

“Why can’t we recognize that business deserves to be embraced at that same level? That business big and small is as important to our well-being?”

ODE TO NEWFOUNDLAND

I recently had the distinct pleasure of participating in a ceremony in Corner Brook to celebrate a wonderful gift from Fortis to the Set The Stage Campaign. This is a fundraising effort to support the construction of a new theatre building in Cow Head, to replace the wholly inadequate facilities there now which nonetheless have given rise to a hugely successful live theatre festival.

I read the following paragraph to the audience, for which I take no credit as it was brilliantly written by the folks at Theatre Newfoundland Labrador and Pilot Communications, their campaign advisors: “What this province has is truly special. In such a small population, the amount of artistic talent is a remarkable gift: musicians, actors, writers, artisans and comedians. And Theatre Newfoundland Labrador shares that unique gift with the rest of the world reminding everyone from everywhere of the importance of culture and sense of place in finding that source of contentment we all seek.”

Wow, what a powerful statement and so profound. Amongst the other speakers was a young lady, a graduate of the Fine Arts Program at Grenfell. Una Hill-McMullin spoke passionately, enthusiastically and eloquently about the impact the program and the theatre had had on her life and what it was like to be a member of the company in Cow Head.

As I drove back to the airport in Deer Lake after the ceremony, I was reminded of a thesis which Don Sobey continues to promote—that you can’t have a strong business community without a strong arts community, or words to that effect. While I totally subscribe to that premise, I think the opposite is not true. Meaning you can have a strong arts community without a strong business community, and that’s my point. I worry that we have this unique, fantastic culture of artistic talent in Newfoundland Labrador and similar pockets throughout the Maritimes. But it is accompanied by a deep suspicion of business, especially big business. There is a sense that somehow big business is there to be feasted upon, to be taken advantage of and to be dealt with at arms’ length.

I am struck by this paradox. We celebrate so proudly and justifiably the presence of this tremendous culture, tradition and history as a part of our lives which we consider so important to our identity, our emotional well-being and our future. Why can’t we recognize that business deserves to be

embraced at that same level? That business big and small is as important to our well-being? To our freedom to live as we want? As a mechanism that will allow us to preserve all we consider to be so special?

The future of rural communities in Atlantic Canada is totally dependent on the strong support of local entrepreneurial talent. One of the reasons I am so optimistic for the role of the Ocean Supercluster is because growth of the ocean economy will largely manifest itself in coastal communities throughout the region. Yes there will be jobs in St John’s and Halifax but the impact on outports should be profound. For the Cluster to accomplish all that it might, the community at large needs to understand its potential and then to get behind it. This means it has to tolerate mistakes, missteps and wrong turns, because these are the steps to progress and success.

But as much as small business has an important role to play so does big business. We are not going to solve our deficit and debt problems on the backs of small businesses. We need the development dollars and royalty income from the likes of Vale and the big oil companies to do that. Small and medium-sized businesses grow by feeding big business, by being the source of innovation and new ideas for those who have the scale and financial muscle to require such services.

So please, when we think about how lucky we are to have this wonderful depth and breadth of artistic talent, in that same sentence understand the importance of supporting in exactly the same way, big and small businesses alike. They are as important a part of our family as Una and all her colleagues.

JOHN RISLEY, CEO of CFFI Ventures Inc., regularly engages in policy debate as a member of the World Presidents’ Organization, the Chief Executives Organization and as a director on the Board of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives.



FEEDBACK

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