

The Lobstermen's Dispute, and What it Reveals about the New Brunswick Condition

We admire civil servants and councillors. But our heart is with miners. Isn't a man worth more than any number of balanced budgets?

(Pierre Elliott Trudeau, qtd. in *Trudeau Transformed* 50)

While death should never be reduced to the symbolic for political gain, neither can some deaths be removed from the broader context in which they occur. Such is the case with the passing of three lobster fishermen from waters near Tabusintac, New Brunswick, on 18 May 2013.

Died at sea—and, as importantly, on the job—were Ian Benoit from Gratton Road (near Tabusintac), aged 35; Alfred Rousselle from Brantville, aged 32; and Samuel-René Boutin from Rivière-du-Portage, aged 23. Each is survived by family, friends, and communities who mourn the loss of strength and vitality that continues to persist against almost impossible odds. Where else in the First World, we should ask, are the stakes so high for such uncertain (and diminishing) returns? Where else is the country's uneven economic development so shamefully on display?

The passing of these three young men, it must be remembered, occurred within the context of a dispute over lobster prices in a year characterized by a lobstermen's strike. At the bottom of this complex dispute was pricing, set by a market—we are told by brokers—that no longer wants to pay for a commodity it considers a luxury. Luxury items, we are told, do not fare well in times of austerity. That logic, at least on the surface, seems unassailable for affirming the drumbeat of recessionary talk we are so familiar with. (And it echoes with the same tones that claim municipal bankruptcies are the fault of greedy unions.)

But other questions and considerations insist themselves. Why are there so many levels of economy between fishermen and consumers? Why are margins so consistently thin? What is the role of provincial processors in creating market conditions favourable to continued large imports of lobster from Maine? And why has this industry remained susceptible to the craven rules of supply and demand when other commodity industries have checked the rapacity of market traders with forward contracts, base pricing, and other measures designed to provide dignity and protection to harvesters?

Lobster fishermen are surely unique in our country for going to work every day with no knowledge of the price of their product, and thus their labour. Why are lawyers' and teachers' wages not subject to the same market conditions and the same dynamics of supply and demand? Who among us would enter one of the most dangerous workplaces imaginable with no knowledge of the remuneration? When considering the price of fuel against what the Market presumably wants to pay (a price per pound of \$3 and lower this year, roughly equivalent to what blueberry harvesters get), most lobstermen say they are working for 40 percent less than what is necessary to keep their businesses viable. Is this acceptable?

In answering that question we must consider, again, the larger context. The boat Mr. Benoit took out to sea that fateful day was a rental he had secured to replace his own, one of five boats lost to fire at the Tabusintac wharf two weeks earlier. That he was able to fish at all after the fire was a considerable achievement. But what choice did he have? At a time when it is “open season” on seasonal workers in New Brunswick, he had to go out to provide for his young family. Did he go out that day against his better judgment to qualify for the stamps that would feed his family during the winter? We do not know. And while some people will consider it indelicate of me to suggest even the possibility of this, I raise it because of the poor understanding of the conditions our seasonal workers face.

Are seasonal workers “heroes,” then, to use that terribly debased word? No, but they routinely endure conditions of employment and remuneration that most of us, with very little thought, would consider appalling.

Worth thinking about as well are the circumstances of the accident. Mr. Benoit’s boat hit a sandbar in rough seas and started taking on water. He and his crew were seen waving frantically from the wheelhouse before a large wave capsized them completely. The area where they ran aground is known to locals as “The Gully,” the entranceway to the Tabusintac River that leads to MacEachern’s Wharf on Wishart Point Road. The area has been a major worry to fishermen in the past, and, according to *The Miramichi Leader*, “Fishermen have been campaigning for years to have the shallow gully dredged to allow a safe exit and entrance to and from their fishing grounds” (21 May 2013). Mr. Benoit was among the most vocal of those fishermen. “Are we going to wait until somebody drowns or kills themselves?” he asked provincial government officials in spring 2012 (*CBC News Online* 21 May 2013).

So what of government officials in this complex but largely unregulated market industry? As New Brunswickers we often lament the lack of representation in the larger federation. We cite the diminishing number of sitting MPs from our region and reductions in the Senate, that chamber founded historically to balance the needs of smaller regions like ours against the wants of the larger. Behind this is the wish that someone might speak up for us, might articulate, even champion, the uniqueness of our rural and resource-based economy amidst the rabble of urbancentric concerns. We wish, among ourselves, for a leader of Louis Robichaud’s fiery conviction or Joseph Howe’s visionary strength. Instead we get Keith Ashfield, a federal Minister of Fisheries and Oceans from New Brunswick chosen, it appears, for his promise to do nothing. We deserve better. Our fishermen deserve better.

Though it must have been welcome news for fishermen to learn that a New Brunswicker would occupy a position of influence and authority in a portfolio so central to one of their province’s staple industries, the minister’s response to the lobstermen’s dispute was, to say the least, disappointing. In his response, the timidity of New Brunswick politicians was on full and pathetic display.

In essence, Minister Ashfield refused involvement, placing the onus on fishermen to solve their own problems. An editorial in *The Telegraph-Journal* summed up his view: “[Mr. Ashfield] expects lobster fishermen to provide his department with solutions to the squabbling over how this fishery should be managed” (19 May 2013).

Though he is now out of the fisheries portfolio, Mr. Ashfield's response at the time raises some pointed questions. What is the role of government in mediating disputes, in looking out for the most vulnerable (and exploited) members of society? And why, as New Brunswickers, do we always seem to get stuck with politicians who seem to want to do nation-building at our expense? Truth be told, Mr. Ashfield should be ashamed of such a response.

He would have been well advised to remember that when Ontario's autoworkers (among the highest paid and protected labourers in the country) were in trouble in 2008, their plight became the plight of the nation, clearly articulated by Ontario Premier McGuinty and federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty as the business of the country. By contrast, no New Brunswick politician has been willing to make the plight of the province's workers the business of the state. Rather, we are told to arrive in Ottawa with "solutions," a response not only insulting but one that raises serious questions about the very existence of bureaucracy. In short, if the response is "bring us your solutions," then what is the use of bureaucracy? What does it do all day? And, if nothing—as Mr. Ashfield's response suggests—then why don't we get rid of it as an expensive habit? I am not being alarmist or reckless in saying this: it is the conclusion Mr. Ashfield's response brings us to. Either government is relevant or it is not; either it participates in our lives purposefully or it does not. If it refuses to become involved in the most serious issues of our day, it is irrelevant and must be reformed.

This loss of three young men, then, is not without wider context and resonance. To pretend that it is isolated to an industry or particular set of crass market conditions is to miss the indifference and scorn (yes, scorn) that continues to be directed at New Brunswick citizens. Market conditions and recessionary pressures were never given as reasons to abandon Ontario autoworkers. Provincial and federal politicians rightly stepped forward to make that industry's woes the business of the country, prompting large taxpayer subsidies to stabilize a once-profitable industry. No such concession for New Brunswick workers. Whether paper mill workers or lobstermen, they must remain subject to the dictates of a cruel and indifferent market, underpaid because—well, because that's what the market determines. And when they need help mediating long-standing disputes or dredging a harbour to make their workplace safer, provincial and federal officials stand mute, telling them that their vast taxpayer-subsidized staff and resources are not available. Rarely have class difference and uneven economic development been so clearly and grossly displayed.

We will continue to think of the three young men whose lives were lost in that cold May sea, as we will continue to think of the five men who died in February aboard the *Miss Ally* off Nova Scotia's southwest shore. We understand the almost impossible odds under which they labour to make a life both modest and fiercely independent.

Tony Tremblay

Editor

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