

# Atlantic Canada Does Not Have A Status Quo Option

By Wade Maclachlan, Dean Faculty of Law, University of New Brunswick.

Atlantic Canada does not have a "status quo" option. We are vulnerable, facing geographic, economic and political isolation. The pressure for regional cooperation, even union, are mounting. The integration of the global economy, the drive to reduce government expenditures, the deterioration of key natural resources, the weakness of traditional industries, and the need to modernize infrastructure all contribute to a climate of economic and political ferment, perhaps of despair.

On the constitutional front, we must prepare for radical reform, even at a time when Canadians do not have a great deal of faith in our capacity to achieve constitutional change. Expectations for reform have mounted, perhaps unrealistically. Aboriginal peoples expect justice, and a fair measure of autonomy. Quebec wants more space. The West wants "in" especially through the reform of federal institutions. Atlantic Canadians want a more viable economy, more public sector resources, and more effective participation in national politics and institutions.

This may well be Atlantic's "last chance" to make Canada into what we want it to be. We have to act with conviction, and with cohesion. We have to be ready for more effective regional approaches, to the constitution, to the economy, and to all aspects of public life.

If we share a conviction about anything it must be that our best option lies within a strong and united Canada. Those who think we can, or should, go it alone or join up with the United States have too much imagination. And those who do not see the opportunity and the obligation, to turn our energy to a revitalization of Canada, have too little.

## A new direction

*Surviving the "trickle down" economic policies in the Maritimes.*

By Patrick Lamey

In the middle of September our federal government presented the Canadian public with a new set of constitutional proposals. The government's dream is to rekindle a new national pride and a greater sense of unity in this country. Whether or not these recent proposals fulfill their mandate is for us to decide. But before we can fully and competently address the soundness of the government's suggestions we must reflect upon our position right here within the Atlantic provinces. The Right Honourable Joe Clark, Minister of Constitutional Affairs visited our region before the release of the proposals. His message was that we think more upon the future of Canada, to think less upon our own unique needs (for every region has them) and devote more of our energies towards thinking how we can save Canada. It is doubtful that we can, or should, heed his request.

Canada is, and has always been, a profoundly regionalist country. When we think about our identity, we always start with where we live and the language we speak, and build up from there. In our own region we have experienced a movement of Maritime consciousness ('Maritime' including Newfoundland in this context). This 'Maritimeness' is shaped by the unique historical experiences of the region and the people who live here. Some would suggest it is also shaped by the more recent attempt to rediscover and re-interpret our history. One New Brunswicker commented that "[w]e are not so much reclaiming our history as reclaiming our right to tell it." (G. Peabody, *Best Maritime Short Stories* (Halifax: Formac, 1988) at ii). Alden Nowlan has commented on the emphasis on community in Maritime culture; we like to be able to place each other within known family and community contexts.

The phenomenon of exploring a region's history, economics and culture is not particular to the Maritimes and we may speculate that the new century will be one which celebrates the parts within the greater whole. Celebrating and reinforcing a Maritime identity coincides not only with this revival of regionalism, but helps to deepen our understanding of ourselves. Canada is in many ways a little bigger than the sum of its part. The parts seem to have grown stronger and more self-aware in time with the expansion of our national consciousness. In trying to imagine a new kind of Canada we have to start from our regional base and build the new structure on it. As Maritimers, then, we need to rebuild our own part of Canada as our own contribution to the national project. This should be our commitment to ourselves as well as Canada in light of the constitutional crossroads we face.

How do we see ourselves? What is the Maritime Identity? We hold ourselves out to be open and welcoming, willing to go out of our way to make sure that strangers feel at home and part of the

community. Through song and dance, literature and drama, sport and debate, people from the Atlantic region have always expressed themselves in ways that are distinctly Maritime. People from away (a distinctly Maritime expression) annually migrate by the thousands to find refuge and rejuvenation in a land that they have come to identify with "home". The region has an excellent network of Universities and community colleges and many students pass through the hallowed halls with the dream of "making it big" here at home.

Unfortunately, we also have a less optimistic vision of ourselves. We are identified as a region with a combined public-sector debt of \$20 billion, unemployment levels chronically higher than the national average (almost as high as during the worst 1981-83 recession in sub-regions like Cape Breton and Newfoundland) and a growing sense that Ottawa has abandoned us. By international comparisons we are in a vicious circle of dependence and inward-looking attitudes. The region has failed to maintain pace with the economic growth which has characterized the development of Canada as a whole over the past hundred years, despite our relatively prosperous position at the outset. We are characterized as victims of "regional disparity" and "economic inequality" in a country that promises in its constitutional proposals, the "commitment to the free flow of goods, services, people and capital [and] the well-being of all Canadians. . ." In fact, the problem of Canada's Atlantic region are just as serious today as they were a decade ago when the federal government began to experiment with regional development policies of Atlantic Canada. However, the new approach, which attaches new emphasis on the entrepreneurial roles in the private sector, local input and decentralization of decision making in the area of government assistance (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency) and Enterprise Cape Breton) is based on the assumption that there may be a trade-off between income and employment opportunities. Our disparities are only bound to be amplified under such a system; increased employment will only be achieved through lower wages which widens the disparity gap.

The recent proposals suggest the possibility of political intervention in the form of a new regional developmental policy. How serious has the federal government's commitment to regional development been? Over the past thirty years, federal spending in the region has consisted of transfer payments to

bolster personal income rather than assistance in alternative forms of economic development. It is doubtful that Maritimers ever asked for welfare in the place of genuine economic development. The gaps that exist in our economic growth signal that we have not been a major concern of federal policy-makers and it is predicted that there will be no narrowing of the income/employment gaps between the national average and the regional level. In fact, we should get used to the fact that federal funding will not be there on the same scale as we have known in the past.

What options exist for a region that has suffered what may well have been one of the most devastating economic declines in Canadian economic history? The rich Maritime economy of over a century ago has been swept under the doormat of a strong central Canada whose "trickle down" economy feeds the already fed and starves the shrinking economies of scale shared by the individual Atlantic provinces.

Is this the fate of our Maritime identity? It is often felt that out of disorder there is promise. This is a time of concern not only for the economy of our region, but for the future of our country. As students and educationalist it is our responsibility to address those issues that hinder our development as a region. We need to show the rest of Canada that we enter a new age of unity, the Atlantic region is ready and willing to be a strong member of this union. Our contribution to the early beginnings of Canada are well known and well thought of. It is time to move away from the unfortunate circumstances that have brought us to this position of dependence and disparity to focus on a new commitment to prosperity. To rekindle a sense of pride out of the apathy to move away from disparity with an eye on diversity in a more globalized market. To encourage not only our own students to stay, but to improve upon the free flow of people and resources in our direction. To look towards a new spirit full of boldness and a will to cooperate.

If Maritime culture emphasizes the desire to place each other within a known family and community, it is our responsibility to commit ourselves to discover our place within our greater community, Canada. *Options East* supports any effort which attempts to define and improve upon our place in that community.

