

For 125 years...

# Premiers talk unity

by Marie-France LeBlanc

It appears the Premiers of the three Maritime provinces are calling for a Maritime Common Market. Yet, at the same time, Premier Cameron, Premier McKenna and Premier Ghiz are emphasising provincial sovereignty and dismissing the possibility of a political union.

Political union would necessarily result in each province ceding considerable political independence. Historically this has been the stumbling block to any such arrangement.

The idea of economic unity has been promoted for more than 125 years, and has always been dismissed. With the Free Trade agreement encouraging more north-south trade between the Maritimes and the United States, with the possibility of Quebec separating from Canada, and with the Ontario and the Federal government's declining wealth (resulting in their withdrawal of transfer payments to the Maritimes) the provinces no longer have 125 years to ponder the issue.

This past weekend the first steps towards reaching an economic agreement were taken in Woodstock, N.B. The Council of Maritime Premiers, which includes Newfoundland's Premier Wells, in an informal capacity at one meeting out of four adopted three initiatives which they hope will move them closer towards a regional free-trade zone. The premiers will table White Papers within their respective legislatures this spring outlining their respective visions of economic union. They hope this will allow politicians and the public to have a hand in shaping the much needed partnership.

"This is only window dressing," says Dalhousie political science professor David Cameron, "it is a misnomer calling this a move towards an economic union. We already have such a union within the Canadian Federation". Rather, Professor Cameron believes this is a push towards closer co-operation in terms of government purchases and regulations.

John Odenthal, of the Atlantic Provincial Economic Council (APEC), agrees with this, but takes it one step further. He says "we already have economic union to a certain degree, but some barriers still exist. There are problems in terms of shipping regulations, professional services exchange, and in procurement issues. Things have opened up but there still exists many restrictions".

As a region the Maritimes is very fragmented. This diversity results in the waste, or the misappropriation of select resources. Also it diverts society's attention away from productivity and towards

competition among themselves. Competition between the four Maritime provinces to promote tourism, trade and foreign investment disperses the possible benefits to such a small region. "But", Professor Cameron warns "it would be the worst of all possible worlds if another regional agency were set up to govern these things."

Odenthal disagrees with this. He says, "for some things it makes sense to form a regional agency". One area where he believes this to be necessary is in energy resources. In 1987 the federal government set up an advisory committee to assess Canada's energy future, and it recommended that the Maritimes adopt a unified power grid. It acknowledged that it might not lower electricity prices, but it would establish a more secure and reliable power base. "This would then be beneficial to all," says Odenthal.

The problem, which Professor Cameron fears, is that this economic union would necessitate a political union. The power authority would have to be in the hands of a "supraprovincial agency".

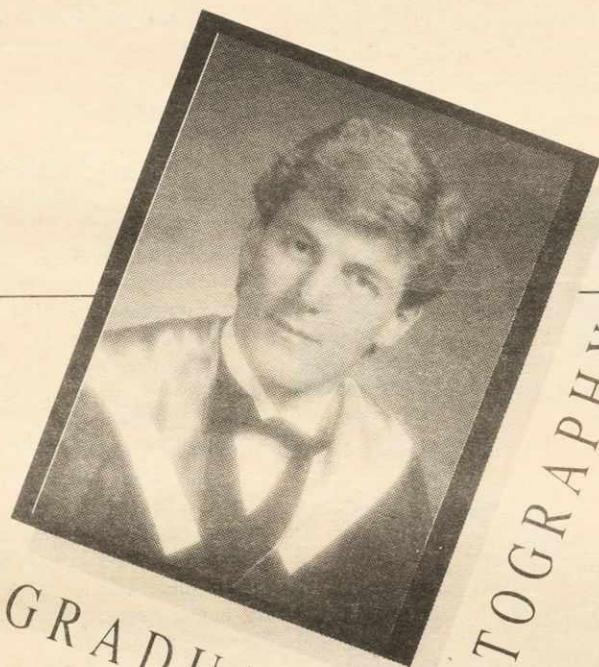
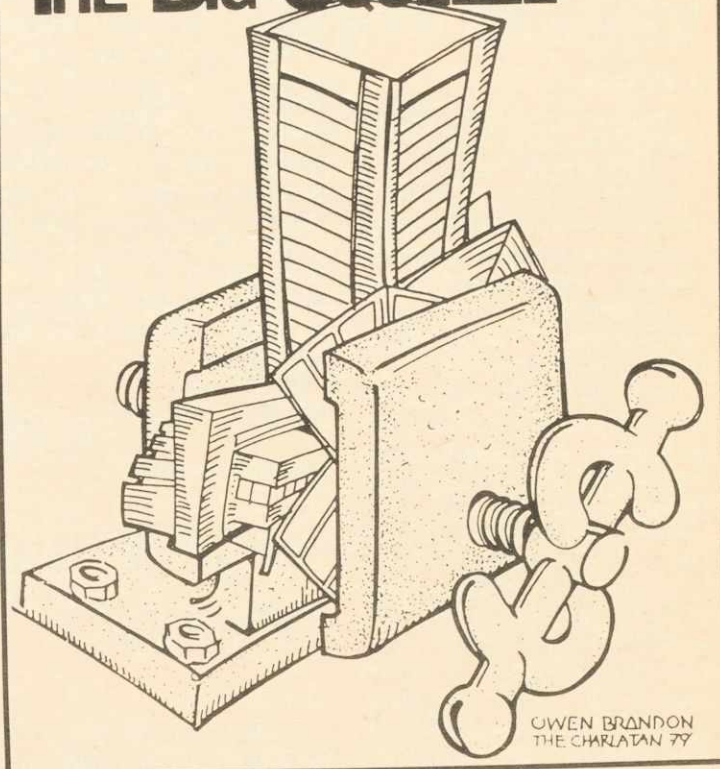
"In proposing this union, APEC

is not suggesting a carte blanche attitude amongst the provinces," assures Odenthal, "There is still much need for discussion in terms of culture and language issues. But at least this is a start."

Where does this leave the proposal? Should it be simply an economic union or should the provinces unite into a single political unit? According to a survey conducted by Corporate Research Associates in Halifax, 22 per cent of those polled in the Atlantic provinces would strongly support a complete political union, with 27 per cent somewhat supporting it, 15 per cent opposed to it, and 21 per cent strongly opposed to it.

The proposal, thus far, only discusses economic union; "a plan to enable the Maritimes to catch up regionally with the Free Trade already begun within the rest of Canada," says Cameron. It is one which must be seriously considered. For it is one thing to try and protect Nova Scotian industry, but to protect it to the detriment of allowing it to compete on a larger scale will result in the stagnation of a province in dire need of growth.

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