

REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

What's Governance got to do with it? Two Investigations into the State of Atlantic Canada

WHILE DRIVING FROM HALIFAX TO FREDERICTON on 29 June 2003, I was poignantly reminded of what policy-makers are fond of calling “the structural adjustments” that are confronting Atlantic Canadians. Just outside of Truro, I passed a car with Newfoundland and Labrador license plates, pulling an open trailer loaded with household effects. Further along, there were two and then four more vehicles in what was clearly a convoy of families making its way from the Gulf Ferry to Toronto, Fort McMurray or some other destination where job prospects promised to be better than at home. It was clear, too, that these were not people whose moving expenses were generously underwritten by some corporation for whom they planned to work. Like so many Atlantic Canadians before them, they were “goin’ down the road” to take up the kind of employment that, given the costs of relocation, might not sustain them much better than welfare at home.

These migrants on the Trans-Canada Highway provide a context for the Newfoundland and Labrador Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada which submitted its main report the very day following my drive to Fredericton.¹ Over the previous fourteen months, Chair Victor L. Young and his colleagues Sister Elizabeth M. Davis and Judge James Igloliorte had worked under considerable pressure to conduct their investigation within the time frame stipulated by the terms of reference for the commission. In addition to a 215-page report entitled *Our Place In Canada*, the commission generated 28 research papers and submissions from two polling companies hired to conduct national and provincial surveys to probe public opinion (Pollara and Ryan Research and Communications). For anyone interested in accessing these resources, they are available on the Internet (<http://www.gov.nf.ca/royalcomm/>). That said, I sympathize with anyone who, like myself, is obliged to read hundreds of pages of single-spaced research prose on a computer screen.

Royal commissions are potentially valuable in at least three ways. At best, they produce practical recommendations that are quickly implemented. They can also serve a political role, either to stall immediate action or to bring greater public awareness to bear on major issues. Finally, commission reports and the research that informs them are often a gold mine for historians. It is perhaps too soon to tell if the report's major recommendations, which focus on more collaborative federal-provincial relations, will be influential with policy-makers in Ottawa. When it was released, *Our Place in Canada* was greeted with a disdainful yawn in the rest of the country – there were, after all, fires in British Columbia, a SARS outbreak in Toronto and summer holidays on the agenda. The commissioners note optimistically (and prophetically in the case of Newfoundland and Labrador) that “an unusual coming

1 *Our Place in Canada*, Main Report of the Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada (St John's, 2003).

together of new governments and new leaders, both federally and provincially”, provides a unique opportunity “to better respond to the hopes and dreams of Canadians” (p. 8); however, hope and a narrow window of opportunity are thin threads on which to hang major policy initiatives. Perhaps more surprisingly, *Our Place in Canada* also failed to spark enthusiasm in Newfoundland and Labrador. It played little role in the October 2003 provincial election that brought Danny Williams and the Progressive Conservative Party to office and its major recommendations, which were conveyed with a sense of urgency, seem to be hanging in limbo. Although a recommendation that requires the government to assess progress on or before 30 June 2005 may kick some new life into the report, two years is a long time in politics.

Whatever the fate of the commission’s recommendations, *Our Place In Canada* is destined to take its place on the shelves with the other royal commissions that have been established to investigate the economic ills of the Atlantic Region.² It is difficult to say whether the report or any of the research papers will become classics, but together they provide a wealth of information for present and future scholars interested in conditions in Newfoundland and Labrador at the beginning of the 21st century.³ Historians are well-represented among the academics commissioned to write research papers. In 1997, J.R. Miller, then president of the Canadian Historical Association, lamented “History seems to be everywhere, but the historian is becoming invisible”.⁴ One of Miller’s concerns was that historians were increasingly less likely than political scientists, economists and sociologists to be hired as consultants to policy-makers. While it is the case that social scientists dominate the list of scholars hired to write research papers for the commission, I counted five historians in the mix – Melvin Baker, Gerald Bannister, Raymond Blake, Jason Churchill and Miriam Wright. Together their reports provide a comprehensive and often highly-sophisticated reflection on the province’s post-Confederation history. Gerald Bannister’s essay on the politics of cultural memory is a splendid piece of writing that may well become a classic. The other historians also tackle with considerable skill the 1945 to 1948 context of Confederation (Baker), the Smallwood years (Wright), the history of rural and regional development policies (Blake) and the exploitation of Labrador’s Churchill River Basin since 1949 (Churchill). Baker makes a second contribution in the form of a 25-page chronology of Newfoundland and Labrador history, beginning in 7000 BC.

2 For a discussion of the spate of royal commission, both federal and provincial, that focused on Maritime concerns in the interwar years, see Kenneth Gary Jones, “Response to Regional Disparity in the Maritime Provinces, 1926-1942: A Study in Canadian Intergovernmental Relations”, Ph.D. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1980.

3 In 1984 *Acadiensis* Press republished a monograph produced by S.A. Saunders for the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations that sat between 1937 and 1940. This was done on the grounds that it was “the first comprehensive analysis undertaken of the Maritime economy and has become one of the cornerstones of the historiography of the region”. S.A. Saunders, *The Economic History of the Maritime Provinces*, edited and with an introduction by T.W. Acheson (Fredericton, 1984). For a thoughtful review of this edition, see Michael Clow, “Situating A Classic: Saunders Revisited”, *Acadiensis*, XV, 1 (Autumn 1985), pp. 145-52.

4 J.R. Miller, “The Invisible Historian”, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association/Revue de la société historique du Canada*, new series/nouvelle série, 8, p. 15.

Given the retrospective nature of the inquiry, most of the papers are grounded in a more or less sound reading of the recent past.⁵ Maura Hanrahan explores the implications of the omission of Aboriginal peoples from the Terms of Union of 1949 that put the province's Inuit, Innu, Métis and Mi'kmaq in a precarious position with respect to the rights claimed by Aboriginal peoples elsewhere in Canada. In her report on the changing role of women, Joanne Hussey argues that the contribution of women to the economy is often overlooked, that women are especially vulnerable in the current climate of restructuring and that policies must be introduced to meet the particular needs of women. The commissioners recognize the importance of culture and identity issues, topics that are addressed by Gerald Blackmore in *Sense of Place: Loss and the Newfoundland and Labrador Spirit*. In part because Confederation is still within living memory, the province's inhabitants nurture a strong sense of their unique identity. According to the provincial opinion survey conducted in April 2003, 72 per cent consider themselves Newfoundlanders and Labradorians first, Canadians second. Interestingly, they told pollsters that what they *most* valued about being Newfoundlanders or Labradorians was the culture, music and arts they shared (25 per cent), along with the safe environment (20 per cent) and sense of community (14 per cent). Although the commissioners detected a strong current of alienation in Labrador (p. 193), they solicited no study on and offered no specific recommendations for the region, other than more development of the Churchill River Basin, which surely misses the point.

The majority of research papers focus on political and economic matters. To get an "outside" perspective on the province's position in the federal system, the commissioners turned to Roger Gibbins of the Canada West Foundation. He concludes that federal governance, which has been greatly transformed since 1949, has evolved in a direction that supports the aspirations of Newfoundland and Labrador. Donald Savoie is more critical of Ottawa and wonders if the gradual shift from "needs" to "opportunities" in the theory driving regional development policy over the past forty years has served the province well. For Savoie, decentralization of responsibilities from the federal government to the provinces no longer offers as much risk as it used to and he supports political and administrative reforms that will encourage Ottawa to accommodate regional economic circumstances other than those of Ontario and Quebec. Past federal-provincial agreements apparently offer no remedy. Stephen May concludes that the 1949 Terms of Union have little practical application to current federal-provincial relationships, while John Crosbie sees the 1985 Canada-Newfoundland Atlantic Accord as offering fewer benefits from offshore oil development than the province had hoped. Other papers address the implications for public policy of demographic trends (Craig Brett), the province's place in the Canadian economic union (Centre for Spatial Economics), Atlantic Region integration options (Stephen Tomblin) and federal representation (Chris Dunn). Two papers tackle fiscal matters (Dave Norris and Robin Boadway). While Wade Locke and Scott Lynch examine what the province needs to know about the

5 A surprising double-barrelled error in historical fact occurs in the report itself where it is claimed that Newfoundland delegates attended the Charlottetown Conference in July 1864 (ii). No Newfoundland delegates attended the Charlottetown Conference and it was held in September not in July.

knowledge-based economy, the P.J. Gardiner Institute, Memorial University, examines the province's entrepreneurial success stories. Expatriate Newfoundlander Gwynne Dyer assesses the province's strategic position and Dennis Stairs addresses foreign policy options. Not surprisingly, given their real and symbolic importance, the fisheries are the focus of three studies (George Rose, Phillip Saunders and David Vardy and Eric Dunn).

While it is no doubt true that Premier Roger Grimes hoped that the commission would improve his political prospects – what royal commission is not motivated by political ends? – the crisis it addresses is very real. Unemployment rates in Newfoundland and Labrador are nearly 17 per cent, income per capita has remained stuck below three-quarters of the national average and the population declined by a whopping 10 per cent between 1991 and 2001, presaging a drop in representation in the House of Commons and in transfer payments of various kinds that are based on population. If Ontario or Quebec were experiencing similar statistical signals, Ottawa would be compelled to declare a national state of emergency.

Conditions in Newfoundland and Labrador 54 years following Confederation in 1949 bear a remarkable resemblance to those of the three Maritime Provinces in the 1920s. A half century after the 1867 Confederation agreement, problems of structural adjustment (and the political fall out that it inspired) in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island prompted the federal government in 1926 to establish a royal commission on “Maritime Claims” chaired by Sir Andrew Rae Duncan. The Atlantic Provinces, either singly or together, are unlikely to convince Ottawa to dignify the region's concerns with a royal commission in 2003, leaving Newfoundland and Labrador to sustain the costs of the inquiry reputed to be in the order of \$3 million. Regardless of who pays the piper, the tune is the same: the need for a better deal from Ottawa. The Maritime Claims commissioners concluded that, while “the Maritime Provinces have not prospered and developed, either in population, or in commercial, industrial and rural enterprise, as fully as other parts of Canada”, they could not “take the view that Confederation is, of itself, responsible for this fact”. Nevertheless, Maritime claims were deemed to deserve “sympathetic consideration” in part because the fiscal capacity of Maritime governments could no longer sustain provincial responsibilities.⁶ As *Our Place in Canada* documents, the fiscal capacity of Newfoundland and Labrador is still a key concern.

While the federal government's power to respond to the needs of the poorer provinces is arguably greater today than it was three-quarters of a century ago, the context in 2003 is no more sympathetic to Atlantic Canada. David Alexander and E.R. Forbes warned us in the 1980s that the neo-liberal agenda would create major challenges, not the least of which was a new north-south orientation in trade relations that would make the Atlantic region irrelevant to empire Ontario.⁷ Meanwhile, political economist Donald Savoie, who keeps a close watch on matters regional, has

6 *Report of the Royal Commission on Maritime Claims* (Ottawa, 1927), pp. 9-11

7 David Alexander, “New Notions of Happiness: Nationalism, Regionalism, and Atlantic Canada”, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, XV, 2 (Summer 1980), pp. 29-42; E.R. Forbes, “The Atlantic Provinces, Free Trade, and the Canadian Constitution”, in *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton, 1989), pp. 200-16.

documented the ways that “governing from the centre” has halted national integration and left Atlantic Canadians swinging in the wind of globalizing forces. With the media focused on the Prime Minister and a few key cabinet ministers, political parties reduced to election machines, the civil service dominated by advisors from Ontario and Quebec, and the other provinces concentrating on their own agendas, the problem facing researchers and policy-makers in Atlantic Canada, Savoie argued in 2000, is how to cope with “dysfunctional national political institutions” that have little likelihood of being reformed and in which “the national government is less and less a major actor or, at least a vastly different one than it has been since the Second World War”.⁸ The inability of Liberal MPs from the Atlantic Provinces to devise a convincing regional program to take to the polls in the 2000 election or, it seems, in the imminent 2004 election, serves to underscore the relative powerlessness of regional MPs within the party that seems destined to rule Canada indefinitely.

Unlike their long-suffering and cynical Maritime cousins, Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are still prepared to stand up and fight. The rhetoric of grievance, gaining momentum since the cod moratorium in 1992, had reached a point by the early 21st century where even some business leaders were beginning to sound a lot like members of the radical wing of the Parti Québécois.⁹ Because of the widespread discontent, Grimes took pains to make this commission a credible one. Its chair, Victor Young, has impressive credentials. He had served on the province’s Treasury Board before becoming chief executive officer of the Newfoundland and Labrador Hydro Group of Companies and then chief executive officer of Fisheries Products International. In her position as chief executive officer of the Health Care Corporation of St. John’s, Sister Elizabeth Davis had wrestled with the difficult reorganization of the health care system. Judge James Igloliorte’s distinguished legal career included membership on the team negotiating Labrador Inuit land claims with Canada. No slouches, these high-profile individuals knew that their task was to preside over a people’s royal commission, not one confined to entrepreneurs, lawyers and academics. The commissioners met with over 2,500 people at hearings at home and in Fort McMurray and Toronto and received some 250 written submissions. When it became apparent that women were underrepresented, and largely voiceless when in attendance at hearings, separate meetings were arranged. Efforts were made to elicit responses from Aboriginal people and students. Although entrepreneurs were singled out for consultation, labour unions, it appears, were not; unions did, however, submit briefs. A series of roundtables sought advice on the fisheries, research, the voluntary sector, expectations of Confederation, and culture and heritage. Women, religious leaders and young adults were also the focus of roundtable discussions. If the commission were to fail, it would not be for lack of inclusivity.

Nor would it be for lack of clarity. This is a lucid document mercifully free of

8 Donald J. Savoie, “All Things Canadian Are Now Regional,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 35, 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 203-17; Donald Savoie, *Governing from the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics* (Toronto, 1999); Donald Savoie, *Regional Economic Development: Canada’s Search for Solutions*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1992).

9 For a recent example, see Craig L. Dobbin, Speech delivered to National Ocean Industries Association’s Oil & Gas Week Luncheon, 26 February 2003.

jargon. We are told bluntly that “Newfoundlanders and Labradorians feel ignored, misunderstood and unappreciated by their federal government and, to a lesser extent, by other Canadians”, and that there “is a deep concern that a future of prosperity and self-reliance is not achievable within the Canada of today” (p. 2). Other than the generally depressed state of the provincial economy and the looming debt crisis, three issues in particular fuel provincial passions: the Churchill Falls agreement that benefits Quebec more than Newfoundland and Labrador, the fact that Canada is the primary beneficiary of offshore oil resources, and the disappearance of the fishery under the federal government’s watch. Despite these tragedies, the commissioners are quick to point out that bitterness “should not be mistaken for regret or loss of hope”. “The vast majority of people”, we are told, “believe in the underlying premise of this Commission – that change, both in our circumstances and in our relationship with Canada is possible” (p. 2). The statistics gathered for this investigative exercise confirm that the majority of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are not in the mood to declare independence. Only 12 per cent thought separation from Canada was a viable option.

The Pollara survey documents the stereotypical view of the province that seems to be a major stumbling block to federal action. When asked to identify the greatest contribution of Newfoundland and Labrador to Confederation, one in three Canadians (34 per cent) could think of nothing to say. A majority of Canadians outside of the Atlantic region feel that their province contributes more to Canada than does Newfoundland and Labrador. Sadly, the most commonly held impression (21 per cent) of the province’s inhabitants by other Canadians is that they are “uneducated/stupid/unskilled/unsophisticated”. In short, the pollsters conclude, “Newfoundland and Labrador may be well-known to Canadians”, but “it is not known-well”.¹⁰

Like the Maritime Claims commission, this one can be criticized for pulling its punches. The benefits from Confederation are duly acknowledged (better health care, education, social services and development expenditures), and there is little support for going toe-to-toe with Ottawa.¹¹ Recognizing that intergovernmental agreements and cooperation have served the province reasonably well since 1949 (for example, the General Development Agreements, the 1985 Atlantic Accord and the 1995 Agreement on Internal Trade), the commissioners argue that “more collaborative relationships, not less, are required in the future” (p. 85). For the most part, the commissioners have taken a middle road, their slogan being “No to Separation! No to Status Quo”. What they want is a new partnership that will address the fact that Newfoundland and Labrador is currently at the bottom of the provincial ladder and locked in a cycle of dependency.

Given the general stress on provincial budgets, many other provinces will no doubt endorse several of the commission’s recommendations, among them an elected and equal Senate, regularly scheduled First Ministers’ Meetings, an improved equalization formula and increased Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) payments. In

10 Pollara, *Newfoundland and Labrador’s Place in Canada*, p. 473.

11 E.R. Forbes, *The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927: A Study in Canadian Regionalism* (Montreal, 1979).

taking up Newfoundland and Labrador's specific grievances, the commissioners call for a federal-provincial Action Team on the fisheries with a six-month mandate to develop a comprehensive action plan, immediate negotiations to revise the Atlantic Accord to ensure that a greater share of the oil revenues go to the province, and federal participation in the development of the Gull Island hydroelectric site on the Lower Churchill River. They also appeal to Ottawa to address the rights and entitlements of Aboriginal peoples in Newfoundland and Labrador who were omitted from the Terms of Union of 1949.

Making nice with Ottawa does not always go down well at home. In a *Globe and Mail* report, historian John Fitzgerald is quoted as being disappointed that the commissioners resisted producing a balance sheet to show how much the province pays into and how much it gets out of Confederation.¹² The commissioners concluded that battling over balance sheets was not a constructive approach: "A balance sheet that focuses only on dollars given and received is not only incomplete but, more importantly, diverts the attention of governments from building a new relationship directed towards enabling the province to end its dependency, and the country as a whole, to work better for Canadians" (p. 33). Provincial concerns are front and centre in the report, which is presumably why the other Atlantic provinces, whose fiscal need is nearly as great as that of Newfoundland and Labrador, were not invited to participate in the investigation and why the commissioners reject the "Atlantic region" policy of the federal government:

It [the Atlantic region approach] speaks volumes about our place in Canada. It reinforces the view that this place does not merit full provincial status and that provincial borders in the "Atlantic" should dissolve. And, of course, when we are continually integrated with the Maritimes, our true needs and aspirations are often rendered invisible. Most tellingly, it enables federal bureaucrats and, increasingly, federal politicians to claim that if it has been done in and for Halifax or Moncton, somehow it has also been done in Newfoundland and Labrador (p. 84).

Among the recommendations for a new strategy for intergovernmental relations, the Commission encourages the building of a tripartite partnership with Québec and the federal government on hydroelectric developments in Labrador. Little is said about the potential of closer cooperation among the Atlantic Provinces on the fisheries, offshore oil and natural gas development, environmental issues, gender equality or any other matter. Although evidence gathered by Larry Felt for his research paper, *Small, Isolated, and Successful: Lessons from Small, Isolated Societies of the North Atlantic*, is suggestive on many fronts – why *is* it that the Scandinavian countries seem to do better than the equally-well resourced Atlantic Provinces? – the commissioners have their sights firmly fixed on reformed federal-provincial relations as the solution to the province's difficulties. Only time will tell whether they will be rewarded for their single-minded focus.

There may be some basis for optimism. Within a generation of the Maritime

¹² Roy MacGregor, "Why Newfoundland's election was surprisingly silent about the 'Blame Canada' report", *Globe and Mail*, 21 October 2002, A2.

Claims commission, Ottawa and a majority of the provinces came to the grudging conclusion that federal-provincial relations required more flexibility if human well-being, so badly served during the Great Depression of the 1930s, was to be fundamental to Canadian governance. A federal Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations (Rowell-Sirois), appointed in 1937, addressed the problem of the relative powers of Ottawa and the provinces. When Newfoundland and Labrador entered Confederation, welfare state measures, equalization payments and regional development programs were being debated and implemented. Governance, it seems, had something to do with it, and royal commissions, both provincial and federal, helped to nurture political and public opinion to new ways of thinking about Canadian federalism.¹³

“Good governance” is a main focus of *Our Place in Canada*, and it is also the preoccupation of a report submitted to the Cape Breton Municipality in October 2003.¹⁴ The 158-page discussion paper prepared by Wade Locke and Stephen G. Tomblin, a pair of Memorial University-based professors, explores the role that reformed governing structures might play in improving Cape Breton’s prospects. In addressing this question, they employ a broad definition of governance that includes the institutions, processes and conventions that determine how power is exercised, how important decisions affecting society are made and how various interests are accorded a place in such decisions (pp. 16-17). They point out that bringing about a “regime change” is a complex matter and one not easily achieved. Not only does there have to be a crisis and an obvious policy direction, but also a situation in which the old regime is unable to adjust to new circumstances and a new credible regime is waiting in the wings capable of bringing diverse interests together to achieve a new common objective (p. 19).

The evidence provided in this study points to the potential of more comparative analyses across the Atlantic Region. Like Newfoundland and Labrador, Cape Breton has a high unemployment rate (averaging over 18 per cent in the period from 1975 to 2002), a low per capita income and in, the decade from 1991 and 2001, lost nearly nine per cent of its population. The authors conclude that “Cape Breton is not sustainable as a meaningful economic entity under the current governance arrangement. If nothing is done the long-term viability of Cape Breton is in question” (p. ii). As with Newfoundland and Labrador, the crisis condition is a stimulus to change, but what direction it should take is not altogether clear.

Locke and Tomblin are prepared to range widely in their discussion of governance options. In addition to the status quo and provincial status, they consider “territorial status, a Cape Breton Assembly that is similar in structure to the Scottish Assembly, a modified power sharing arrangement drawing on the principle of subsidiarity proposed by the Graham Commission, a tri-level of governance involving the region, provincial and national governments and an evolutionary process that involves

13 T. Stephen Henderson, “A Nation Made Safe for Provinces: Nova Scotia and the Rowell-Sirois Report, 1938-1948”, paper presented at the Canadian Historical Association Annual Meeting, 27 May 2000.

14 “Good Governance, A Necessary but Not Sufficient Condition for Facilitating Economic Viability in a Peripheral Region: Cape Breton as a Case Study”, discussion paper prepared for The Cape Breton Regional Municipality, October 2003.

progressive, but incremental changes to the status quo” (p. iii).¹⁵ They are also prepared to show us the numbers. According to their calculations, “an independent Cape Breton with full provincial status would have sufficient resources to meet its expenditure commitments” and have a surplus of \$12 million (p. ii). I am no economist, but it seems to me that the added costs of developing a provincial administrative apparatus would quickly wipe out this modest surplus. In any event, the failure (refusal? inability?) of the Nova Scotia government to share information not already in the public domain, make these financial conclusions tentative at best.

In laying out the options for Cape Bretoners to ponder, Locke and Tomblin suggest that major constitutional departures are not likely to succeed. What is now required, they conclude, is finding new ways to renew Cape Breton based on governance structures that do not promote territorial and jurisdictional competition. The biggest challenge facing the island involves building a common vision and cooperative networks, and in particular mitigating the rivalry between Sydney and Port Hawkesbury. The authors conclude that “Cape Breton is more an idea than an institutional reality” (p. 62), and unless people living on the island can get beyond their internal divisions and their feelings of dependency and powerless, they are unlikely to succeed under any political system. “Cooperation, not competition, is vital to survival” (p. iii).

Since Locke and Tomblin were involved in writing research papers for the Newfoundland and Labrador Royal Commission, they may well have been influenced by the vision that inspired the recommendations found in *Our Place in Canada*. It is difficult to miss the emphasis on cooperation in both documents. Equally interesting is the absence in both documents of any serious discussion of provincial and sub-regional fortunes within the context of a reinvented Atlantic region. The focus is provincial and national, even international, but not regional. Although Ottawa has spent the last half century operating on an Atlantic regional model and the new Council of Atlantic Premiers, launched in 2000, has released a document entitled *Working Together for Atlantic Canada*, regionalism seems to have lost its ability to inspire the imagination of investigators.¹⁶ Why is it that the cooperation and collaboration across federal-provincial jurisdictions does not apply equally to the region as a whole?

In my classes on Atlantic Canada history, my students (no doubt influenced by the era in which they grew up and their tendency to range broadly across the region) wonder why the wealth from offshore oil, tourism and other economic enterprises are not shared within the region, benefiting such areas as northern New Brunswick, Cape Breton and Labrador before being siphoned off to Ottawa. It may be the case, as the Newfoundland and Labrador commissioners concluded, that such a rigid “regional” approach would probably not serve the Atlantic provinces very well in the current federal-provincial framework; it could, however, as Frank McKenna noted some two

15 According to the authors, the subsidiary principle is a European construction informed by the decentralist assumption that a “higher” political body should take up only those tasks that cannot be accomplished by “lower” political structures” (p. 34).

16 See Council of Atlantic Premiers, *Working Together for Atlantic Canada: An Action Plan for Regional Co-operation, 2001-2003* (2000) and a report commissioned by the Council by Charles MacMillan, *Focusing on the Future: The New Atlantic Revolution* (Halifax, 2001).

years ago, have merit in certain circumstances.¹⁷ At the very least, there would be cooperation in a context where negative stereotypes were less powerful. At a time when all things in Canada are regional, we seem determined to squander a potential axis of power.

The Western Provinces are not so short-sighted. Gerald Friesen maintains that in recent years the notion of a geographic Prairie West has given way to a single Western region that includes British Columbia. The new “political West”, is much more important than the community labelled “prairies”, Friesen claims, and now operates, if not on a formal or imagined level, at least on a functional one as represented, for example, in the Canadian Alliance Party.¹⁸

The Atlantic Provinces need not, indeed I would argue should not, follow the model of the Western provinces; but we need to recognize that our geopolitical context is changing. As a region bounded by the Atlantic, with four component provinces, seven or more geo-cultural identities (among them Cape Breton and Labrador) and three major cities (Halifax, Moncton and St. John’s), the people of Atlantic Canada may be lurching toward a new imagined community; however, it is one that seems incapable of the kind of cooperation that would really make a functional difference. This is a great pity, especially for the families that will be hitting the Trans-Canada Highway once school is out next June.

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17 Frank McKenna, “Share the Bounty”, *Globe and Mail*, 5 July 2001.

18 Gerald Friesen, “Defining the Prairies: or why the prairies don’t exist”, in Robert Wardhaugh, ed., *Toward Defining the Prairies: Region, Culture, History* (Winnipeg, 2001), pp. 13-25.