



The next great debate

The last great debate which engaged the country was that around the wisdom of signing the Free Trade Agreement with the United States. Inevitably, as in any debate on a subject having such profound effects, there were many spurious arguments, most of which were against proceeding. These were promoted on behalf of various vested interests (in some cases for political purposes). In spite of such attempts to misrepresent the consequences, there was much intelligent, informed debate and the country had the courage to proceed and make the right decision.

As one should expect, no agreement is perfect, and this was no exception. The United States has since mounted several challenges, the most famous of which was focused on our softwood lumber exports. However, the agreement and its successor agreement (NAFTA), have been a tremendous boost to Canada and our economy.

Now we need another debate and another win. Manufacturing and other

old-line jobs are being lost, not to the United States but primarily Asia, and they're not coming back, even with economic recovery. Here in Atlantic Canada, only Newfoundland and Labrador is really enjoying the natural resources' commodity boom. The rest of the region is suffering from no obvious economic strategy as to how it will replace these jobs, deal with demographic changes or crushing debt burdens.

Our regional policy lacks vision. We still huddle in the corner hoping the world will leave us alone. Problem is, that's what the world is doing. The public, perhaps because it was not engaged properly, thinks it is dangerous to consider selling a power utility to Quebec, apparently believing the region is somehow better off ensuring each province has its own. This is an argument for which there is an emotional basis, but none based on logic.

We don't really understand what is happening in China or India or the rest of Asia. Few Atlantic Canadians have

traveled there and our local media (famous only for its think-small local reporting) has not done us any service in providing relevant education on the subject. How many of us understand there are still some 420 million working people in Southeast Asia who do so for \$1.25 a day? If we don't know that, we can't begin to appreciate the consequences for our economy and importantly, its future.

We understand education is important but we suffer a sub-par education system run not by government and not by parents but by the teachers unions who would have us believe all teachers are equal and the system is just fine (oh, sorry, more money will fix whatever is broken).

We understand the health care system is broken, unaffordable, unsustainable, but yet it seems hugely difficult to actively engage in any sort of meaningful discussion about changing it.

We understand our own folly as voters in focusing on short term issues and punishing any political leader who doesn't do the short-term stuff right, yet we seem woefully unwilling to demand more attention be focused on longer-term, fundamental issues.

We care when we hear about this or that company closing its doors and we have empathy for those affected but we don't really understand what we can do about it.

My point is this: we need vision, a debate around what Atlantic Canada can and should focus upon to be globally competitive. What are the high valued jobs of the next 25 years for which our institutions should be training people? Jobs which will both keep our young people in the region and attract others? Jobs are crucial. Economic growth is almost impossible to achieve absent population growth.

Focus requires resources, resources which were previously dissipated amongst attempts to be generalists, and mediocrity has been the result. That won't work anymore. Next issue, I will attempt to outline some realistic policy options and, hopefully, promote a debate. | ABM

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