

What the New Liberal Government Should Know About “One-Term Governments and the Cultivation of Backwardness in New Brunswick”

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A country begins to die when people think life is elsewhere and begin to leave. It begins to die when order disintegrates, when people cease to trust their fellow citizens or their government. In a country that is truly alive, the laws hold us in obedience, not just through fear of punishment but also through attachment to the values and traditions the laws protect. If this attachment wanes, if obedience is reduced to fear, either chaos or tyranny beckons.

– Michael Ignatieff, *True Patriot Love*, 5

New Brunswickers have long been accused of being resistant to change. It's in our DNA, we are told. Provincial historian Ernie Forbes found evidence of this view in *Maclean's* magazine as far back as 1926. The Maritime citizenry, wrote the *Maclean's* columnist he uncovered, was “like a housewife who having married for money which failed to materialize ‘neglected her housework, went down to the seashore...watched the ships go by and pouted’” (qtd. in Forbes 59). Today's conventional wisdom trades on that old myth. It holds that New Brunswickers want nothing: no shale gas, no forestry, no pipelines, and no energy sector. All they want, implies the myth, is the status quo, which they will fight for with a tenacity better directed to more practical ends.

New Brunswick's former Conservative Minister of Energy Craig Leonard summoned this myth when criticizing opponents to his government's recent forestry policy. “I would like to hear from any of those individuals what the alternative is,” said Leonard. “Give us a solution that allows for a vibrant forest industry to take place in the province. They haven't done that. All they want is the status quo” (“Irving Clout with Government Challenged”).

Quite apart from the fact that his government (and the previous one) functioned unilaterally on the forestry file to stifle input from stakeholders, Minister Leonard's response was recklessly rhetorical. It placed policy responsibility where it does not belong (on the shoulders of those who have much less responsibility than he does for being stewards of the public trust) and then it blamed citizens, once they had been disenfranchised, for a lack of solutions.

The Alward government's other two most senior ministers took a similar rhetorical position in a commentary they co-authored in May 2014. Finance Minister Blaine Higgs and Health Minister Ted Flemming opened their commentary with the heavily freighted sentence, “It's time for New Brunswickers to realize the next election is really about the next generation” (Higgs and Flemming). “It's time for New Brunswickers to realize” suggests that, for decades, citizens have been indifferent to the demands of their society. “It's time for New Brunswickers to realize” is another way of saying that citizens only want the status quo—and that anything other than the status quo they are vehemently against.

Opposition to that mythical (and, quite frankly, manufactured) status quo also formed the entire platform of the 2014 Tory election campaign. Premier David Alward's "Say Yes" campaign message was deliberately filtered through constellations of "No's"—such that it appeared that "saying yes" was a new direction for the province. "Saying yes," in other words, was the Tory solution to the real problem in New Brunswick, which was clearly shown in campaign ads to be the old provincial habit of "saying no."

What I would like to do in this reflection is test that supposed truism, for it seems to have infused the political rhetoric of successive New Brunswick governments. And to do so I pose a simple question: *What are the advantages of concluding that New Brunswickers are against everything—that their tendency is the habitual "saying no"?*

Blaming the Citizen to Obscure the Problem

For one thing, that view enables a deflection of the real problem, which is structurally embedded in our political system. One example of such deflection will suffice. For generations in this province, politicians and the political class have worked strenuously to divide people and communities against each other. The political narrative of the town I grew up in, for instance, was strongest in denouncing neighbouring towns for the perceived advantages they received. Provincial politicians invented this game, and citizens gladly played along, often electing the loudest mouthpiece they could in an effort to win the greatest partisan advantage. It was the adversarial Westminster system run amok. Is it any wonder that today's strategies of rural amalgamation don't work? That neighbouring communities can't be brought to see the advantages of cooperation? *When conventional wisdom holds that the people are the problem—that they are small-minded, timid, and unwilling to embrace new things—then a fundamental structural problem like the political system itself goes unnoticed.*

To push the example to its logical conclusion, I would propose a quite reasonable solution: if governments do indeed see merit in wholesale amalgamation, then why not cut the number of MLAs in New Brunswick from 49 to 21 or 15? If the structure of representation changed, then wouldn't that change also alter the political sociology of the ridings being represented? Of course it would. If Dalhousie and Campbellton, and Newcastle and Chatham, each had one representative, which they now more or less do, then those communities would learn to work together instead of working at odds.

To shrink a civil service, add more tax on a population, and reduce service delivery, while also refusing to address the essential core of a political system that has not worked well for New Brunswickers, is to impose change on others while exempting oneself from it. Why does this persist? Because of the strength of the myth that New Brunswickers are against everything. If New Brunswickers and other Canadians can be convinced of the truth of this myth of compulsive opposition, then the political system that ultimately created and sustains it can go unnoticed and unfixed.

Infantilizing the Citizen to Empower the State

Paternalism has become the new handmaiden of the state. And in New Brunswick, we are not strangers to its claims. The Bricklin was going to save us. Nuclear power was going to save us. Information technology was going to save us. Self-sufficiency was going to save us. Selling NB Power to Hydro Quebec was going to save us. And, now today, shale gas development, an east-west pipeline,

and an enhanced energy corridor are going to save us. How these initiatives were (or are) going to save us has been a question of great concern for citizens, who have rallied, in predictable democratic fashion, to debate and sometimes contest these various panaceas for our deliverance from poverty and backwardness. In the process, that democratic reflex has angered and inconvenienced sitting politicians, who have based party identities or corporate allegiances on the success of their curative.

From the point of view of a political body trying to market a particular curative—for example, the Alward government's vigorous attempts to normalize the benefits of shale gas development—citizen opposition is often answered (defensively) as the reaction of citizens who don't really know what's good for them. And if citizens can be convinced that they don't know what's good for them, then that empowers the state to act on their behalf. If those citizens can be further characterized as being ideologically, even culturally, averse to change and innovation (again, wired to be against everything), then their democratic impulse to question and debate is easily dismissed as disingenuousness, more like subversion or stubbornness than healthy concern. In the first case, the myth of compulsive opposition clears the way for the authority of the state, and in the second, it reduces participatory democracy to what is base, disruptive, and ignoble. In both instances, the rhetoric of compulsive opposition plays fast and loose with democratic entitlements, and is thus used recklessly by officials who live, and also die, by its consequences.

Pathologizing the Citizen to Rewrite Federalism

Writ larger, an unfortunate consequence of cultivating the myth of compulsive opposition is tacit support for shutting off the various wealth transfer taps that New Brunswick depends on. If New Brunswickers “want nothing,” then, by implication, that means they want a continuance of the status quo: namely, more money from Ottawa and Alberta. That expectation puts them at odds with recent history, *which also makes them easy targets for the new federalism to do its work.*

In a post-Keynesian era of scaling back wealth transfers and changing the practices of distributive federalism, it is both politically convenient and rhetorically effective to upgrade opposition (“New Brunswickers are against everything”) to pathology, thereby, once again, shifting the real problem from the state to the individual. In the current EI debate, for example, the more the focus is on the unwillingness of unemployed New Brunswickers to travel 100 kilometres to find work, the less likely it is that they will ask why this kind of mobility is necessary in the first place. If the behavioural pathology of New Brunswickers becomes the issue (that, again, they are against everything), then perhaps people will *not* ask why there are no Crown corporations in the province, why there are no defence industries in a province with one of the country's largest military bases, and why there is such inequity between the tax and utility rates of citizens and corporations. Nurturing the myth that citizens are against everything is a sure way of obscuring the various political motives behind what we are told are amoral shifts in matters of federalism, patterns of trade, and changes in governance. When citizens are purported to be compulsive and unrealistic in their opposition to change and expectations of entitlement—when their crisis-response mechanisms are alleged to be dulled to the point where they have no capacity or willingness to act—then governments are free to redefine and assert trusteeship, acting unilaterally or in consort with special interests on behalf of a supposedly incompetent citizenry. No longer trustees of a public good kept vital in democracy's sometimes-bloody arenas, these governments use power for self-interest, treating electorates not as bodies to be represented but as groups to be administered.

With such change come the consequences that provincial officials will die by, for that change does the essential work of affirming for others that New Brunswick's problems are ultimately the problems of its citizens; that, in effect, the political class did all it could but the raw citizen material was not up to the task. This will confirm for many in the country what the post-Confederation narrative has been saying all along about malaise in the East, and will further excuse federalist forces from responsibility to a region and an economy that *they* configured and continue to disadvantage.

What We Need is a More Robust Culture of Criticism

Our reflex as New Brunswickers is to protect our own when they are down or disparaged—and that extends to open criticism of public officials. While a vocal minority in the province seems to delight in public debate, the greater majority is more often silent, feeling that something hurtful or unfair has happened when criticism is levelled. As a provincial population we have to get over that feeling, for it is carefully inculcated in us, aimed at ensuring our compliance and fear, and, as a result, it is an impediment to our democratic maturity. If recent evidence of engagement and mobilization is any indication, however—witness the public response to the sale of NB Power or the citizen uprisings over the new forestry plan, both ultimately successful in bringing down sitting governments—citizens *are* starting to acquire that political maturity. Integral to that maturity is a culture of open and vigorous criticism.

To criticize is not to condemn, and critics worth their salt always take great care to ensure that their arguments are based on reason, not emotion, and are directed toward ideas, not individual personalities.

In the last two election cycles, New Brunswickers have shown a growing intolerance for the swinging-pendulum status quo: the red-party-in, blue-party-out pattern. They have made it clear that that pattern serves only the political class. In unprecedented numbers now, they know this to be true.

An informed, respectful, and passionate criticism complements that—a criticism aimed squarely at enhancing our democracy so that backroom deals and secret alliances are no longer part of our political subtext. Only in the presence of vigorous and ethically minded criticism will that be possible. Only if citizens insist on transparency, and publicly condemn its absence, will transparency ever become the norm in New Brunswick.

So what should the political class in New Brunswick know about one-term governments? They should know that citizens are better informed about the issues, better equipped to respond to them, and better able to mobilize around them than ever before. Moreover, an independent media of diverse forms is fomenting that has exceptional capacities to not only address all manner of subterfuge, but also to swing public opinion to degrees that were previously thought to be impossible. Because New Brunswick is small and geographically contained, the effect of these citizen actions is greatly amplified.

All this is to say that the old paternalism won't work any longer. New Brunswickers value government and want it to succeed. I am convinced of that. But they want government to succeed for the many, not just the few. To realize this, citizens want their government to work openly and transparently; they no longer want their government to work secretly for what, by some partisan calculation, "is good for them."

What is also clear is that, in wanting success for the many and not just the few, citizens in unprecedented numbers will reject austerity measures that target the already disadvantaged while bypassing the wealthy. And by “wealthy” I mean both the province’s business and corporate classes, those classes treated “lightly” even in comparison with provinces like Nova Scotia and PEI. Exempting those classes on the premise that to tax them equitably is to stifle growth is an old argument that New Brunswickers no longer believe. New Brunswickers have seen too little wealth distributed on the basis of that trickle-down logic. A small number of businesses and individuals have become wealthier while the vast majority has inherited only the massive debt. The days of “privatizing the profits and socializing the debt” must end.

Governments that do not understand this or choose to discount it will be condemned to single terms. An eight-year majority reign is the prize for the next government that invites (*really* invites) citizens to the table as equal partners—and, in so doing, treats the provincial electorate as more than rubes who are easily taxed, uncommonly negative, and temperamentally against everything.

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