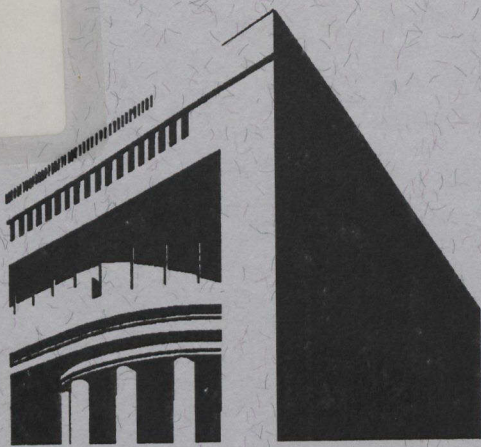


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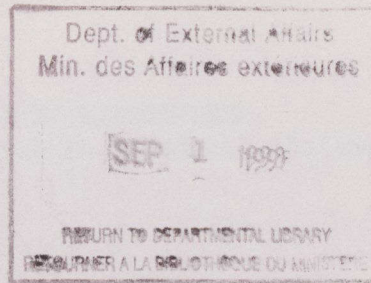
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The Environment, The Economy, and The
Community: New Approaches to Rural
Community Development in British Columbia

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This manuscript is a product of the Canadian Studies Research Grant Program. The program promotes research in the social sciences, journalism, business, trade, environment, and law with a unique relevance to Canada, or in the context of the bilateral or North American relationship; and the social, cultural, political, and economic issues that impact on these relationships in the 1990s.

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This book sheds light on this view by examining the case of the Alberni-Clayoquot region in southwestern British Columbia. The immediate aim of the book is to interpret how the community's first-level leadership has re-created Port Alberni's social order and seeks to use its change in order to help the community gain more control over its economic future. My broader purpose is to explore the idea of decentralization with a case example of its actual practice.

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To shed light on this view I have been investigating the case of the Alberni Inlet and Clayoquot Sound area in western Vancouver Island, focusing on the community of Port Alberni, British Columbia. The immediate aim of my study is to interpret how the community's first-level leadership understands Port Alberni's social order and seeks to use or change it in order to help the community gain more control over its economic future. My broader purpose is to explore the idea of devolution with a case example of its actual practice.

**THE ENVIRONMENT, THE ECONOMY, AND THE COMMUNITY:
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Introduction¹

From highly developed nations such as Japan to newly industrializing countries such as Korea and Malaysia to the relatively isolated island states of Oceania, many nations are experimenting with a shift toward devolution in their approach to community development--toward the decentralization of public responsibility from higher to lower levels of government and to community based non-governmental organizations (CBOs) (Jun and Wright 1996). Checkoway reports that

In industrial countries, political and economic changes have shifted previously public responsibilities to local areas and challenged communities to develop their capacity. In developing countries, government and non-government organizations have adopted community-oriented policies . . . (1995, p. 2).

Devolution arises from the view that conventional top down approaches have not been effective in addressing local community issues and that local communities themselves can be an important source of solutions. The thought is that local governments and CBOs are better attuned to the local community and so can better respond to the challenges they face (Kingsley 1996).

To shed light on this view I have been investigating the case of the Alberni Inlet and Clayoquot Sound area in western Vancouver Island, focusing on the community of Port Alberni, British Columbia. The immediate aim of my study is to interpret how the community's first-level leadership understands Port Alberni's

^{1/} Research for this paper was supported by a Canadian Studies Research Grant from the Canadian government. I am also grateful to Carol Rosskam, my research assistant on this project.

social order and seeks to use or change it in order to help the community gain more control over its economic future. My broader purpose is to explore the idea of devolution with a case example of its actual practice.

I begin by examining some of the thinking behind devolution in community development and the reasons for choosing Port Alberni as an appropriate case example. Next I present an economic history of Port Alberni, to show the specific context for community development in that area. Then I report and comment on Port Alberni's recent economic development activities, based on community planning documents and a series of in-depth interviews with local government officials and leaders of CBOs in Port Alberni. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of devolution both in Port Alberni and more generally.

Single Industry Towns and Devolution

Natural resource-based small communities are in crisis around the Pacific basin.² The proximate causes are the interrelated problems of economic change and population loss. Resource extraction activities are under heavy pressure. In many places minerals, timber, fish, and other natural resources have been exploited to exhaustion. In others changing societal values have reduced or eliminated access to the resources. And even in those

^{2/} There is a vast literature on the background and current situation of natural resource-based communities. The classic on British Columbia is Marchak 1983. See also, e.g., Brown 1995; Knight 1994; Friedmann and Rangan 1993; Berck et al. 1992.

places where resources are still abundant and accessible, automation and industrial restructuring have significantly reduced the job base.

Making matters worse, natural resource jobs are generally characterized as **Difficult, Dangerous, and Dirty**. To escape these "three Ds" and try to find better opportunities, many young people leave rural communities for the city. This is a well-known phenomenon of industrialization, of course, but advances in transportation and communication have made urban relocation more feasible and attractive in the last two decades.

In short, for many rural communities the exploitation of the environment that provided their raison d'etre is no longer relevant; in other cases it no longer provides a secure foundation. As the natural resource economy disappears, households and the businesses that rely on them cannot support themselves.

A particularly Canadian type of natural resource based small town is the single industry community. The single industry communities of interest here are those that focus on the industrial production and export of a specific staple commodity. They are the mining towns, smelting towns, textile towns, pulp and paper towns, sawmill towns, and the like that dot rural Canada. Single industry communities are usually geographically isolated and they are

products of an age of industry and technology. . . . (T)heir very existence depends upon an advanced technology, a complex division of labour, and a sophisticated division of exchange (Lucas 1971, p. 20).

In his classic 1971 study, Rex Lucas defined single industry towns as those with staples-based economies that have a population

of less than 30,000 in which at least seventy five percent of the workforce is employed in the single industry and its supporting institutional services.

Stelter and Artibise (1982) help to flesh out Lucas's definition. They note first that in these places the town itself is an adjunct to the industrial enterprise: the goals of efficient production receive priority. A related characteristic is that the economic base of the town is not controlled from within. The industrial enterprise is owned by outside investors or an absentee corporation that determines the size of the local workforce and the degree of local prosperity. And finally, single industry towns have a simplified occupational structure. The typically well-paid industrial workforce dominates in terms of numbers. The middle class--professionals and merchants whose livelihood depends on serving the industrial enterprise and its workforce--is usually small and weak.

Single industry towns are not unique to Canada, of course. However, they are a common Canadian phenomenon. Lucas (1971) found 636 Canadian communities that met his definition reported above. And DREE (the old Department of Regional Economic Expansion) identified 811 single industry communities in Canada, twelve percent of which were in British Columbia and forty percent of which were timber-dependent (Canada Employment and Immigration Advisory Council 1987).

Devolution would seem to be especially appropriate for single industry communities. To reiterate the idea of devolution, it is

that local organizations and officials can do a better job of community development because they are more sensitive to the local culture and hence more aware of local problems and opportunities. This is based on the belief that the local social order within which people make lives for themselves shapes the culture of a community--roughly, the things that define the special nature of that particular place. And the local social order is shaped in turn by the local economic base. As Himmelfarb (1982) has summarized the argument, the local economy shapes not only the economic and social well-being of the residents, it shapes their view of the world.

Thus, because of their varying economies different types of single industry communities--mining towns, textile towns, sawmill towns, and so on--have different cultures calling for different approaches to community problem-solving, approaches that can best be formulated at the local level.

The responsibility for community development has increasingly been devolved in Canada since the early 1980s. This is at least in part because of the failure of traditional regional development policy (Savoie 1986). But it is also because innovative community strategies have become more critical in light of the economic and social changes of the recent past. Local governments and CBOs have tried to seize the initiative, often with provincial support. Their goal is usually to reverse economic decline through self-development projects aimed at increasing income to the locality and/or generating or saving local jobs (Galaway and Hudson 1994).

Port Alberni is an especially pertinent case example. It is a paradigmatic staples-based single industry community: Events in the Alberni Valley timber industry, the economic base of that area, mirror the situation facing small communities and rural regions throughout the North American Pacific Northwest and elsewhere. And the community has been working for fifteen years to formulate and implement its own community development activities.

Port Alberni: Paradigmatic Single Industry Community

Port Alberni is located in the Alberni Valley at the head of Alberni Inlet, in south central Vancouver Island (Fig. 1). The first European settlement was established in the Alberni Valley in 1860, to prepare the way for a sawmill which began production the following year.³ The mill was built by the Anderson Company, a family owned British firm. The company had received land grants of 2,000 acres for a settlement and an additional 15,000 acres for a timber reserve.

Initially, output from the mill was shipped to Victoria where the company maintained a small office that chartered ships to transport Alberni lumber to markets around the world. However, vessels soon began loading directly at the mill. During the winter of 1861-62 fourteen ships loaded at Alberni Inlet for South America, Australia, and other parts of the world.

^{3/} The early history of Port Alberni is drawn from Drushka (1992), Peterson (1992) and Hay (1993).

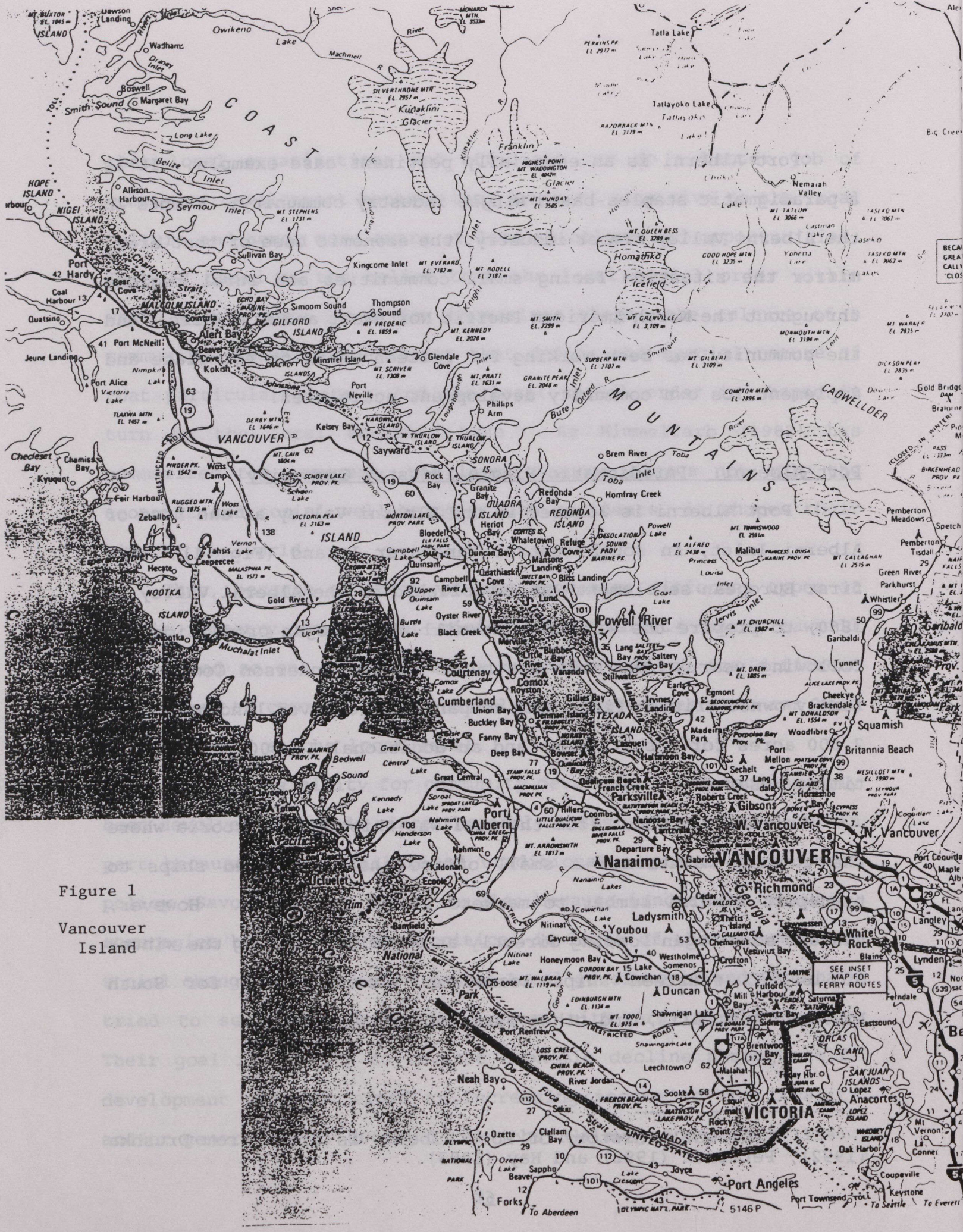


Figure 1
Vancouver Island

The technology of the era limited logging to areas adjacent to bodies of water and by 1863 all suitable trees on the timber reserve had been harvested. The mill was closed by the end of that year and all hands laid off. The white population of the Alberni Valley, which had risen to two hundred, declined to three.

Although it had a favorable location on a deepwater inlet surrounded by forest, the Alberni Valley remained a frontier backwater for forty more years. Several small mills came and went until the Barclay Sound Cedar Company was established in 1904 on land purchased from the Anderson Company. After passing through several hands, in 1915 it became the Alberni Pacific Lumber Company, the first permanent timber operation in the area.

Meantime, in response to the hoped-for boom that would follow the arrival of the transcontinental railroad at Port Moody in 1886, the Anderson Company laid out two townships on its Alberni Valley property. These became the towns of New Alberni (later named Port Alberni), which was largely industrial, and Alberni, which was a residential community.

Development of the Alberni Valley accelerated in the years prior to World War I. The Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway (E&N, owned by the Canadian Pacific Railroad) arrived from Victoria, and the two Albernis became incorporated municipalities, New Alberni in 1912 and Alberni in 1913. By the time of the 1921 census their combined population had reached 1,596.

In the early 1920s the E&N extended branch lines into the woods to the northwest of the Alberni Valley, to encourage the sale

of timber acquired in the original land grant. Bloedel, Stewart, and Welch (BS&W), in partnership with the King-Farris Lumber Company, contracted for 200 million board feet of this timber. In addition, in 1927 BS&W acquired 35,000 acres of timber leases between Great Central Lake and Alberni and along Alberni Inlet to Franklin River. In 1934 BS&W opened the biggest railway logging camp in the world at Franklin River. Within a year it was producing 100 million board feet of logs a year.

There was no processing facility on the west coast of Vancouver Island to handle this volume of timber. So in 1935, in the depths of the Depression, BS&W built its Somass sawmill at the head of the Alberni Inlet. This made the area the second largest lumber exporter in British Columbia, after Vancouver.

The other major presence in the Alberni Valley forest industry came on the scene at this same time. H.R. MacMillan was a pioneer Canadian forester. Among other things he was the first director of the B.C. Forest Service. After World War I he entered the lumber export business. By the 1930s he was selling about forty percent of the lumber shipped out of B.C. However, the mills that supplied him began looking for alternative exporters for their product. In response MacMillan got into lumber production himself. In 1936 he bought the Alberni Pacific Lumber Company, including its railway logging equipment, as well as 17,000 acres of prime timber in the Ash Valley beyond Great Central Lake.

Following World War II BS&W constructed a pulp mill in Port Alberni. They wanted a way to utilize the large amount of company

owned timber in the area--primarily hemlock--that was more suitable for pulp than lumber, and they wanted a way to utilize the waste from the Somass sawmill. In combination with the sawmill, the pulp mill, built in 1947, created one of the first integrated mill operations in North America.

The Alberni Valley was totally dependent on the timber industry: 85% of residents' income came from forest products. To put it in human terms, the estimated population of the two Albernis in 1948 was about 7,000; 2,300 of them, nearly one-third of the population, worked for BS&W.

In 1951 BS&W merged with MacMillan's company to form what is now MacMillan Bloedel (MB). The combination of MacMillan's lumber, plywood, and shingle mills with BS&W's pulp and sawmills, and the newsprint and paperboard plants added in the 1950s, meant that not only a single industry but a single firm dominated the community. Then when the two Albernis merged in 1967 under the name Port Alberni, the result was a single municipality dominated by one company.

British Columbia's forest industry experienced extraordinary growth through the period from the end of World War II into the 1970s. For example, the volume of roundwood produced increased by 80% between 1963 and 1978, and lumber and pulp production each increased by over 120% over the same period. In the early 1970s about 10% of the B.C. labor force was directly employed in the forest industry and it accounted for 60% of the province's total exports (Marchak 1983).

Wages moved up with company profits and "company towns such as Port Alberni, . . . dominated by Macmillan Bloedel mill complexes, were among the most affluent communities in Canada during the 1960s and 1970s" (Marchak 1995, p. 94). In fact, in every year in the 1970s except 1972, Port Alberni ranked among the top ten Canadian cities in per capita income (Hay 1993).

In the early 1980s the long boom stopped. The deep downturn was felt all over North America. However, the recession began earlier and lasted longer in British Columbia than it did in the rest of Canada (Northcliffe and Featherstone 1990). The record corporate profits experienced in 1979 were transformed to record losses in 1981 and '82. Mills were closed, permanent layoffs occurred, and community viability was threatened in single industry towns across British Columbia.

Employment in the forest industry fell precipitously, from a total of about 97,000 jobs in 1979 to 75,500 in 1982, a decline of over 22% (Grass and Hayter 1989). Although the decline has slowed, it continues. By 1991 there were 75,000 jobs in all sectors of the British Columbia forest industry (Marchak 1995). The British Columbia section of the International Woodworkers of America, the principal union for the forest industry, had 50,000 members in logging and sawmilling at the beginning of the 1980s. By 1995 the IWA membership stood at 27,500 in B.C. (Marchak 1995).

These corporate and employment trends had a profound impact on Port Alberni. MB's net earnings of \$154.9 million in 1979 had turned into a loss of \$57.3 million by 1982. Coinciding with these

economic problems, MB was the subject of several takeover bids. In 1981 Noranda, a Toronto based company, gained control of MB. And Noranda almost immediately became part of a still larger holding company with no ties to the industry or to B.C. (MacKay 1982).

Although a Noranda spokesperson declared that there was no intention to alter MB's company structure, by the end of 1982 the MB offices in B.C. no longer contained a library, research staff, personnel department, or computing department; all had been closed (Marchak 1983). This was a clear signal that the new owners would make management decisions about capital expenditures, layoffs, and the like on the basis of the requirements of the corporation as a whole instead of its constituent parts.

Employment changes in Port Alberni paralleled those of the province as a whole. In 1980 MB had 5,386 employees in Port Alberni. By 1986 that number had dropped to 3,904 and by 1991 it was 3,385. This is a decline of almost 40% over eleven years (Barnes and Hayter 1994). Membership in the Alberni region of the IWA decreased by 50% over the same period, 1980-1991 (Hay 1993).

Perhaps most revealing of the effects of corporate and employment trends are changes in the population of the community. As Table 1 shows, the total population of Port Alberni declined by about 7.5% during the 1980s.⁴ That is a matter for some concern, but an even greater worry is the change in the demographic structure of the community. The number of working age people in

⁴/ Port Alberni officials state in personal interviews that the population has now returned to the 1981 level.

Port Alberni--those between the ages of 15 and 65--declined by 9.6% and the number of children under 15 dropped by nearly 20%, while the senior population increased by more than 40%.

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Table 1
CITY OF PORT ALBERNI CENSUS DATA

	<u>1981</u>	<u>1986</u>	<u>1991</u>
total population	19,895	18,240	18,405
under age 15	5,020	4,250	4,115
age 15 to 64	13,315	12,030	12,040
age 65 and over	1,560	1,960	2,250

Source: Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District Fact Book
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A large population of seniors is sometimes viewed optimistically--as an asset because of the transfer payments that retirees bring into a community. However, a shrinking working population and a declining number of children are usually taken to be signs of a deteriorating economic base and loss of faith in the future of the community (Bingham and Mier 1993). And Port Alberni's ranking in per capita income supports a pessimistic interpretation. From having the sixth highest per capita income among Canadian cities in 1980, Port Alberni fell to fortieth in 1981 and, after a brief rebound to thirty-third in 1984, to eighty-ninth by 1987 (Hay 1993).

Community Development in Port Alberni

Port Alberni has been engaged in community development activities since the beginning of its decline in the early 1980s. The Alberni-Clayoquot Economic Development Commission, one of the first community development organizations in B.C., was established in 1979. And, in 1982, it was the first commission to use a public process to create a community economic development strategy. Nearly one hundred local people took part in a two day process that led to the first "Economic Development Strategy for the Regional District of Alberni-Clayoquot." The Strategy has been reviewed and revised six times since 1982, most recently in 1994. The Port Alberni approach has been adapted and used since then by communities throughout British Columbia (Economic Development Commission 1994).

It is fair to say that those who participated in the various public processes that produced and have updated the Port Alberni Strategy are the community's first-level leadership. To gain some insight into what such people think about Port Alberni's situation, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty first-level community leaders.⁵ They were asked about the changes they have noted in the community; the consequences of the changes for the

⁵/ The interviewees were selected purposively, because of their positions in a cross-section of community organizations, both governmental and CBOs. They include those dealing directly with economic development, those providing social and recreational services, civic groups, and First Nations organizations. The interviews were conducted during the summer of 1996. The interviewees were promised anonymity so neither they nor their organizations are identified in this paper.

community and for their organizations; and the community's response to the changes.

Changes in the Community. Unsurprisingly, every respondent mentioned the downsizing at MB, connecting it with the long-term decline in timber, both logging and milling. And the decline in commercial fishing, though less prominent, was also important.

The changes in the timber industry were attributed to a variety of causes. Many people commented on the structural changes in the industry--automation, changes in product lines, and the like--as a source of mill closures and layoffs. Others laid the responsibility on environmental protests and the consequent decline in access to a steady supply of timber for local mills.

Although there seems to be little agreement as to the causes of the changes in the timber industry, nearly every respondent characterized it as the defining influence out of which all other changes flowed. The lost jobs meant less money in the local economy. By the mid-1980s there were few opportunities for young people, "downsized" workers and their families were moving away, and businesses were closing.

Eventually, according to most informants, things stabilized at a reduced level. Some "downsized" workers received early retirement packages and stayed in the community. And there has been an influx of retirees attracted by the cheap housing market that followed the outmigration.

Consequences of the Changes. Many of the consequences of the changes in Port Alberni's economy are also unsurprising. One

respondent described a hypothetical but typical situation:

a man in his 40s, with a traditional family setting, a wife at home with 2-3 kids, and he only has a grade 10 education; he has all the toys in the driveway--boat, truck, motor home or travel trailer; then it all comes to an end, he's laid off;

he's almost illiterate, he's never pursued that part of his life (reading, education) because once he got into the mill he didn't need to;

now he's too young to retire but he's not employable; his wife gets a job; he could go back to school, but he'd be at the same level as his kids

Social service professionals among the respondents reported increased incidences of divorce, domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and the like in families such as these. On a broader scale, there have been increases in burglary, assault, and other "personal" crimes. There is less financial support available for community activities such as the annual fishing derby or the student exchange between the Port Alberni Rotary and their sister city in Japan.

But respondents also report that there is a sense among some that the community has rallied, as in response to a challenge. There is a need to prove something: "We're not dead because we're saying we're not dead!" A few local people have started new small businesses. Community organizations have become more self-reliant, generating their own resources and making extensive use of volunteers rather than depending on external funding. And the shift away from a resource dependent economic base is viewed favorably by some respondents.

The Community Response. Port Alberni's goals have remained essentially the same since 1982--to stabilize and diversify the local economy and replace the jobs lost in the forest industry. Like many resource dependent single industry towns, the community has focused its Strategy on entrepreneurship and small business development.

(T)he economic future of the Alberni region is highly dependent on the growth and expansion of existing enterprise. Consequently, the role of the community with respect to strategically planned economic development should focus on:

- developing the skills of entrepreneurs and business people that enable successful growth and expansion
- encouragement of "co-operative" alliances among like businesses to share skills and resources

(Economic Development Commission 1994, p. 22)

The principal economic sectors targeted for small business development are manufacturing, especially value-added wood products, and retail and services directed toward tourists and retirees. Respondents commented favorably on the prospects for both these approaches. They pointed to a small furniture manufacturer that "has grown so fast they can't meet orders," to the slow-but-steady increase in the community's retirement population, and to Port Alberni's location as the gateway to Vancouver Island's increasingly popular west coast tourist areas.

Summary. The respondents describe their community as a place that found itself in a desperate situation. The bottom fell out of the local economy when MB reorganized and downsized, with dire social consequences. Most seem to think things have reached

bottom. There is a difference of opinion as to whether Port Alberni has turned the corner or not, but there seems to be a sense that long-term prospects are favorable. "There's hope for Port Alberni, though!" The community is "getting out of the 'poor me' thing and starting to deal with the future." The respondents' optimism seems to be based largely on confidence that "Port Alberni is quite a resilient community--the adversity has brought out the volunteer spirit and social organization of the community."

Discussion

The respondents paint an engrossing picture. Port Alberni is to be admired for its resilience and community spirit; they are laudable and essential values for a community experiencing long-term hard times. They reflect the worldview and culture of a staples-based single industry community. It is a culture shaped by the goals of efficient industrial production directed from above. To succeed in such a culture people learned to be hardy, stable, dependable, conscientious, team players.

Admirable as this is, however, it should not be mistaken for entrepreneurialism. The community's development strategy of entrepreneurship and small business development involves more than just a set of skills; it requires a certain worldview, one that is not readily apparent in Port Alberni.

Entrepreneurialism calls for people who think critically, welcome change, and accept risks eagerly. These values may actually be a disadvantage for someone in a thriving staples-based

single industry community (explaining in part the Stelter and Artibise finding that the entrepreneurial sector--professionals and merchants--is often small and weak in such places), but they are values essential to the Port Alberni Strategy. Consider again the hypothetical case of the laid-off mill worker.

His lack of basic skills to move into a new career are widely understood, and training programs have been established that can help him. But he is also missing the entrepreneurial values that would encourage him to embrace change and try something new.

The available pool of potential entrepreneurs in Port Alberni is composed of people just like this hypothetical worker. They are mill workers, timber workers, and middle managers laid off from MB. They learned the values needed to flourish in their old single industry community, but they are now being tested because they lack the values required to function in the alternative culture implied by their community's development strategy.

Some respondents acknowledged the existence of the problem. "People are very insulated here." "They don't change unless they're backed up against the wall." However, there doesn't seem to be an awareness of its origin in the values inspired by the community's single industry worldview, or of the need for the values of entrepreneurialism.

The lesson of Port Alberni, then, is that effective local control of local development has to go beyond tangible issues such as capital, work force skills, and economic base. The local social order, worldview, and community culture must also be taken into account.

And more broadly, the experience of Port Alberni challenges the fundamental idea of devolution--that local organizations and leaders can do a better job of community development because they are more sensitive to the local culture and hence more aware of local problems and opportunities. First-level local leaders in Port Alberni are clearly aware of the tangible aspects of local problems and opportunities. But they do not seem to understand the more subtle factors related to the local culture and its values.

The latter requires an exceptional level of detachment and self-examination, one that is beyond the ability of most of us. As the Zen koan asks: Does the fish know the water? Nevertheless, the implication is that the advantages of devolution can be lost unless ways are found to include a detached view of the local culture and its values.

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