

Time to get digging

I wasn't fussy about meeting with Burf (Burford Ploughman, if you want to be formal about it). Nothing against the man, but I've been so darned busy that I wasn't sure if it was worth yielding a precious hour to talk about an idea that had been covered many times before.

Ploughman, after all, has been preaching the same gospel for almost 40 years, ever since he was part of the 1978 Commission of Inquiry into Newfoundland Transportation. After considerable study, he and his fellow commissioners advocated the immediate construction of a fixed link tunnel under the Strait of Belle Isle, connecting the island of Newfoundland to Labrador. But here we are, in 2014, and Newfoundland and Labrador is no closer to a fixed link than it was 36 years ago.

I'm not aware of anyone who has ever disagreed with the value or validity of the idea. Labradorians have never needed convincing that they deserve better road access (nor has anyone who's attempted to drive the Trans Labrador "highway"). Well-known engineer and innovator Tom Kierans, who died in 2013, spent much of his professional career touting the plan. (Kierans, it's interesting to note, was a technical advisor to Environment Canada for P.E.I.'s Confederation Bridge.) Former N.L. Premier Frank Moores played with the idea as an election strategy back in the '70s, even going so far as to set off a few explosives (Frank always did have a flair for the dramatic). More recently, Danny Williams broached the idea in the lead-up to his first election as premier, then followed through with a prefeasibility study in the early days of his mandate. The subsequent report said it was do-able, just not feasible.

Feasibility. That, in a single word, summarizes the so-far insurmountable obstacle to a fixed link. Would there be a sufficient volume of traffic to warrant the cost? Or are there more pressing priorities in the competition for public spending?

Back when Danny was leader of the province, he noted that a fixed link wasn't an "immediate priority." Still, he said, "the possibility remains that a fixed link could be constructed during the completion of projects such as the Lower Churchill hydro development or Highway 138 in Quebec."

The Lower Churchill is going ahead, but there's still no sign of a fixed link. It was this



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new issue which Burf wanted to address. Using maps and numbers, citing assorted studies and historical documents, he laid out his case for why he thought Muskrat Falls and its subsea transmission lines might be the best hope for a tunnel to finally link N.L.'s disparate parts. "They're drilling one anyway," he said, "to accommodate the electrical cables. While they're at it, why not make it big enough to accommodate vehicular traffic?"

Why not, indeed? This was the question which we ultimately tasked freelancer Wade Kearley with investigating (you'll find the results of his exhaustive efforts in this issue's cover story "The Atlantic Disconnect").

Link or no link, I believe there's an even bigger issue at play. And it relates directly to the role, influence and respect owed to Labrador vis-à-vis provincial affairs. Think about it. What part of the province is home to the Voisey's Bay nickel deposit? Where will Muskrat Falls hydro power be generated? Where, for that matter, is the Upper Churchill? Gull Island? Where is the iron ore rich Labrador Trough? (I know, that one was too easy.) Which part of the province has three newly-discovered oil and gas basins off its coast? And is perfectly situated as a gateway to Arctic developments? The conclusion is inescapable: a region that generates as much wealth and attracts as much investment as Labrador should not have to beg for anything.

Consider these what ifs. What if the provincial government waits too long to forge that physical connection? What if Labrador is provoked to act on its as-yet passive disgruntlement? What if other jurisdictions (Quebec, for instance) took advantage of their proximity to offer Labrador a more attractive alternative to its awkward union with Newfoundland? (A very real potentiality given the pending deadline on the Upper Churchill contract.) What if Labrador democratically decided to become a standalone province?

If that were to ever actually happen, a \$1.7-billion tunnel would be the least of Newfoundland's problems.