



BETWEEN THE LINES

by Dawn Chafe

Let's hear it for the small minded

Are you one of those people who insist Atlantic Canada's economic survival depends on us becoming a single, homogenized non-entity? Could you do me a solid and just shut the heck up already? Because, honestly, I'm sick of listening to it.

I've been editor of this magazine for 18 years, and it's been a recurring theme that entire time (and longer). You know what I'm talking about: the periodic bleating that the four Atlantic provinces can't possibly make it on their own in this big bad world. That Canada east of Quebec is embarrassingly under-populated. That all of us, together, barely amount to a respectable city. That we have no clout, no influence, no power and we never will ... unless, until, we finally manage to push aside our provincial attitudes.

Our N.B. contributing editor, Alec Bruce, gives the devils their due in his Winner Takes All column (page 20). He writes: "This small

collection of principalities... remains one of the most economically divided, socially backward and culturally anxious (regions in the country)." He also laments our lack of interprovincial free trade, the barriers to post-secondary credit transfers and the difficulty having professional designations from one province recognized in another.

Alec is right: all of these things stand in the way of doing business in a region which desperately needs more of it.

There are only 2.5 million of us, after all, thinly spread across 540,000

(mainly rural) square kilometres. The fewer people there are, the fewer taxes are collected. And the lower the population density, the more expensive it is to provide essential services like health care and education. The more services decline, the more attractive it is for people to leave.

It's a cycle that must be stopped—but I'm not convinced regional assimilation is the tool to do it. Just because there's strength in numbers doesn't mean that autonomy is a weakness. One of the letters to the editor this issue is an apt case in point. It references the precarious fiscal situation in Nova Scotia and Greece—and how their lack of currency control holds them back. There is an inherent trade-off in every partnership, federation or economic union: personal power diluted for general protection; individuality sacrificed for collective conformity.

I find that arguments in favour of Atlantic Canada's cooperative

unification often feature disturbing undertones of disrespect for cultural distinctions. "We must stop thinking as separate provinces," or so the wisdom goes. We're supposed to merge our interests for the greater good. Pool our resources. Act as one. Buy in bulk.

I'm not saying there aren't economies of scale to be achieved or that we shouldn't cut through the bureaucratic B.S. that makes mountains out of molehills. What I am saying is that the one-size-fits-all franchise mindset doesn't transfer well to regional development planning. Haligonians are not Cape Bretoners any more than St. John's townies are the same as outport livyers. Nova Scotians are not New Brunswickers; Prince Edward Islanders are not Labradorians.

The tourism sector has a great name for the differences that reap rewards: authenticity. People travel the world because they yearn to experience something unique and genuine, something that says, "this is what it means to be part of this place." Ever visited a city and thought, "Seen one concrete jungle, seen 'em all?" Curious, isn't it, that you never hear New York, London, Paris or Montreal described that way. That's the difference between a must-see destination and a place that happens to be highly-populated.

If you're looking for a lesson in the right way to pool resources, look no further than this issue's cover story. It's about an innovative group of Inuit entrepreneurs who are combining their separate strengths to create a culturally-sensitive, indigenously empowering and sustainable enterprise in one of the remotest, least populated regions of the country.

Instead of diluting their unique culture or historic traditions into a generic aboriginal experience, they are celebrating their authenticity. That, I think, will make all the difference.

Dawn Chafe started with *Atlantic Business Magazine* as a freelancer 20 years ago, becoming editor in 1998.

FEEDBACK

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