
Joey Smallwood's Vision of Canada

by Joseph Smallwood

In July 1992 the Thirty Third Conference of the Canadian Region of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association will take place in Newfoundland. To mark the occasion we are reprinting one of the most famous pieces of Newfoundland political writing a 1946 speech by Joey Smallwood urging that Newfoundland join Canada. Originally a voice in the wilderness, he worked tirelessly toward this objective until, after many trials and tribulations, his efforts were rewarded. On March 31, 1949 Newfoundland became Canada's tenth province. Joey Smallwood died in December 1991. His words continue to speak directly to the concerns of contemporary politicians as they wrestle with the constitutional and economic problems of 1992.

Our people's struggle to live commenced on the day they first landed here, four centuries and more ago, and has continued to this day. The struggle is more uneven now than it was then, and the people view the future now with more dread than they felt a century ago.

The newer conceptions of what life can be, of what life should be, have widened our horizons and deepened our knowledge of the great gulf which separates what we have and are from what we feel we should have and be.

We have been taught by newspapers, motion pictures, radios and visitors something of the higher standards of well-being of the mainland of North America; we have become uncomfortably aware of the low standards of our country, and we are driven irresistibly to wonder whether our attempt to persist in isolation is the root cause of our condition.

We have often felt in the past, when we learned something of the higher standards of the mainland, that such things belonged to another world, that they were not for us. But today we are not so sure that two yardsticks were designed by the Almighty to measure the standards of well-being: one yardstick for the mainland of the continent; another for this island which lies beside it.

Today we are not so sure, not so ready to take it for granted, that we Newfoundlanders are destined to accept much lower standards of life than our neighbours of Canada and the United States. Today we are more disposed to feel that our manhood, our very creation by God, entitles us to standards of life no lower than those of our brothers on the mainland.

Our Newfoundland is known to possess wealth of considerable value and variety. Without at all exaggerating their extent, we know that our fisheries are in the front rank of the world's marine wealth. We have considerable forest, water power and mineral resources. Our Newfoundland people are industrious, hard-working, frugal, ingenious and sober.

The combination of such natural resources and such people should spell a prosperous country enjoying high standards of living. This combination should spell fine, modern, well-equipped homes; lots of health-giving food; ample clothing; the amenities of modern New World civilization; good roads, good schools, good hospitals, high levels of public health and private health; it should spell a vital, prosperous, progressive country.

It has not spelt any such things. Compared with the mainland of North America, we are 50 years, in some things 100 years, behind the times. We live more poorly, more shabbily, more meanly. Our life is more a struggle.

Our struggle is tougher, more naked, more hopeless. In the North American family, Newfoundland bears the reputation of having the lowest standards of life, of being the least progressive and advanced, of the whole family.

We all love this land. It has charm that warms our hearts, go where we will; a charm, a magic, a mystical tug on our emotion that never dies. With all her faults, we love her. But a metamorphosis steals over us the moment we cross the border that separates us from other lands.

As we leave Newfoundland, our minds undergo a transformation: we expect, and we take for granted, a higher, more modern way of life such as would have seemed ridiculous or even avaricious to expect at home.

And as we return to Newfoundland, we leave that higher standard behind, and our minds undergo a reverse transformation. We have grown so accustomed to our own lower standards and more antiquated methods and old-fashioned conveniences that we readjust ourselves unconsciously to the meaner standards under which we grew up. We are so used to our railway and our coastal boats that we scarcely see them; so used to our settlements and roads and homes and schools and hospitals and hotels and everything else that we do not even see their inadequacy, their backwardness, their seaminess.

We have grown up in such an atmosphere of struggle, of adversity, of mean times, that we are never surprised, never shocked, when we learn that we have one of the highest rates of tuberculosis in the world; one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world; one of the highest rates of beriberi and rickets in the world.

We take these shocking facts for granted. We take for granted our lower standards, our poverty. We are not indignant about them. We save our indignation for those who publish such facts. For with all our complacency, with all our readiness to receive, to take for granted and even to justify these things amongst ourselves, we are, strange to say, angry and hurt when these shocking facts become known to the outside world.

We are very proud of our Newfoundland people. We all admire their strength, their skill, their adaptability, their resourcefulness, their industry, their frugality, their sobriety and their warmhearted, simple generosity.

We are proud of them, but are we indignant? Does our blood boil when we see the lack of common justice with which they are treated? When we witness the long, grinding struggle they have? When we see the standards of their life? Have we compassion in our hearts for them? Or are we so engrossed, so absorbed, in our own struggle to live in this country that our social conscience has become toughened, even case-hardened? Has our own hard struggle to realize a modest competence so blinded us that we have little or no tenderness of conscience left

to spare for the fate of the tens of thousands of our brothers so very much worse off than ourselves?

In the present and prospective world chaos, with all its terrible variety of uncertainty, it would be cruel and futile, now that the choice is ours, to influence the handful of people who inhabit this small island to attempt independent national existence.

The earnings of our 65,000 families may be enough, in the years ahead, to support them half-decently and at the same time support the public services of a fair-sized municipality. But will those earnings support independent national government on an expanding, or even the present, scale?

Except for a few years of this war and a few of the last, our people's earnings never supported them on a scale comparable with North American standards, and never maintained a government even on the prewar scale of service. Our people never enjoyed a good standard of living and never were able to yield enough taxes to maintain the government. The difference was made up by borrowing or grants-in-aid.

We can indeed reduce our people's standard of living: we can force them to eat and wear and use and have much less than they have; and we can deliberately lower the level of governmental services. Thus, we might manage precariously to maintain independent national status. We can resolutely decide to be poor but proud.

But if such a decision is made, it must be made by the 60,000 families who would have to do the sacrificing, not the 5,000 families who are confident of getting along pretty well in any case.

We have, I say, a perfect right to decide that we will turn away from North American standards of public services and condemn ourselves as a people and government deliberately to long years of struggle to maintain even the little that we have. We may, if we wish, turn our backs upon the North American continent, beside which God placed us, and resign ourselves to the meaner outlook and shabbier standards of Europe, 2,000 miles across the ocean.

We can do this, or we can face the fact that the very logic of our situation on the surface of the globe impels us to draw close to the progressive outlook and dynamic living standards of this continent.

Our danger, so it seems to me, is that of nursing delusions of grandeur. We remember the stories of small states that valiantly preserved their national independence and developed their own proud cultures, but we tend to overlook the fact that comparison of Newfoundland with them is ludicrous.

We are not a nation. We are merely a medium-size municipality, a mere miniature borough of a large city. Dr. William Carson, Patrick Morris and John Kent were

sound in the first decades of the 19th century when they advocated cutting the apron strings that bound us to the government of the United Kingdom. But the same love of Newfoundland, the same Newfoundland patriotism, that inspired their agitation then would now, if they lived, drive them to carry the agitation to its logical conclusion of taking the next step of linking Newfoundland closely to the democratic, developing mainland of the New World.

There was indeed a time when tiny states lived gloriously. That time is now ancient European history. We are trying to live in the mid-20th century, post-Hitler New World. We are living in a world in which small countries have less chance than ever before of surviving.

We can, of course, persist in isolation, a dot in the shore of North America, the finks of the North American continent, struggling vainly to support ourselves and our greatly expanded public services. Reminded continually by radio, movie and visitor of greatly higher standards of living across the gulf we can shrug incredulously or dope ourselves into the hopeless belief that such things are not for us.

By our isolation from the throbbing vitality and expansion of the continent, we have been left far behind in the march of time, the "sport of historic misfortune," the "Cinderella of the Empire." Our choice now is to continue in blighting isolation or seize the opportunity that may beckon us to the wider horizons and higher standards of unity with the progressive mainland of America.

I am not one of those, if any such there be, who would welcome federal union with Canada at any price. There are prices which I, a Newfoundlander whose ancestry in this country reaches back for nearly two centuries, am not willing that Newfoundland should pay. I am agreeable to the idea that our country should link itself federally with that great British nation, but I am not agreeable that we should ever be expected to forget that we are Newfoundlanders with a great history and a great tradition of our own.

I agree that there may be much to gain from linking our fortunes with that great nation, but I insist that as a self-governing province of the Dominion, we should continue to enjoy the right to our own distinctive culture. I do not deny that once we affiliated with the Canadian

federal union, we should in all fairness be expected to extend the scope of our loyalty to embrace the federation as a whole. I do not deny this claim at all, but I insist that as a constituent part of the federation, we should continue to be quite free to hold to our love of our own dear land.

Nor am I one of those, if there be any such, who would welcome union with Canada without regard for the price that the Dominion might be prepared to pay.

I pledge myself to this House and to this country that I will base my ultimate stand in this whole question of Confederation upon the nature of the terms that are laid before the convention and the country. If the terms are such as clearly to suggest a better Newfoundland for our people, I shall support and maintain them. If they are not of such a nature, I shall oppose them with all the means I can command.

In the price we pay and the price we exact, my only standard of measurement is the welfare of the people. This is my approach to the whole question of federal union with Canada. It is in this spirit that I move this resolution today.

Confederation I will support if it means a lower cost of living for our people. Confederation I will support if it means a higher standard of living for our people. Confederation I will support if it means strength, stability and security for Newfoundland.

I will support Confederation if it gives us democratic government. I will support Confederation if it rids us of commission government. I will support Confederation if it gives us responsible government under conditions that will give responsible government a real chance to succeed. Confederation I will support if it makes us a province enjoying privileges and rights no lower than any other province.

These, then, are the conditions of my support of Confederation: that it must raise our people's standard of living, that it must give Newfoundlanders a better life, that it must give our country stability and security and that it must give us full, democratic responsible government under circumstances that will ensure its success.

I believe that this move will lead to a brighter and happier life for our Newfoundland people. If you adopt this resolution, and Canada offers us generous terms, as I believe she will, and Newfoundland decides to shake off her ancient isolation, I believe with all my heart and mind that the people will bless the day this resolution was moved. With God's grace, let us move forward for a brighter and happier Newfoundland.

