

Atlantic Provinces Economic Council

An address by the Minister of Finance, Mr. Walter Harris, to the Maritime Boards of Trade, Charlottetown, P.E.I., September 12, 1955.

When Cartier first saw Prince Edward Island he spoke glowingly of its beauty. I am glad to admit that the attractiveness of this region is just as obvious to the visitor of today as it was to him. The Maritime region has a deep historical interest for all Canadians who take pride in the origins of our country. To people in all parts of Canada, Charlottetown is the cradle whence came our united and prosperous country. As we all know, the city of Charlottetown is celebrating its centennial this year. I understand that the first civil elections were held in 1855 and I have heard it said that the citizens enjoy elections today as much as they did then. Sharing as I do with all Canadians a feeling of great pride in the history of our country, I am especially pleased to be able to visit the birthplace of Confederation in this centennial year of the founding of this city. I am, therefore, most grateful to you for inviting me to speak to you.

The forces making for Confederation were both political and economic. Politically, it was designed to forge a stronger and bigger community, one which would be more secure from possible external pressures. In terms of economics, it was hoped to create a large free trade with the markets of Upper Canada, with the expectation that trade with Upper Canada would replace to a considerable extent the dwindling overseas trade. The prosperity of this region was based on the products of the sea, the forest and the farm and upon the carrying trade which took these products to overseas markets. As long as the sailing vessel was supreme and the British Colonial preferences existed the Maritimes could be assured of an important place in the economy of the North Atlantic. The shift from the sail to steam and the disappearance of colonial preferences changed all that.

The political objectives of Confederation have been pretty satisfactorily fulfilled. Indeed, I think the Fathers would say - amazingly so. But I know that the various parts of Canada have not progressed economically together - one seemingly doing better than another, but in turn being superseded by some other part.

It does seem to me, however, that the post-war period, while full of problems and adjustment for all regions of Canada, has brought to the Atlantic Provinces a new spirit of confidence and a determination to make the full use of their potential resources. We all know that the Atlantic Provinces labour under certain natural handicaps arising from the long distance between them and the big markets of Upper Canada. Freight rate subventions and special help to the steel and coal industries on the part of the Federal Government may have done something to offset this handicap, but it remains a problem for many of your industries. Then, until recently there was the question of