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Quebec cheered, Ottawa jeered at global green gathering

By GLORIA GALLOWAY

Charest wins praise for sustainable development from Pew centre while WWF condemns Harper government in Rio

While Canada is being condemned at a major international gathering on environmental protection and sustainable development in Brazil, Jean Charest is reaping praise for the work Quebec is doing to bolster the long-term health of the planet.

The Premier has been trying for months to promote Plan Nord, his economic development proposal for northern Quebec that has been overshadowed by student protests. It has been decried by some aboriginal and environmental groups as a scheme to fast-track mining and other development in the province's untapped regions.

But Mr. Charest said Tuesday in Rio Di Janiero, where heads of state from around the world and thousands of other participants are attending the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, that Pan Nord legislation will be amended to fulfill his pledge to protect half of northern Quebec from industrial activity.

Mathew Jacobson of the Pew Environment Group's boreal campaign, who is also in Brazil for the conference, said in a statement that Mr. Charest's promise will protect more than 600,000 square kilometres – an area about the size of France – from all industrial activity. The Canadian boreal forest, which stretches across the northern parts of provinces from Newfoundland to British Columbia, is the Earth's largest intact forest ecosystem and its largest storehouse of carbon.

"Quebec's boreal region is a world class ecosystem, and it deserves world class leadership," Mr. Jacobson said. "When this policy is strengthened, it could lead to the single largest land conservation initiative in history. Working in partnership with aboriginal communities and implementing science-based ecological planning, the Quebec government will create a new global model for sustainable development."

That was a far cry from the words that another group had for the Canadian government, which is being represented in Rio by Environment Minister Peter Kent.

On Monday, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) released a list of countries it considered to "heroes" of the environment and those that were "blockers" of progress. There were just two mentions on the latter list – the major oil exporting countries of OPEC and Canada.

"Canada refuses to acknowledge any differences in responsibility between developed and developing countries, is blocking on any new financing and generally seem unwilling to make any concessions within this process," the environmental organization said. "This is a negotiation, and yet it's not clear anyone from Canada has any mandate to move in any way on any issue. Canada appears disinterested in measures to

safeguard the environment. So, why are they here?"

When Mr. Charest was federal environment minister in the former Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney, he headed the Canadian delegation to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio – a precursor to the current meeting – where he signed the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Gerald Butts, the president of WWF Canada, said Tuesday that no federal government has demonstrated the progressive attitude toward the environment marked the policies of Mr. Mulroney and his cabinet. But, for the past six years under the Conservative government of Stephen Harper, Canada has done little more at international environment conferences that attempt to gum up the works.

"We are an obstructionist approach to just about everything including the technical drafting of communiques and the selection of language, etc., etc.," Mr. Butts said. "Delegates from other countries are walking out of the room and talking to WWF people saying 'what's going on with Canada?'"

Mr. Kent responds that his government is "pragmatic" and that it has tried to craft an environmental agenda that is "achievable and fair."

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