

Province urged to overhaul Treasure Trove Act

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WESTERN SHORE — The new NDP government must waste no time dealing with the province's controversial Treasure Trove Act, says the man who administered the act for 30 years.

"At this point, the future of the act is truly unknown," said Rick Ratcliffe, who retired from his job last month.

The three-page act is the only one of its kind in Canada, and was put in place to deal with Oak Island, though its effects go a lot further because the province is surrounded by shipwrecks. Mr. Ratcliffe spoke Sunday at the annual Explore Oak Island Days at the Oak Island Resort & Spa in Western Shore.

He said four treasure trove licences have been issued for Oak Island since 1954. There is one licence still in effect and three applications are outstanding. They can't be dealt with until the Treasure Trove Act has been addressed.

It would take six weeks to get any revised act approved by cabinet, which Mr. Ratcliffe said would allow treasure hunting to take place on Oak Island by fall.



Rick Ratcliffe (ERIC WYNNE / Staff)

Mr. Ratcliffe has already spoken to newly minted Chester-St. Margaret's MLA Denise Peterson-Rafuse about the issue. He said the Ms. Peterson-Rafuse, who on Friday was sworn in as the province's community services minister, is looking into the matter and is seeking cabinet's direction on the issue.

Fellow NDP MLA Howard Epstein introduced a private member's bill in 2007 to repeal the



Denise Peterson-Rafuse

Treasure Trove Act. A heritage advisory group also recommended to the province the act be repealed. The concern is protection of these treasures and artifacts.

The province hired the Blackstone Group to do an independent report which is now in the province's hands. Mr. Ratcliffe has read it and thinks the public should get a look at it too. "It has some very strong recommenda-

tions—a lot of what I've been trying to fight for for years."

He said there is also tremendous pressure on Nova Scotia from the international community to pass laws banning treasure hunting.

He said UNESCO wants shipwrecks left alone and treasures left protected under the sea. But Mr. Ratcliffe said investors have already spent a lot of money on ventures in and around Nova Scotia and he questions how well preserved artifacts would be given the effects of tides, storms and ice.

Canada hasn't signed on to this request from UNESCO, "but is under tremendous pressure to do so," he said.

Mr. Ratcliffe said the whole issue of treasure hunting is about the need to balance the rights of people who want to look for treasure and shipwrecks with those who want to leave heritage untouched.

Also of concern to treasure seekers is a provincial law that

requires them to turn over 10 per cent of their find to the provincial department of tourism, culture and heritage. It's not so much that they have to turn the artifacts over, Mr. Ratcliffe said, but that no one ever gets to see them.

"Staff at the (Nova Scotia) museum find the activity of treasure troving unacceptable," so he said they won't display what they have been given.

That can make life difficult for treasure seekers, because the museum is also responsible for issuing the heritage research permits that are required before undertaking any searches.

"The fact is (treasure hunting) exists and treasures have been collected and they should be open to the public," said Yvonne Hennigar of the Oak Island Tourism Society.

Mr. Ratcliffe agreed. "Anything that's the property of the Crown should be open to the public."

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