
Challenges Facing Rural Communities: A Newfoundland and Labrador Perspective

by Roger Fitzgerald, MHA

Some of the challenges undermining the strength of our rural communities flow from deliberate interventions in the economy over the years by governments at all levels. If governments have created many of the conditions that damage rural sustainability and viability, they also have the power and the obligation to intervene in ways that strengthen these communities and enable them to survive and thrive in the modern world. This article argues that rural communities have an indispensable role to play in the economy, and there is nothing natural about letting them die.



The city of St. John's is a wonderful community and Newfoundland's largest urban centre. With a population creeping towards 200,000 it is fairly small by North American standards, yet huge in the provincial context. About two of every five people live on the northeast Avalon. The region is like a magnet, drawing people from our rural communities into the city with

its wealth of opportunities.

But St. John's is not the place to go if you want to see firsthand the challenges facing our rural communities. You have to come to places like the Bonavista Peninsula. It is the place John Cabot made landfall in 1497 on his vessel *The Matthew* which, he reported, was slowed down by the massive schools of fish reaching far out from our coasts. From the 1490s to the 1990s, the Bonavista Peninsula prospered from the bounty of one of the richest fishing grounds on the entire planet. But in the early nineties, when the Government of Canada imposed a moratorium

on cod fishing in the face of drastically depleted stocks, the Bonavista Peninsula's circumstances changed, as did the circumstances of hundreds of other communities throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. The district of Bonavista South, with an entire population of approximately 13,000 endured the loss of over 2000 jobs in the fish processing sector alone.

In St. John's the official unemployment rate as reported by Statistics Canada is around 10 per cent. In my region, the official rate is double that; and in some communities in my district, the unemployment rate is above 80 per cent. And remember that those official rates do not include the people who have given up searching for jobs they know do not exist or those who have moved away in search of opportunities they cannot find at home. Many have moved to St. John's. Many others have left our province altogether. Since the early nineties, Newfoundland and Labrador has lost over 10 per cent of its population.

Some may ask why not just let the trend continue? Why prop up rural economies when opportunities exist in our growing urban centres? Why not let our rural communities die a natural death?

The economist, E.F. Schumacher, penned the famous work entitled *Small is Beautiful*. He wrote about ways and means to strengthen the small community and make it viable. He wrote about the limitations that we all know too well, but he also wrote about the opportunities that too often are missed. He said: "Perhaps we cannot raise

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the winds. But each of us can put up the sail, so that when the wind comes we can catch it." This perspective means a lot to me as a resident of a rural community and as a Newfoundland and Labrador parliamentarian.

It is no accident that we have hundreds of communities dotting the shores along Newfoundland and Labrador's coasts and rivers. The fish brought most of our ancestors here, but nature threw every manner of adversity up against the settlers to make life interesting – wars, disease, storms, famine, abject poverty, you name it. Only the stubborn could survive here, so not surprisingly, stubbornness has become a mark of character in these parts. And it may therefore be tempting to think many people remain in our rural communities simply because they are too stubborn to make a better choice.

But I would put it another way. People whose families have survived here for generations are too stubborn to believe that the opportunities to sustain our communities have all been used up. How could any sane person look around Newfoundland and Labrador and not see the vast multitude of opportunities on which survival and sustainability can be grounded for generations to come?

Yes, the cod continue to be in trouble, but consider the shellfish that abound in our waters.

- Consider the numerous species other than groundfish and the opportunities to replace depleted stocks through aquaculture.
- Consider the opportunities to extract greater value from the fish and other resources we harvest.
- Consider the forests that sustain our logging, lumber and paper operations.
- Consider the opportunities to replace trees through silviculture.
- Consider our minerals, with new finds being discovered year by year in rural areas.
- Consider the hydro power, the oil and gas, and the bounty of other natural resource opportunities that we can harness.
- Consider the age-old skills Newfoundlanders and Labradorians developed by constructing vessels for the sea.

At Bull Arm, approximately 150 km from Bonavista, Newfoundlanders and Labradorians built what *Time Magazine* called the eighth wonder of the modern world, the Hibernia platform. We have proven that we can build big, but we also remember how to build small. Tiny manufacturing enterprises offer huge opportunities for small communities; and also small opportunities that, working together, can have a huge impact.

In Fogo on our northeast coast, they manufacture quilts. The ancient skills and traditions passed down from generation to generation have provided an oppor-

tunity to sustain rural families through our handicrafts sector. In Labrador, some extremely talented Aboriginal artists are sustaining themselves through first-rate soapstone carvings that capture attention around the world. Our province's cultural industries are thriving as never before. Artists are beginning to utilize new technologies in exciting ways, and we are beginning to appreciate the economic value of activities that were once regarded as pastimes.

Technologies such as the internet and other mass-media communications tools have begun to bridge gaps in ways that railways, highways and skyways did many decades ago. It is interesting that Marshall McLuhan described this interconnectedness as the "global village", a term with strong rural overtones. Technologies from radio to telephone to television to the worldwide web have enabled all of our tiny, remote villages, along with our larger communities, to function as a single village that transcends space and time. There are even people who "tele-commute" to work, thriving in the global village without actually going to the office.

There are children in our province who tele-commute to school, at least for certain subjects. Technology connects them to teachers and fellow students across great distances in real time. Indeed, with realtime web connections, email, instant messaging, internet chat rooms, online video gaming and a host of other emerging technologies, young people in rural areas no longer feel the remoteness that defined their great-grandparents. They may not have a McDonald's or a Wal-Mart down the street, but they can chat with other kids in urban and rural communities around the world and feel that they are an integral part of what is going on. They are connected. They are virtually urban in their outlook (not to mention in their music and clothes).

And while it may be painful for them to be unable to finish the night with a Quarter Pounder with fries, how many children around the world can breathe clean, fresh air while hiking safely across barrens behind their homes and hear the waves washing gently against the shores? I will take that over traffic noises any day of the week!

In rural communities, you usually know your neighbours, and neighbours usually look out for one another. Economists call it the underground economy, but the term does not really do justice to the cooperative spirit it tries to describe. Canada would not be Canada without this cooperative spirit, this eagerness to pitch in. Perhaps it would be better called the "potluck economy", where each benefits from the strengths of the others. I believe Canada owes this strong tradition to the rural communities that have predominated here. It is this very tradition that lies at the root of our Medicare system – an apprecia-

tion of the fact that we are all in this together, so we must share.

I shudder to think what will become of us if this cooperative spirit is eroded. If we pretend the erosion of our rural communities is something that we cannot or should not address, then I believe we risk changing Canada fundamentally.

The survival of the rural community in our increasingly urbanized world is a challenge that all Canadians must address together, because we will all suffer together if we do nothing.

Over ninety-five per cent of Canada's natural and environmental resources are located in rural Canada. Many of Canada's major industries – agriculture, fishing, forestry, mining and energy – rely on rural communities. These communities and their industries are a wellspring of strength and vitality for many urban centres. Twenty-two per cent of GNP and 33 per cent of resource-based industries rely on rural communities. If urban centres think they are insulated from rural Canada's suffering, they should prepare for a rude reality check.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, over 54 per cent of the population lives in communities with 5,000 people or less – a percentage far in excess of the national average. So our exposure to challenges affecting the viability and sustainability of rural Canada is even greater. If rural Canada is left to shrivel and die, the effects will be felt here the hardest. But if we undertake collectively to find new and innovative ways to breathe new life into rural Canada then Newfoundland and Labrador is the perfect incubator in which to put those initiatives to work. If it works here, then it works period!

The Infrastructure Challenge

In Newfoundland and Labrador, as in some other areas, transportation is a key infrastructure challenge. Sir John A. Macdonald recognized that constructing a rail line from west of the Rockies to eastern Canada was an investment in Canada's viability and sustainability as a nation. It was enormously expensive, but far cheaper than the alternative of letting the idea of Canada disintegrate into a collection of remote, disconnected states. The initiative opened up new opportunities for our rural communities, allowing rural agricultural producers and timber producers and manufacturers of all sorts to trade with one another. In fact, solid transportation infrastructure freed people to live in cities because it assured them

of their supplies of raw materials from the hinterlands. If those transportation networks are left to erode, then Canada as a whole will suffer in terms of productivity and competitiveness – though the suffering will be felt first and worst in the rural communities whose infrastructure has been neglected. I believe as a nation we need to revisit the thinking of Canada's first Prime Minister and share the burden of bringing the country's transportation network into the 21st century.

Infrastructure also means power wires, telephone wires, cables, various wireless technologies and everything that makes these utilities functional. Our province is witnessing a revolution in broadband accessibility, which means a great deal to the success of rural communities like mine. We are pursuing new opportunities to generate power to propel the industries of tomorrow. Prince Edward Island has applied the "small is beautiful" principle in a big way by focusing on opportunities for local wind power generation. Power attracts opportunities, and clean renewable power – such as Lower Churchill power – can attract opportunities that are sustainable over the long term.

Infrastructure is essential to economic diversification, and diversification is integral to sustainability. A region is best-positioned for survival if it has many oars in the water at once. I applaud our government and all governments that are making the investment in infrastructure to serve rural areas, because it is not only an investment in sustainability, but a vote of confidence in the people who live there.

The Education Challenge

The CBC's "The Passionate Eye" recently aired a documentary hosted by Lisa Moore and Mary Walsh entitled "Hard Rock and Water", a comparison of Newfoundland and Labrador, which surrendered independence in 1949, and Iceland, which asserted its independence at about the same time. One point not lost on the hosts is the fact that Iceland's literacy rate is 100 per cent. In Newfoundland and Labrador, as in other parts of Canada, we envy that statistic and wonder how our lives would be different if we could match it.

But delivering broad-ranging, high-quality education to the residents of small, remote rural communities is a challenge. The problem has been compounded here by the loss of young families following the cod moratorium and the declining birth rate that is partly related to this loss of young families. In the near future, rural Newfoundland and Labrador is projected to experience more deaths than births. Our province's source population, those over 15, is shrinking and aging to such an extent

that, by 2008, it is expected that seniors will outnumber youth.

If you can afford to have four teachers for 100 students in a rural community, how many teachers can you afford to have when the number of students drops to 75 – or 50 – or 25? It is difficult to reduce the number of teaching units without affecting the range of curriculum or the quality of the educational experience. In this province, there is a small schools policy that insulates some schools from the loss of teaching units that would otherwise occur based on population decline. Our boards have been attempting to manage this demographic shift through reorganization. The new technologies I discussed earlier are also of tremendous benefit to rural students who would otherwise not have easy access to certain curricula. But there is no way to sugar-coat the reality that the shrinking number of children in widely-dispersed rural communities is presenting a challenge to parliamentarians who realize that a highly-educated population is a prerequisite to viable and sustainable communities. We need to find new ways to cooperate in the delivery of education so that our young people are prepared to embrace the opportunities that will bring prosperity to their communities.

The government in this province recently announced its policies on public post-secondary education, and emphasized the need to maintain public colleges in the rural and larger centres that now have them. These colleges provide a focal point for higher education and skills development; they help to attract investors and employers; and they can also draw in and develop expertise from which our school system can benefit.

In the St. John's metropolitan area, we recently witnessed a stellar success that was grounded in this very type of cooperation. High school students of our Eastern School District paired with students of our university's Marine Institute to develop a remotely-operated robotic vehicle that they entered in a competition at the Neutral Buoyancy Laboratory of the famed NASA Johnson Space Center at Houston, Texas. Competing against schools from across the United States and another from Canada, the local team brought home first place overall, first place in robot performance, first place in engineering panel presentation, first place in engineering display, first place in teamwork and professionalism, and first place in motion management.

This is proof of the power of cooperation, and I believe we are imaginative enough to find other ways to harness this power to the benefit of our rural students and their communities. We owe it to rural students to help them discover and develop their unique talents so that all of Canada can benefit from the application of those talents. Environmentalists tell us we suffer when rainforest

clear-cutting eradicates species from the planet that could hold the cures to major diseases. How much more do we all suffer when a young person's potential is ignored? No one benefits when talents that could serve humanity are left undiscovered and undeveloped.

The Future of Rural Canada

In a rural area of western Newfoundland, there is a new internationally award-winning, first-class resort that has attracted wealthy buyers from across Europe and around the world – buyers who want to enjoy Newfoundland and Labrador's rural lifestyle even though they have enough wealth to live virtually anywhere they choose. Along our coastline, Americans have been buying up rural properties with a vengeance. Many can not believe that more people do not realize the value of what we have here. It is only now that Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are beginning to truly appreciate the value of our rural environment and way of life.

We have something worth boasting about and something worth sustaining here. And there are rural communities all across Canada that can make that same boast. We are a nation of "best-kept secrets". It is time that, collectively, we invested in these best-kept secrets in order to allow the people who live there to capitalize on the benefits in ways that sustain viable communities. Only people with very small imaginations and cookie-cutter mentalities fail to appreciate the opportunities that rural sustainability can provide. I believe a nation of cities where everyone lives in concrete cubicles stacked upon one another is not what Canada wants to be or should be. It is not really who we are – and it is certainly not who we are in Newfoundland and Labrador.

There are some who would say we should instead be quaking in our boots at the prospect of China's billion-people economy swallowing the world and destroying our beneficial trade arrangements with cheap labour. But the people of China simply want to survive and thrive as do we, as do the people of Africa and South America and the rest of the world. In many of these places, the village is the norm, as it has long been in Canada. As we learn better ways to sustain our own villages, we can export our knowledge to other villages around the world, building partnerships that encompass the globe and raise the standard of living in regions poorer than our own. This is a more positive approach to global village development than the path that some would have us on. But if we lose the village and the sense of sharing and compassion that it engenders, then what kind of world will we have? What kind of people will our great-grandchildren be?