

# It's time to stop thinking magically about the future

**Those of us** who are well-established in our irascibility (a function of our sullen conviction that most people are thoroughgoing nincompoops), approach the dawn of a new year experiencing an odd mixture of dread and resignation.

Didn't we just come off the tail-end of one of the stupidest 12-month periods in recent Canadian history? Why must we do this all over again? Do we really expect to get it right this time when getting it wrong is what we do best?

Of course, part of getting it wrong, maybe the most important part, is making darn sure that otherwise eminently solvable problems become utterly intractable and, so, eternally, nauseatingly durable.

Consider, in this context, shale gas.

There might be 70 trillion cubic feet of the stuff trapped in sedimentary rock beneath the surface of New Brunswick. Presently, a handful of companies pursue exploration leases to determine whether any of the resource is commercially exploitable. If any of it is, then a new industry dedicated to its extraction and export could create hundreds of jobs and replenish provincial government coffers with royalty revenues.

Meanwhile, cognizant of the potential environmental hazards associated with drilling operations, the Government of New Brunswick has released not one, but three sets of guidelines to govern industry practices. Premier David Alward calls these rules "the toughest and most comprehensive in North America." He's not wrong.

All things being equal, then, one should expect a broad level of public support for the investigative phase of this resource's development. After all, no one's building a strip mine or digging a quarry, many of which exist in New Brunswick, posing far more of an existential threat to potable water and uncontaminated soil than do shale gas wells.

But lest John Q. Public becomes confused, he must always ignore the facts.

Now, the only images tight plays of petroleum conjure in the minds of the majority are those of angry, rural locals (and their urban, politically correct confederates) who are convinced that democratically elected governments cannot be trusted to regulate industry responsibly.

Somehow, placards, barricades and protest lines do a far better job than does the law



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of holding accountable those dirty, rapacious drilling operations.

Equally absurd, and no less irksome, is the notion, gaining widespread currency in the mainstream of the population, that New Brunswick should abandon all efforts to develop any of its natural resources – non-renewable and otherwise.

The argument against harvesting and processing fossil fuels is already familiar and, though not actually practical, not without some merit. But many of those who decry pipelines for Alberta bitumen into Saint John's refinery also condemn wind turbines, which pollute nothing, contribute no greenhouse gases to global warming, as they add 500 megawatts of electricity to the province's power grid each year.

With evidence that is almost diaphanous, opponents of "big wind" claim that proximity to the rotating blades produces everything from migraines to vertigo to brain tumors. Besides, they whine, they're ugly.

Such was the condition of New Brunswick's polity in the year that was. Such, we may reasonably fear, will be its condition in the year ahead, solely because, in this province, a lack of intellectual firepower is matched only by a catastrophic failure of the collective imagination.

Increasingly, far too many of us cannot conceive of a day when we will witness the economic engines and commercial levers freeze for good. It's never happened before. We've always managed to pull through, demanding and pretty much getting everything we've asked our politicians to deliver.

The corollary effect, of course, is that we get politicians who will only pander to our misguided, uninformed expectations.

But the day of reckoning is nearly upon us. A province of 750,000 people, sporting a structural deficit of \$500 million on a long-term debt of \$11 billion, a province that is shedding people and jobs faster than any other in Canada, cannot afford to engage in magical thinking about its future.

Should this realization eventually dawn on New Brunswick, version 2014, I'll gladly apologize to all those of my fellow citizens who once apprenticed in this sullen, self-satisfied land as nincompoops.

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