



O CONADA?

I don't know if she's still on the job, but there used to be the most delightfully-accented woman on the phones at Newfoundland and Labrador's provincial legislature. "Con-federation Building," she'd consistently intone. It made me laugh, silently, every time. Turns out, the laugh was on me — she was right.

Yes, the 144-year-old secret's been exposed. The sordid story told. Apparently, there is not now, nor has there ever been, a munificent sea-to-shining-sea of federal unity. The Constitution Act of 1867? Nothing more than a strong-armed sham.

At least, so says the New Brunswick government. According to an April 14 article in *The Globe & Mail*, New Brunswick (one of the country's founding signatories) has filed a legal brief with the Supreme Court of Canada claiming it was forced into Confederation. An 1865 letter from London appears to support that claim.

"(If) the views which you have now expressed are to be regarded as sound, New Brunswick, as a separate province, appears to be able to make no adequate provision for its own defence, and to rest in a very great degree upon the defence which may be provided for it by this country."

The letter was in response to New Brunswick's anti-confederation government of the day, which had asserted that the proposed unification of British North America would be politically, commercially and financially disastrous to the province. The defence reference was an obvious threat: do what you're told and join Confederation, or be prepared to defend yourselves from the neighbouring Americans. (With confederate marauders already attacking in New Brunswick waters, there was reason to fear.)

The issue of whether New Brunswick willingly joined Canada or was forced to do so is undoubtedly intriguing, but it's also largely irrelevant — it has, after all, been a done deal for over 140 years. So why bring it up now?

The answer, quite simply, is economic: N.B. is protesting federal efforts to create a federal securities regulator (the province argues this is beyond the powers ascribed the national government in the Constitution Act).

It's also relevant on a larger scale. New Brunswick is in serious financial trouble. Between rising taxes, deficits and power rates, the province is foundering. It needs immediate help and direction, neither of which our national leaders seem willing or able to provide.



Illustration: Iain Keith Murray

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Donald Savoie, a professor of public administration at the Université de Moncton, claims federal neglect is nothing new. In a sworn affidavit submitted to the Supreme Court, he asserts that New Brunswick has been in a steady decline since joining Canada.

Further, according to the *Globe*, he says that New Brunswickers interpret "national policy as code . . . for looking after the economic interests of Central Canada." Cited examples include canal development in Central Canada (but not for Saint John), the St. Lawrence Seaway, the Canada-U.S. Auto Pact and support for manufacturing growth in Central Canada.

New Brunswick is not alone in thinking that way. In 2004, as part of a cost-benefit analysis of Confederation for Canada's youngest province, *The Independent* newspaper ran a headline stating that the absence of fair Canadian energy policy has hurt Newfoundland and Labrador more than other provinces. Indeed, the Canada question (benevolent social state or evil centralist agenda?) has driven the province's political agenda for decades.

When times are good, Canada is one big happy family. But the further a province falls from prosperity, and the more it feels ignored by the federal government, the more disenchanting it becomes with national membership. Coincidentally, the further (and smaller) said dissatisfied province is from Ottawa, the easier it has been to disregard.

Whether they like it or not, and regardless of whether it fits with their election hopes and agendas, our political leaders have to revise their scatter-gun approach to economic investment. We need a new vision for Canada, one that includes a real national strategy for collective growth.

What should that strategy include? That's not for me to say, but I will suggest this: forget the paternalistic hand-outs. Speaking from a Newfoundland perspective, and keeping the New Brunswick position in mind, anti-nationalism is driven by a desire for respect, for a recognition of value and for the fair, equal opportunity to succeed.

And really, isn't that the Canada we all long to be part of? | ABM

The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of Atlantic Business Magazine. Feedback: dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com