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Fighting the slow agony of the world

By Émilise Lessard-Therrien

Mother of Solène and deputy with Québec Solidaire in Rouyn-Noranda-Témiscamingue at the Québec National Assembly.

(Translated by Lucas Zabotin)

January. The year has just barely begun. We are entering a new decade. For many, this new beginning is a moment to adopt new habits, to make changes in our lives, to make resolutions that will be held—or not. This turning point is, in a sense, a moment to assess the past year and to project oneself into the months to come.

For me, January started with the frightening images and terrible statistics of fires ravaging Australia. A blaze covering an area equivalent to two times the size of Belgium, nearly 10 million acres of land devoured by flames, hundreds of millions of animals perished, the immaculate white of New Zealand's glaciers turned brown due to the smoke...

We are already well aware of the impact of melting glaciers on ocean levels, which continue to rise. From north to south, east to west, our landscapes are receding more and more, submerged by rising water. The glaciers turning black with soot will absorb more sunlight... and the vicious cycle, the one that has already begun, will only accelerate.

Despite the nightmare in Australia these past few months, despite the traumatic climatic expropriations experienced by coastal communities, despite the dire warning calls coming from scientists and taken up by crowds of climate activists young and old, the striking reality of climate change continues to be challenged. Despite the clear signs we are receiving from nature,

despite the growing awareness of millions of people, denial seems to still be the solution advocated by the majority. And I continue to ask why.

Yes, there are forest fires. Yes, there is glacial ice melt. But climate change is also occurring in less dramatic ways, even more slyly. From the depths of Témiscamingue, I feel the Québec of my youth changing.

I remember when our summer nights beside campfires extended late into the night. When our mornings were spent in the fields of flowers, our jeans wet from dew as we chased butterflies. When the forest became the theater for all sorts of adventures in which, as a child, I would rejoice in rediscovering the world.

Is all this destined to become a thing of the past? The mere thought devastates me. Just like our vast territory today: devastated. And as our territory becomes devastated, our collective identity is disrupted, our orientation and our vision of the world wither.

The increasing frequency of heat waves during our summers is conducive to forest fires. This is exactly what happened in Australia. Although the episodes here are at an entirely different scale, their consequences remain impactful in our lives. I remember apocalyptic skies, when an unusually red sun traversed the thick plume of brown smoke rising from the flames in Northeast Ontario. All summer, the fire index was near “extreme,” making all campfires unauthorized. But here, in the region, what is summer if not a time to lie around a campfire and...? A fire to keep away the mosquitoes, to cook our dinner, and to keep us together, gathered around the warm, soft light.

The flames burned for weeks. Hundreds of hectares, healthy forests went up in smoke. Scientists predicted: forest fires will only become more frequent. Add to that the increasing epidemiological risks and the pressures on forestry become dire.

Global warming also significantly impacts the flora and fauna of our fragile ecosystem. Take, for example, invasive species: just on our farm, my daughter will no longer be able to run carefree through the fields. Wild parsnip, one of the forty-odd exotic invasive species currently documented in our territory, has taken root as is spreading at shocking speeds. Contact with its oils can cause severe reactions, blisters or burns, which can leave scars. In our Nordic climate, this species has become even hardier than indigenous organisms.

When the deer migrate north in a newly hospitable climate, and when white bears move south in search of food, how can we possibly believe that the fragile balance of our ecosystems will endure?

More deer in Témiscamingue means more competition for the species already living in this habitat. More competition means less food for everyone. And less food for everyone means weaker populations, more susceptible to parasites.

In the forest, walks are also becoming increasingly dangerous with the propagation of ticks carrying Lyme disease. The number of cases between 2016 and 2017 has almost doubled, and more and more regions are affected.

This disease is not just a menace to our domestic animals. It is a menace to those who still forage for wild blueberries, to the amateur mycologists, to those who hunt small game, to those of us who still live in our forests.

And in our region, I guarantee you that the forest, for her part, still lives in us.

In the east of the country, our coastal regions will also be severely impacted. The absence of ice along the edges of the Magdalen Islands and of the Gaspé Peninsula exposes the coasts to strong waves during an increasingly long winter period. The salt-water swells more and more

into our territory causing the recession of the coves and bays, even menacing road 132. What is a road trip in Gaspésie without the legendary 132? Without its colorful cottages by the sea?

Scientists predict that the water level in the gulf and estuary of St-Laurent will rise by at least 50 centimeters, and possibly up to three meters by 2100! This is a greater rise than the estimated average from the whole planet!

When our seasons, our forests, our animals and our fields are taken hostage by climate change and global warming, it is the very future of our regions that is taken hostage.

These colorful seasons, these majestic forests, this rich fauna and breathtaking landscapes: it is all this which shapes Quebec. It is all this which shapes us as human beings. It is all this that is in the process of radically changing in the face of the indifference of our political leaders.

More than one night, as I finished reading my young daughter to sleep, I turned off her light with knots in my stomach. Soon, the embrace of a mother's soft voice will not suffice. Soon, our future will be so uncertain that we will no longer desire to have children...

This thought haunts me to the point that it gives me the courage, every week, to leave my family nest and sacrifice these precious minutes beside my child every night in order to journey to the National Assembly of Quebec, to face this dread and call for the changes that the future demands.