their licenses, the fact that in Newfoundland and Labrador you can only hold two licenses, some people would like to have three or four, and you know, that abandoning the owner/operator principle would allow that and lift the restrictions that small independent harvesters face now?

NATHAN CULLEN: I can only speak to our experience on the west coast. The experience has shown us that people don't stop at three or four and they don't tend to be fishermen. They tend to be people who can actually afford this kind of

investment and return on investment is what they're looking for. So you know, while it may make sense for someone who needs to get another license to make ends meet, there is many, many and an overwhelming number of cases where we just end up with stack licenses within one person's hands and people end up working for somebody else. Right, because people don't fish their licenses and they get somebody else to do it and you're working for peanuts.

JOHN FURLONG: And the other argument that's being made here is that once the door opens on scrapping these principles, once the door opens it will swing wide open and never be closed again.

NATHAN CULLEN: And then what we've noticed is that international buyers start coming in. So we have licenses owned by Chinese companies, American companies and when you get down to the question of actually managing and being stewards of this resource, this lifetime renewable resource, it starts to get to the hard questions. You're dealing with a stockbroker in New York or investor in Beijing, they simply don't care and why would they? This is just another investment in their portfolio. It's no different than them trading shares on IBM. This time you're dealing with a (inaudible) natural resource and so they run the risk of heavy depletion because you have people thinking only about the next quarter, not the next quarter century. Ultimately we have to respect the people who live and die by this resource and it's their lives and their income and their livelihoods on the line. So for once why not respect the people who actually know what they're talking about and that's the people that are out here, not in Ottawa.

JOHN FURLONG: All right then, Nathan Cullen, certainly appreciate you making time for me today. Thank you.

NATHAN CULLEN: Not a bit. Any time.

JOHN FURLONG: Bye now.

NATHAN CULLEN: Bye.

JOHN FURLONG: That's Nathan Cullen with a quote, a sound bite for the ages in this debate. People are more interested in the next quarter rather than in the next quarter century. Nathan Cullen of course is the NDP MP for Skeena-Bulkley Valley. That's in British Columbia.