

Foreword to Don Dennison's *The Power to Change: A Letter to New Brunswickers*

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Don Dennison was one of the nation's top constitutional advisors, emerging from Toronto roots to become a New Brunswick patriot deeply interested in the future direction of his chosen province.

Through twenty-five years of Pierre Trudeau, Brian Mulroney, Rene Levesque, Jean Chrétien, Richard Hatfield, and Frank McKenna, Dennison was a player in the country's grand era of constitutional change. He was a central figure in the fight for the Meech Lake Accord and its distinct society provisions.

New Brunswick's showdown over Meech Lake happened after the province's 1987 election, which McKenna, demanding changes in Meech, won over Hatfield's Conservatives. In the memoir that he completed shortly before his death, Dennison relates that when McKenna and Hatfield met, Meech Lake was very much on both their minds. Hatfield advised McKenna that the entirety of the accord "had" to be passed, while McKenna demanded to know why. The gap between them was profound. As the consummate civil servant, Dennison navigated between both positions, becoming as indispensable to McKenna as he had been to Hatfield. He was ultimately appointed as McKenna's Deputy Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs.

Deputy portfolios in government are rarely permanent, and after several years in Intergovernmental Affairs, a portfolio which one senior civil servant described as "pushing clouds," Dennison took on two successive appointments—Environment and Public Safety—both thoroughly grounded in New Brunswick life. It was in those two portfolios that he further sharpened his commitment to move the province forward, a commitment that was rewarded when he received the Lieutenant Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Administration by the Institute of Public Administration of Canada. His desire for change deepened with several post-retirement involvements, including helping organize the fledgling New Brunswick Business Council, serving as president of the Nature Trust of New Brunswick, and working with John McLaughlin, currently UNB President Emeritus, on the Next NB initiative, which inspired Dennison's "Power to Change" letter to New Brunswickers below. It was Dennison's wish that New Brunswickers would read his thoughts after his death. They are circulated publicly here for the first time.

Dennison was of bedrock Ontario stock and, while at the University of Toronto, briefly joined the Young Conservatives, which he considered "Red Tory" in character. Although he was of the vintage of students making revolution in the sixties, he was not by nature a radical. He climbed the ladder rapidly through his networking with great thinkers and decision-makers. This is perfectly illustrated by his teaching assistantship with the country's great constitutional expert, Eugene Forsey.

Dennison was purposeful. He liked to skipper his own sailboat and he treasured his autonomy. Whether it was sailing, cross-country skiing, or riding his bike, he liked to make serious progress. Conversant but not totally fluent in French, he pleased Acadians by speaking confidently with them in their own language. And when his cancer became more serious, he remained determined, carrying on unflinchingly with his professional and family work.

Music was a passion throughout his life, especially jazz favourites such as Oscar Peterson, Molly Johnson, and the Maritimes' own Holly Cole. At the same time, his musical tastes ranged widely from Harry Belafonte to Gordon Lightfoot, whom he called "Canada's greatest troubadour." Friends recall him at the stroke of midnight putting vinyl on the turntable to dance, with their cottage bathed in moonlight.

He and his wife Gail were one of Fredericton's great couples. They enjoyed their friends and their heritage Church Street home, and equally treasured their Charlotte County cottage, situated on a classic small peninsula. He was surrounded by women and girls: Gail and their two beloved daughters, Anne and Christie, and their three granddaughters. When Christie was expecting her second child, Don was asked whether he wanted a boy this time. He said wryly that he wouldn't know how to relate to a boy.

In the latter days of his life, Don devoted his energy to the memoir of his career and also to a very personal mission. In a charming conclusion to the memoir Don Dennison commented: "It is my hope that this very personal recounting of experience and values will allow me to remain involved in my family."

Julian Walker was a deputy minister in the provincial government with Don Dennison.

The Power to Change: A Letter to New Brunswickers

Don Dennison

The people of New Brunswick, along with other Canadians and citizens of the world, recently marked sixty years since the end of the Second World War. This has been a period of unprecedented growth and prosperity. Yet when we contemplate the future, there is not unbridled optimism. There is a sense that we may be witnessing a turning of the tide.

Conversations are taking place, more privately than publicly, in which concerns are being expressed that we need some course corrections if we are to navigate successfully. We need to understand the currents and how to manoeuvre away from the receding edge of the wave.

Within Canada, New Brunswick has always been a “player” in the game. But, increasingly, the game is not national but global, and the playing field is less familiar. Provincially and nationally the geographical and political units remain the same, but roles are altering. Government provides the basic infrastructure for development, but the superstructure is built by many hands, and so requires concentration by all elements in our society. Our greater prosperity is dependent on our ability to come together, to plan, and to utilize our resources in the most strategic ways. That is the essence of entrepreneurship, and it needs to be a stronger feature of our culture.

We need to strengthen relationships within the province and with those outside our borders. We need to invite others to join in this enterprise, and we need to bring our best learning and ideas to the national and international stage. Sixty years ago, John Humphrey, from Hampton, NB, led an effort of some of the finest and most dedicated minds in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. New Brunswickers know that the people of this small province have important contributions to make to our own future and to that of others. But to make these contributions we have to prepare ourselves and focus our efforts.

New Brunswick is facing a number of stark realities. Recent reports confirm what we have known for some time, but also cite new evidence:

- New Brunswick ranks fifty-eighth among the sixty Canadian provinces and American states, whether measured by productivity or income.
- In 2006, deaths in the province will outnumber births.
- Population decline is projected to continue over the next ten years.
- The decreasing population will increasingly be made up of a higher percentage of older people, further depressing economic activity and increasing pressure on medical and other services.
- Efforts to attract immigrants have seen limited success. Between 1991 and 2001, immigration accounted for 0.6 percent of New Brunswick’s population, compared to a national average of 6.2 percent. Many of the immigrants who do come to the province move on to other locations.

- Natural resource-based industries are under unprecedented supply and/or competitive pressures, with no relief in sight.
- New Brunswick has one of the lowest rates of participation in post-secondary education.
- Investment in research and development in NB lags behind national figures, which themselves suffer by international comparison.

A Different Kind of Threat

Some of these factors are not unique to this province or region. Canada generally faces many of the same challenges. It is of concern, however, that the sense of “all being in the same boat” is eroding. Parts of the country are less committed to common solutions, and are looking for province-specific remedies. The concept of sharing burdens and opportunities is under attack by interests that fail to appreciate the goals behind long-established approaches, including equalization and the reduction of regional disparities.

Equalization is intended to help provincial governments carry out their constitutionally mandated responsibilities to deliver essential public services, including health and education. The fact that all Canadians still have access to reasonably comparable levels of service testifies to the fact that equalization indeed is working. Attacks on this fundamental underpinning of our federation are out of step with Canadians’ belief in equal opportunity, as embodied by the concept of equal access to basic medical care.

Measures to reduce regional disparities in economic opportunities have a different purpose, and though there is and should be a healthy debate about the instruments used, the goals are being met at least in part. From 1981 to 2003, the gap between New Brunswick and Canada has narrowed significantly in terms of productivity, personal income, and employment. New Brunswick’s relationship with the rest of Canada is critical.

How Are We Seen?

Even with the success of efforts to provide more equal opportunities, New Brunswick comes out near the bottom in most national measures of economic health. Of equal concern is the fact that we are coming out at the bottom on a number of measures of social and physical health. In education, New Brunswick students placed last among provinces on OECD international tests in reading, math, and science. We have among the lowest literacy rates in the country. In health, we have the highest levels of inactivity, obesity, and smoking. While these measurements don’t tell the whole story, they certainly have a negative effect on our image—in our own eyes and as others see us. Major employers have said that these negative perceptions make it difficult to recruit highly qualified professionals from outside the province.

Attitudes and perceptions are surely holding us back. The good news is that things don’t have to stay the same. There are many examples where countries, such as New Zealand and Finland, have had the determination to change and have reversed directions. In Canada, we have tended to stereotype provinces, as though they were forever destined to play the same predetermined roles. But roles can change. Sometimes it is by happy circumstance, as with the discovery of oil and gas in Alberta, or by

unhappy circumstance, as with shifts in technologies and industrial policies that disadvantaged Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Sometimes it comes about through sheer determination, as with Newfoundland's demand for a change in how oil and gas revenues are treated in the hope that they might be able to propel themselves up the economic ladder.

In dwelling on their province's have-not status, New Brunswickers are inclined to overlook the fact that they have several advantages that communities in other circumstances do not enjoy. As a Canadian province, New Brunswick has jurisdiction and legislative authority over key development factors, including education and social programs. We are assured of the integrity of our lands and borders. We have constitutionally guaranteed representation in the House of Commons and the Senate more than commensurate with our small and declining share of the population. Also, as one of ten provinces, we have an assured voice at provincial and federal-provincial tables. Moreover, in the eyes of Canadians, New Brunswick has been seen as a positive contributor to national efforts and a supporter of national policies.

Capacity to Change

New Brunswick has demonstrated its capacity to lead the country in making fundamental changes when needed. Under the Equal Opportunity Program, New Brunswick achieved the most comprehensive reform of responsibility structures ever undertaken by a Canadian jurisdiction, and it was completed within a few short years.

With its two major linguistic and cultural communities, New Brunswick enjoys a diversity that is a strong source of economic and social dynamism. Further, New Brunswick has come to terms with its diversity by rejecting the divisive politics of minority status in favour of the recognition and constitutional guarantee not only of equal status of the two official languages, but also of equal status for the two official linguistic communities.

New Brunswickers have good reason to be confident in their abilities and in their capacity to positively influence their future. Understanding that its own prosperity is inextricably linked to Canada's, New Brunswick strongly believes in a united and prosperous Canada. This province wants to continue to contribute to Canada's success. Provincially and nationally, we need to address our challenges with greater vigour and optimism. This province can succeed and once again set an example for all of Canada.

Leading Change

In our determination to forge a more prosperous future, we should focus on three elements: maximize the potential of our people, embrace entrepreneurship, and build relationships.

1. Maximizing the Potential of our People

By national and international measure, we are few in number. This can be a distinct advantage. The importance in investing in the development of human capital is well understood. We have the scale, the capacity, and the support to make it happen.

Maximizing the potential of our people begins with education and training. All parents want the best opportunities for their children. A strong educational base is a precondition of economic success for individuals and societies. The province's Quality Learning Agenda aims for New Brunswick to be among the top three provinces in Canada. A first option is to endorse that target, and work to broaden the base in support for it. A second target is to increase New Brunswick's rate of participation in post-secondary education and training. In 2003, only 13 percent of those over 25 had a post-graduate degree. (The national average is around 20 percent.) Trades training is a frequently cited but underutilized tool. An objective to boost the numbers undergoing quality trades training should be set jointly by industry and provincial and federal agencies.

Opportunities for real progress in this area are enhanced by the fact that both the provincial government's *Prosperity Plan* and the federal government's *Plan for Growth and Prosperity* commit to investing heavily in education and training. In pursuing an emphasis on human resource development, our size enables us to adjust quickly, our legislation allows us to exert provincial direction over curriculum and the schools, and we have quality post-secondary institutions.

We must also put language learning at the centre of our education and training efforts. In a global economy, it is an advantage to be able to function in the languages of your business and trading partners. New Brunswick already has a head start over other North American jurisdictions in that we have already made the commitment to bilingualism, and we have a greater bilingual capacity than any other province except Quebec. We have the population from which to draw teachers and the institutions in each language to train them. We can use our existing natural advantage to make us leaders in language learning. The Quality Learning Agenda already sets the target of having 70 percent of our high school students able to function in two languages. Why not raise the bar and make the target 100 percent? Our experience with language learning enables us to introduce proven features into the curriculum to enhance the confidence and capacity of our students to acquire additional languages.

Aboriginal education must also be a focus. Where New Brunswick students score poorly in educational testing and achievement, Aboriginal students lag even further. To help address this gap, we could support the creation of an Aboriginal education board that parallels the French and English administrative structures. A single, capable authority could ensure schooling opportunities geared to greater success for Aboriginal students. It would include language learning, where acquisition and retention of Aboriginal languages can be seen not just as a goal in terms of cultural affirmation, but also as a natural advantage in advancing multiple language acquisition. The target could be for Aboriginal students to meet or exceed the educational attainment target for English and French students; that is, be in the top three nationally.

The other key to maximizing potential through education is wellness. Health care tops the public agenda in Canada. New Brunswick lacks the resources to lead the country in critical and hospital care, but we do have the greatest need among provinces for improvement with our rates of smoking, obesity, and inactivity. In the past, we have pioneered successfully in extramural health care and the regionalization of health services. As with education, we have provincial control over all aspects of the health care system. New Brunswick could be a laboratory in health innovation for Canada, with a particular focus on finding solutions to chronic disease brought on by poor lifestyle choices. Our smaller cities and access to an attractive natural environment favour opportunities for healthy outdoor recreation. We propose that New Brunswick be the base for a research-led, multi-sectoral, community-based project to bring the kind of change required to fend off an impending health care crisis.

2. Embracing Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is about having a vision and getting the resources in place to realize that vision. We need to invest more in developing our human resources, not only through education and training, but also by sharing knowledge and experience through mentoring. Students and other learners, and people in all professions and occupations, can benefit from coaching and guidance. Good businesses coach their employees and give them a variety of development experiences. We need to find ways to expand the use of experience to better develop the management, leadership, and entrepreneurial skills of people in all parts of our workforce. Federal and provincial governments have targets in place for increased investment in R&D. Such measures have their biggest payoff when entrepreneurs are assisted in bringing developments to the commercialization stage. In a small province with few barriers, it should be possible to mentor in a more concerted way. All jurisdictions are focused on attracting new people, but few pay sufficient attention to retaining and developing the potential of those already living in the province. Mentorship should be the practice, not the exception.

People learn best when receiving personal attention and interest in their achievements. Lifelong learning is a familiar phrase, but it can be facilitated through coaching and mentoring. Teaching institutions should demonstrate a continuing commitment to their students and graduates by maintaining contact and recognizing career success. Modern information systems afford the capacity to maintain supportive contact. If we maintain contact with those who leave the province, there is a better chance that they will return.

Immigration is an important aspect of entrepreneurship. Attracting immigrants to New Brunswick is not easy; there is increasingly active competition among jurisdictions facing population decline and seeking infusions of capital and energy. Those who do come to this province can be given support through programs for settlement and mentoring. One outcome of the Seachange/Métamorphose 2005 conference was the initiation of a project of community encouragement of Chinese immigrants and students in Saint John. Voluntary agencies have long supported settlement efforts. This might become a provincially mandated activity, with monitoring of the support and retention efforts offered to each immigrant and foreign student.

Entrepreneurship also requires us to invest in our communities. With declines in resource-based industrial employment, New Brunswickers will be looking more and more to urban areas as growth poles. We need to focus more effort on making our cities viable competitors. Some have been nationally recognized as preferred places to do business. We need to invest strategically in transportation and communications to better enable rural-dwelling New Brunswickers who live in the ambit of urban centres to participate in a changing economy.

3. Building Relationships

We need to consciously build and strengthen relationships within the province. Concentrating efforts brings gains to all. Equally important is to be proactive in developing a multitude of links and partnerships externally, using the ample opportunities available in an increasingly accessible universe.

Increasingly, each province is going to have to take a more active role in determining its own future. In so doing, we must not look exclusively to government to set the agenda. There are a number of reasons for this conclusion. Governments, certainly at the provincial level, are stretched for resources

and may not be investing sufficiently in longer-range policy development. Where long-range planning has been undertaken (e.g., the NB Prosperity Plan and Quality Learning Agenda), plans may be perceived as political platforms, and be discounted by a cynical media and public. Public confidence in government and the political process is eroding in most jurisdictions.

What this means is that governments are limited in the extent to which they are able to lead in pursuing ambitious agendas. Exercises that are more broadly based can set the bar higher and credibly aim at longer-term horizons. New Brunswickers need to get more involved in setting objectives and monitoring progress in meeting them. This province can pioneer in developing a broad-based process for visioning a future and setting objectives. In British Columbia, such an exercise was initiated by Simon Fraser University. "Imagine BC" has engaged residents of that province in an interactive, online dialogue about that province's options. Recently in Quebec, a group of twelve leaders issued a manifesto, "*Pour un Québec lucide*," and established a process to receive feedback from the people of that province.

New Brunswick was not far behind. Over the course of two years, Next NB/Avenir N-B undertook a wide-ranging state-of-the-province consultation involving sixteen public roundtables and the publication of eight discussion papers on themes ranging from education, to community development, to immigration and migration. These papers were compiled as *The Next New Brunswick: A Story of Transformation*. The galvanizing idea around Next NB/Avenir N-B was to create a space in which New Brunswickers could come together to reinforce the impetus for achievement in our province. The assumption was that governments are exerting their best efforts to address the challenges and opportunities faced by New Brunswick, but they are limited in their reach and resources, and cannot be expected to help us achieve ambitious objectives without the active support and participation of the citizenry in setting and helping to realize these objectives.

Creating a forum for sharing aspirations and constructing new visions for the future is a process that can work to overcome traditional divisions. In the same way that "the medium is the message," the process of bringing elements of New Brunswick society and economy together is in itself a key outcome. There is not, in this province or in any other, an organized process for joining efforts and voices in a common enterprise. Political parties have traditionally played a brokerage function in an effort to gain power. Governments adjudicate between competing interests. But political processes and government do not command consistent or broad support. Further, there is no expression or embodiment of a "provincial vision" beyond the policy and legislative products of government. Governments have a limited mandate and are invariably replaced within a decade or so. There should be room for the greater provincial community to concert efforts and establish longer-term objectives.

In June 2005, with the support of several NB companies and the federal and provincial governments, Next NB organized and hosted Seachange/Métamorphose 2005, a major conference covering aspects of our provincial makeup, values, strengths, and ambitions. The conference demonstrated that New Brunswickers have a strong sense of where opportunities lie and measures are needed. At the conference, working groups composed of individuals from a diversity of backgrounds were each challenged to come up with a big idea. From that, they produced a resolve to act on initiatives in areas that are also finding resonance in other circles. The following broad themes emerged:

Retention and repatriation: renewing efforts and creating incentives for New Brunswickers to invest in their future in the province.

Immigration: creating and implementing a template for local community action to welcome and help integrate immigrants.

Creating an entrepreneurial culture: a multi-sector effort to promote and recognize entrepreneurship at many levels and in various endeavours.

Innovation, mentoring, and capital: engaging an active network of business-oriented people to guide new ventures and encourage the formation of capital.

Wellness: transforming NB into the wellness province through the applied efforts of a coalition of stakeholders researching, leading, implementing, and measuring our progress toward becoming the national leader in wellness.

Education—building a stronger foundation: utilizing early assessment, sharing information, bringing community resources into schools, and monitoring to ensure better educational outcomes, leading to more productive lives.

Meeting the aging challenge: aging is changing; increasing numbers will need support in living healthy, productive, independent, and dignified lives.

Remaining grounded: not losing track of fundamental values, a sense of place to call home, keeping in touch with a rich heritage.

Strengthening relationships inside NB: building bridges between cultures; collective community responsibility; networking to support individual efforts.

Strengthening provincial relationships with outside jurisdictions: capitalizing on our position as a province within the federation; convening the NB caucus to maximize influence and outcomes; being a strong player and contributor nationally and internationally.

Next Steps

The Next NB/Avenir N-B exercise has spawned two new circles of active leaders. First, twenty-one young leaders for the twenty-first century were selected from among 270 applicants from across the province. They undertook a week-long, province-wide learning tour, met with other leaders from all segments of our society, participated as presenters at Seachange/Métamorphose 2005, spearheaded projects arising from that conference, and reconvened to organize and incorporate as “21 Inc.” to ensure a continuing presence and influence. Second, chief executive officers from leading New Brunswick companies and our two largest universities met several times to discuss their concerns about the province’s future prospects, and have organized themselves as a Business Council.

These two new entities should be joined by others under the umbrella concept of Next NB/Avenir N-B. Together, they can share aspirations, involve the political leadership at all levels, and begin a process of proposing longer-term objectives that reflect a basic sense of where New Brunswick needs to make progress that is both real and symbolic of our determination. New Brunswickers need to be confident that they can build on their past and forge improvements in key target areas. Next NB/Avenir N-B allows us to demonstrate that this province is on the move. In this way, we can convince

young New Brunswickers that they have a stake in the province and can share in a promising future. We can convince former residents that a return to the province would be a positive investment in their own futures. We can convince investors that New Brunswick is a can-do place. And we can convince immigrants that there is reason to choose this community as a place to establish their futures. With commitment and tangible successes, New Brunswickers can once again feel the pride of achievement and acknowledgement.

Next NB/Avenir N-B is advocating an approach whereby agenda setting and monitoring is a shared activity, with close collaboration between all levels of government and private and public organizations in the province. Successful collaboration can be advanced by having a focus on the process of advancing ideas and monitoring progress.

New Brunswick has no significant centre for independent policy input. We do have policy expertise and capable researchers, however, and should focus on establishing a virtual policy institute or policy network in the province to concentrate the activities and abilities of those in various university faculties, small institutes, and government. The Saskatchewan Institute for Public Policy offers one interesting model from which we could plan a New Brunswick counterpart. In that model, individuals are loaned from government, drawn from the universities, and engaged directly. Quebec provides another model. CIRANO is a network linking university-based researchers with business and government practitioners in an effort to advance information sharing and knowledge transfer. The result is an institution that can address provincial issues, and speak from an independent platform.

Governments have limited effectiveness in reporting their achievements in the face of political competition and a skeptical media and public. Monitoring and reporting of results at arm's length from government better communicates where our successes are taking place and where we may not be keeping pace. It may be time for New Brunswick to establish a network that brings together sources of policy advice and analyzes in a way that stimulates debate in this province. Such a network could also provide a more widely recognized "voice" for New Brunswick in a national arena of increasingly active ideas.

Conclusion

This province has experienced great improvements in social development and standard of living in the post-war period. Now, the path of our progress is threatened by powerful forces of international competitiveness, currently heightened by the growing economic strength of China and India. The protective shield of the Canadian federal state, under which we have achieved some measure of success, is being challenged and to some extent eroded. Changing demographics, competition, and globalization are weakening the fiscal safety net, and New Brunswick has no choice but to act to exert greater control over its own destiny. This is a task in which people and interests in the province need to develop a broad social consensus around key goals in order that their governments can play a less encumbered role in helping reach objectives.

A process for dialogue and concentration of effort will allow New Brunswickers to articulate and share their aspirations for their individual and common futures. We need to be able to set long-term objectives and to see those objectives being achieved. Monitoring and reporting our successes is essential to building the confidence of New Brunswickers and those outside the province whose collaboration and support we wish to cultivate.