

A modest proposal

A daring response to the problems faced by Atlantic Canada in the coming decades.

By John Fraser. *Saturday Night*. This article provoked a furious response from Premier Mackenna when it was first published

When the last remaining residents of Prince Edward Island recently held a plebiscite to decide if they wanted a bridge or tunnel built to connect them to the mainland, there was intense interest throughout the country. Not that anyone west of Atlantic Canada was in any doubt about the outcome. The proposed link would cost between \$500 and \$700 million and this fact alone guaranteed that a majority of the Islanders would be for it. Fortunately, the wildly impractical scheme was being touted at the very time the rest of the country was finally waking up to the harsh realities of the postmodern age.

We have the proposed free-trade deal with the United States to thank for this propitious development. No matter which side of the fence Canadians find themselves sitting on with free trade, they can all be grateful that the debate itself heralded an infusion of common sense and sound business logic into the national consciousness. In coming to terms with global economies and North American trade imperatives, people seem finally to have realized that the witless romanticism which has plagued Canada from the beginning has to be replaced by tough, bottom-line thinking.

The first step in this process is to examine the premise of whatever has been deemed the problem. Once this basic breakthrough in perception has been made, the problem itself may disappear. In Vancouver for example, the city's orchestra was in a terrible pickle a few months ago. Falling revenues, a massive deficit, insufficient support from the various levels of government, an unimaginative board, lack lustre subscribers: all of these elements conspired to suggest a major disaster in the imminent offing. Instead, look what happened when the local community redefined its premises. Alternatives to live orchestral concerts were widely available, whether it was the plethora of records, tapes, and digital discs in neighbourhood stores, or CBC-FM's exciting range of snippets from the classics. In the past, the community has always thought of such things as peripheral. The breakthrough here came when Vancouver finally realized that it was the orchestra that was peripheral.

The jump into common sense requires imagination and decisiveness. Vancouver has risen to the requirement and the citizens have their reward: there is no longer an orchestra problem because there is no longer an orchestra. In similar fashion the federal government has solved the dilemma of escalating numbers of aliens' being allowed into the country. Thanks to the adroit application of common sense to new immigration legislation, refugees will now be directed anywhere else but here. Not only does this remove the source of a specific problem, it brings subsidiary benefits such as eliminating the onerous burden on refugee support groups and relieving the security services of the need for unlawful surveillance.

These and other developments, occurring at the same time as the Prince Edward Island plebiscite, point the way to a creative solution for a problem that has been with Canada since Confederation. Justifying the link-up to the New Brunswick mainland - whether a bridge or a tunnel, or a combination of both

- is not in itself the issue. Nor is the specific cost. Nor even is the fact that PEI can no longer grow an honest potato and must annually deploy a mountain of suspect fertilizer to supplement its fraudulent soil. Grotesque as all these things are, they are gossamer on a summer breeze compared to the historic blackmail the rest of Canada is obliged to pay to keep the whole of Atlantic Canada in the style to which it has become accustomed.

Consider even these isolated items:

- Every year since 1949, Canadians have had to cough up the outrageous tab for maintaining Newfoundland's wasteful coastal ferryboat service. Last year alone the cost to Transport Canada was \$27.4 million. This "contract" enshrined in an appendix to the British North America Act, is valid in perpetuity and inevitably indexed to inflation. There seems to be no solution.

- Like the other three Atlantic provinces, Nova Scotia elects several Members of Parliament during federal elections. Occasionally, some of these M.P.s make it into the cabinet and feel obliged to look after their impoverished ridings. Senator Allan MacEachen, for example, was the Liberal M.P. for two ridings (Iverness-Richmond, and Cape Breton Highlands-Canso) a quarter of a century, much of it during Liberal rule in Ottawa. Over that period, hundreds of millions of Canadian taxpayers' dollars were diverted to such dubious projects as the National Philatelic Centre in Antigonish, the Nova Scotia Nautical Institute in Fort Hawkesbury, and a heavy water plant in Point Tupper, not to mention the Cape Breton coal industry and the Sydney steel plant. Despite such provocation, Maritimers cannot simply be disfranchised, because our democratic institutions are too precious to jettison, so here too there seems to be no

everybody knows it. Confederation today is a much more practical and realistic proposition which must hold to the basic economic principle that each receives according to his merits - or, in simple layman's terms, God helps those who help themselves.

This principle is not unfamiliar even in Atlantic Canada. The brightest and best from the region, in hundreds of spontaneous acts of fiscal responsibility, have already moved westward and are leading moderately productive and useful lives. Unfortunately, the exodus has left an increasingly isolated and desperate population facing the inevitable risk of inbreeding. Already, one has heard terrifying tales of entire communities given over to TV-mark mania by night and regional expansion programmes by day.

There is no longer any point to it. Academic judgment is a rid without the following - through, however. The old rationale - that the region was part of the price we all had to pay in a Confederation where each was supposed to receive according to his needs - simply collapses under the exigencies of such comprehensive and intractable need. The price is no longer right and

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This is a situation to prick the consciences of everyone because the state of

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solution.

- As symbol of the abiding sinkhole in the east, New Brunswick last year received a grand total of \$1.335 billion in federal trans-

Atlantic Canada is a savage indictment of the way the rest of us have condoned drift and compromise. It is as much out fault as

theirs, for they too - the least among us - remain our brothers and sisters. So far, desperate questions have been the only response: how much more will we have to pay? How long can this madness continue? Once again, creative scrutiny of premises suggests better answers: no more and no longer. It is time everyone in Atlantic Canada cleared out and moved on. Fortunately, the path of practical common sense leads to the realm of decency. The compassionate solution is a comprehensive relocation of the entire population.

Maritimers, to give them their due, have shown superhuman tenacity in unlikely and untoward settings. The hardest could properly be sent to the new settlements in the high Arctic where Canada intends to make its presence felt on a permanent basis. This is in the national interest and should have the highest priority. Elsewhere, a sensible screening process should be able to place several thousand lost souls in the expanding service industry. In Toronto and Vancouver, and perhaps some day soon in Calgary and Edmonton once again, there is an urgent need for mothers' helps, messengers, window cleaners, copy boys, church vergers, ticket takers, clearing ladies, laundresses, knife grinders, shoeshiners, and comptrollers.

As for the rest, they constitute a direct challenge to our better instincts. Most are not trained for work, yet must be somehow housed and fed - preferably in well-organized camp allotments where welfare and disability payments can be easily delivered and redeemed. Local customs should never be denigrated where they do not harm others and precedent suggests we follow the Newfoundland example of the mid 1960s when hundreds of benighted outport residents, foolishly mired in modest self-sufficiency, were successfully moved to more appropriate welfare settlements. The populations of all four Atlantic provinces are conveniently located near the mouth of the St Lawrence River and could be transported to several locations in just the sort of commodious barges the former Liberal premier of Newfoundland, Joseph R. Smallwood, made available to his own people.

the vacated territory would, of course, remain part of every Canadian's heritage. the boundaries of existing national parks and wildlife sanctuaries could be extended until they actually joined each other, thus ensuring federal protection for the entire area while legally discouraging squatters and ending forever pollution in the environmentally threatened areas of North Sydney and Saint John. A cadre of armed wildlife security officers would cost scant pennies in comparison to the onerous billions doled out over the years to keep this unprofitable scrubland populated.

Humane common sense, as it turns out, is also sound business sense. In embracing the bottom line in Atlantic Canada, we will be saving countless tax dollars as well as eliminating the most vexing and enduring social problem in the country. There is nothing modest about this proposal: it forms a natural corollary to the national dream.