



# A tough-love letter to the Maritimes: Heal thyself

**It could create hundreds,** even thousands, of jobs at a time when truly gainful employment is as scarce as a snowball in June. It could anchor the economy of the Maritimes to the sturdy sub-strata of the Alberta oil fields and generate new, if unforeseen, opportunities for interprovincial trade and technology transfer.

In fact, a pipeline to bring western bitumen to Saint John for refining and export could transform New Brunswick from an industrial backwater into an international energy hub, a magnet for investment, innovation and the kind of entrepreneurial brio rarely seen since the Golden Age of Sail.

Why, then, is it likely doomed, forever consigned to that corner of the public dreamscape in this region where good ideas go to die?

Stephen Harper once decried Maritime Canada's culture of defeat. He did so when, as a callow candidate for federal office, he reckoned (not unreasonably) that his stinging characterization of the birthplace of Confederation would play well among prairie farmers and Calgary oil men. He paid some sort of political price for his remark, though his majority government is convincing evidence that it was not a steep one.

Still, in our Eastern hearts, we must admit he wasn't altogether wrong.

We, in this niche of the Canadian steppe, are most animated when others are picking on us. On these occasions, we stir from our Equalization-induced torpor and proclaim with one voice, and regardless of our internecine rivalries, "You, sir, are a cad."

We foam and fulminate. We write letters to newspapers, post angry ripostes online and grant our premiers the right to defend our honour on the nightly news, as if we were so many swooning debutantes. And when we've had our fill, we return to our chambers to do what we do surpassingly well: Wait for things to happen to us.

Of course, it would be nice if the federal government didn't cut us off at the knees whenever we managed to achieve something productive for ourselves. The history of this country has been a litany of taking from those who "have" and giving to those who "have not". So many

westerners remain deaf to the irrefutable argument that this nation was built, in tangible and evident ways, on Maritime ingenuity and wealth.

But we mustn't continue to blame Fat City for the structural weaknesses of our regional economy. This is all on us. And it's time we do something; something extraordinary.

We should start by recognizing that public debt in the Maritimes, now tipping the scales at \$25 billion, is a symptom of a deeper problem. Yes, the wretched state of the global economy exacerbates our fiscal woe. But, at some basic level, we've convinced ourselves that there's not much we can do about it, so, naturally, we don't try with anything approaching imagination. And that's coloured our thinking about all the things we can and cannot afford.

Apparently, we can afford to maintain costly duplications in public services, protectionist trade barriers between provinces and a bevy of universities and colleges whose officials continue to insist that greater administrative integration is the surest route to academic perdition. We can afford to supply 1.8 million people with social programs they don't need at the expense of those they do.

Meanwhile, we can't afford even the time to rationally examine major, long-term investments that could strengthen and diversify the regional economy for decades to come. Shale gas development in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, we say, is too risky, too fraught with potential perils, even before exploration drillers have determined whether the industry is commercially viable. Absurdly, we say the same sort of things about large-scale wind farms and tidal power.

In laughably similar fashion, Moncton City Council approaches its own plans for a downtown events centre with all the conviction of the cowardly lion, wondering aloud whether it's biting off more than it can chew with a 15,000-seat facility. Maybe, 7,500 is good enough. Maybe, that's all we deserve.

This is the prevailing attitude that makes a pipeline into Saint John doubtful. But not impossible if we, for once in a very long time, realize that no one's coming to rescue us. In the end, we are the heroes of our own story. | ABM

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