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James Overton

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# The Politics of Hope in Newfoundland in Two Depressions

JAMES OVERTON

## INTRODUCTION

MANY WOULD AGREE WITH Joe Bailey's (1988: 1) suggestion that "it is now difficult to be optimistic," or with the assessment of Levitas (1982) that we live in "dystopian times." Often the current lack of positive views about the future, the demise of utopian thinking and lack of hope, is linked to a weakening of belief in progress. But it is also common to link this to capitalism's current economic crisis.

At the same time that pessimism seems to be widespread, and perhaps somehow because of this, there has developed recently a remarkable explosion of activity devoted to the promotion of what can only be described as positive thinking. We are urged to be optimistic, to not lose hope in the future and to invest that hope in information technology and the coming of post-industrial society or the emergence of a new world order.

In this respect the current period is quite similar to the early 1930s when, as the effects of the Great Depression began to be felt, there emerged what was virtually a light industry devoted to the encouragement of positive thinking. People were told that recovery was just around the corner and that they had nothing to fear but fear itself. The purveyors of hope, optimism and belief in the future had widespread influence then as now, these sentiments being widely found in popular music, in the press and magazines, in the speeches of politicians and public leaders, and in the sermons of representatives of various religious denominations. Then, as now, economic recovery was made to rest, at least in part, on the willingness of people to think positively about the future.

Our feelings about things are individual but they are also social. Their existence, their "shape," and the manner in which they are expressed can only be

understood in relation to social conditions and social processes. Understanding such feelings as hope and fear is important. They are related to how we act now and in the future.

Clearly hope is important politically. The future, like the past, is part of the present. How we view the future, what we hope and strive for and what we expect is of great political significance. Having said this it is important to recognize that hope is the object of struggle. The existence of hope and its character are in dispute.

Hope can be a passive thing. But understood as desire linked with expectation it is active. Hope in this sense can be learned in the same way our desires can be educated. In a society characterized by class and other divisions there is an on-going struggle over hope because at least one of the faces of hope is potentially dangerous for the rulers of society, particularly so during periods of crisis.

This paper examines the politics of hope in Newfoundland during the 1930s and in the present period of economic difficulties. It starts from the assumption that hope is not some fixed, essential quality of human existence which waxes and wanes, according to some overarching logic, but something to be understood in context. The social scientist can map the contours and examine the diversity of that set of feelings we call "hope." What are the sources of these feelings? What forces affect the existence and "shape" of our hopes? What consequences does hope have for social action? How does hope work in the political arena? What battles are fought out over hope?

In both the 1930s and the present period the state is following a strategy of limiting people's desires and curbing their expectations. Hope that was learned has to be unlearned. It has to be redefined and redirected rather than extinguished. Thus both depressions produced a bumper crop of those promoting faith, confidence, optimism, and the power of positive thinking at the same time that real improvements in people's living standards and real movement towards a society with greater justice and equality are halted and reversed.

The apparent paradox that, in both depressions, movements to get people to cut their clothes according to their cloth have marched under the banner of "restoration of hope" and "faith in the future" is the focus of this paper. This idea will be explored through a discussion of politics in Newfoundland during both the depression of the 1930s and the present period. For the 1930s I will draw on the fruits of my extensive work on unemployment and state policy (Overton, 1992), the collapse of democracy (Overton, 1990), and the politics of self-help (in progress) in the 1930s. For the present period I will draw on my research on neo-nationalism, resource development and economic recovery (Overton, 1979; 1985a; 1985b; 1993).

The essential approach to hope will be to make it a problematic concept. Who talks about hope and how do they talk about it? How does it fit in with

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particular political agendas? How is hope thought of, how is it used and for what purpose? The approach to hope will therefore be historical and social.

This paper seeks to do no more than argue that hope should be taken seriously, that it can and should be analyzed in political terms. It supports this argument by examining specific situations in which hope plays a role in politics. It is the intention of this paper to contribute towards an understanding of politics in Newfoundland and at the same time to join the growing body of writers who are drawing attention to the political significance of hope. What we lack, however, are detailed studies of how hope is linked to specific visions of the future and how these are linked to particular sets of interests in the political arena. We need studies of the politics of hope in particular places and periods. This presentation will go some way towards providing such an analysis.

### HOPE AND POLITICS

Men have always been expected to cut their coat according to their cloth, they learnt to do so, but their wishes and dreams did not comply (Bloch, 1986, Vol. 3: 1365).

My approach to the problem of definition is to adopt the stance taken by Raymond Williams in *Keywords* (1976). I seek not to provide a neat definition of hope, but to look at the use of the word. How is it used? What is it taken to mean? How has meaning shifted? Who uses this word and in what contexts? This essay is, then, concerned not just with “the available currency of meanings” (*Ibid*: 20), but starts with the assumption that “no word ever finally stands on its own.” The task is to return words to the relations in which they are used. We study meanings in context. We look at actual speakers and writers “in and through time” and examine their relationships with “the objects and relationships about which language speaks.”

Dealing with hope in this way is extremely difficult. We are dealing with a complex word used by many different speakers in a variety of circumstances to refer to a varied and changing set of feelings. But the problems are not essentially different than if we are trying to understand any set of feelings, any state of mind. As Anthony Skillen (1977: 157) suggests, “the problem is to locate psychology not deny it.”

And here we have a body of work to draw on for inspiration. We have Bailey’s (1988) work on pessimism, work on “cultural despair” (Stern, 1965), and on nostalgia (Lasch, 1984; Overton, 1985). There is also a body of work which deals specifically with hope which will be drawn on for this presentation. Most important here is Ernst Bloch’s three volume text *The Principle of Hope* (1986). Work on utopias is also of importance to anyone wishing to understand the politics of hope (Levitas, 1982; Frankel, 1987).

My approach is, broadly speaking, the same as that adopted by Christopher Lasch (1984) in his study of “the politics of nostalgia” in the United States.

Lasch is concerned to understand the social roots of both nostalgia and what he refers to as “the ideological critique of our ‘national nostalgia’” (*Ibid*: 65). Lasch’s aim is to locate socially the tendency to dismiss nostalgia which was a characteristic of much intellectual work starting in the 1970s. Who was putting forward this critique and why? How was their critique related to their view of the world and their social position? Why did some people become preoccupied with nostalgia? How do we account for the widespread “infiltration of political and cultural commentary by this particular catchword”? (*Ibid*: 66). How do the concerns and vision of a particular group become the concerns of a nation? How are they spread? Why do they gain widespread acceptance?

Lasch’s answer, hopefully not simplified too much, is that the critique of nostalgia emerged as “the dogma of progress became increasingly untenable” (*Ibid*: 68). Liberal intellectuals “salvaged something of their self-confidence – the appearance if not the substance of hope – by deploring the nostalgic mood that allegedly made so many Americans afraid to face the future.” This tendency can be observed from the late 1940s. But by the 1960s it had become a “liberal ritual, performed, like all rituals, with a minimum of critical reflection.” Uncomfortable with the idea that society was heading for trouble, critics of nostalgia sought to “reassure themselves that evidence of cultural decline is really evidence of nostalgia” (*Ibid*: 65). Such thinking “serves as effectively as nostalgia itself, as a form of escapism.” It declares the death of the past and denies history’s hold over the present.

People talk about different kinds of hope. One widespread distinction is between passive and active hope. Thus, Peeler’s (1987) work on American intellectuals in the 1930s suggests that many of them exhibited a passive rather than an active hope. They hoped for a better future, for an end to the Depression without necessarily doing very much to make these things a reality. I suppose Joe Walsh’s (1993) statement that “Newfoundlanders have always lived in hope because there was no alternative” would also indicate a kind of passive hope. Such hope is perhaps a kind of coping mechanism, helping to ward off despair. Norman Duncan’s turn-of-the-century description of rural life in Newfoundland suggests the existence of this kind of hope when he tells us that the outporter “laboriously, precariously .... slips through life” as he “follows hope through the toilsome years” (Duncan, 1988).

Some of the most important literature on the different types of hope comes from the accounts of those who were the victims of the Nazi Holocaust. Dimsdale’s (1980) essay on the coping behaviour of concentration camp inmates is especially useful. He also distinguishes between two kinds of hope, active and passive. The belief that “Where there is life, there is hope” was a relatively passive expression of hope. However, many people believed that their suffering would one day end, that they would be saved. Such people believed that they must have hope in order to survive. Without this they would sink into the

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severely apathetic and fatalistic state from which there was no return. A more active hope was based on a belief that the camps would not and could not survive and that there were forces at work to overthrow the evil system of which they were the victims and that these forces would eventually prevail. This was an active hope which was strengthened and sustained by involvement in groups such as the Communist Party.

The existence of this kind of hope was less a quality of a person's personality than to do with their larger belief system and the support that they received from others. Isolation was deadly. To be a member of a group was to enhance one's chances of survival, whether this group be small or large, whether it was based on love, friendship, political affiliation or engaging in some particular activity such as singing. To be part of a group was to be part of a mutual support network.

Passive hope came in the form of a ray of light at a person's darkest moment. A pat on the shoulder, the urge to "cheer up" might work wonders. But again this hope depended on the support of others. Active hope is always something socially constructed and sustained.

It is difficult to assess the importance of hope as a coping mechanism. We have only the survivors' stories. Coping methods cannot be seen as necessarily leading to, or enhancing the possibility of, survival in any simple sense. To withdraw was a way of coping with stress, but it virtually guaranteed death. Passive hope was unlikely to prevent execution, although it might limit or slow down the development of the apathetic and fatalistic behaviour which quickly and certainly led to death. It might help people live even though it might not prevent them from dying.

It is necessary to talk about false hope. It was James Agee (1968: 154-5) who, in his 1937 poem *Summer Evening*, warned that "hope can cut the roots of reason." The desperate need to see times as improving and the future as holding something for us can lead to the emergence of "hopes without much objective basis" (Peeler, 1987: 3). In the USA, many people desperately wanted an end to the suffering of the Depression and this led to the emergence in many intellectual circles of:

Various forms of optimism based more on wishful thinking than upon any reasoned set of alternatives to the Depression's dilemmas (*Ibid*).

Ernst Bloch (1986, Vol. 1: 5) also examines false hope. He suggests that deception – and surely that is what we are dealing with, whether by self or others – must always work with aroused hope if it is to work at all.

Hope has many meanings and because of this it is a profoundly difficult concept. It is ambiguous, politically. It must be treated with care. As we have seen, hope can be used in a relatively weak sense, as a vague expression of support or of confidence. It may be used in this sense without any real expectation that the desired state of affairs will come about or without passing

judgement on the likelihood that what is desired will happen. In its relatively passive meaning, hope refers to the contemplation of future enjoyment of something and to the vague desire that something will happen, that something will be enjoyed, without necessarily any real chance of this happening and certainly no implication that the desired state of affairs can and will be brought about through the actions of the person who lives in hope. Hope is what you “cling to” when the real chance of getting something is limited, when nothing you can do can influence events. What does hope without expectation look like?

Hope in the sense of “dreaming and longing” may, in Ernst Bloch’s terminology, “stand still” (1986, Volume 3: 1365). But it may become forward looking and when this happens “longing now shows what it can really do.” Hope, understood as desire linked with an expectation that the desire will be met, is dangerous for our rulers. It is something that always has to be carefully managed, channelled and tamed. Periodically this becomes difficult. What happens when expectations are not met? When what we have learned to long for is denied? This can lead to disillusion and despair. But it can also lead to action. What we need to explore is the way in which hope is linked to discontent, to peoples’ feelings that they are worthy of a better life (*ibid.*). What part does hope play in the relationship between the actual, the desirable and the possible? How is hope linked to political action to change the world? How are peoples’ dissatisfactions, hopes, expectations dealt with politically during periods of crisis? How are hopes curbed, re-worked, channelled? How is hope the focus of struggle?

The lesson of this discussion is that hope, like nostalgia or pessimism, must be understood in social and historical context. But it is also clear that hope is not always what it seems or proclaims itself to be. We must distinguish between what people say and even think they are doing and what they are actually doing. We must look at what work hope is called upon to perform and for whom the performance is taking place. And nowhere does this become more clear than in a discussion of the politics of hope during periods of economic crisis.

## THE RESTORATION OF HOPE, SELF-HELP AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The problem is one of fear of what is to come: the fear of the wage earner that his wages will be cut or even that he will lose his job entirely, the fear of the employer that he will not be able to meet his obligations, the fear of men that they will not be able to pay their taxes, or the interest and instalments on mortgages, the fear that savings will be lost, and so on and so forth. These individual fears spread like a hysteria in a crowd which is trapped in an enclosure and cannot find the exits, and the hysteria itself accelerates the very evils that men fear (Walter Lippmann, 1931: 12).

Let’s sing of the day not far away  
When the sun shall shine again

(Judge W.J. Browne, *Evening Telegram*, October 25, 1937).

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Walter Lippmann's comment on fear in the early 1930s was made about the United States of America, but it could have been made about many other places. It is not necessary to search too far to discover other evidence that the 1930s was a decade of fear. This remains true even though the impact of the Great Depression was uneven between and within countries and its severity varied over time. How it affected individuals depended on where they sat in the class hierarchy, what their trade was and what resources they were able to mobilize to deal with uncertainty, poverty, or any of the other problems which were routinely faced by many people. What Philip Gibbs (1933: 4) describes as the "chill of doubt" was felt by some old gentlemen in their London clubs, while out of work miners scabbled for a few pieces of fuel on Britain's abandoned coal tips, and Newfoundlanders poached the near-extinct caribou in order to get a bit of fresh meat. But there were regions that prospered during the 1930s, while deflation meant that real incomes rose for some of those who had regular employment. There were also improvements in health for people in some areas.

From the onset of the Depression many politicians and other public figures offered soothing words to those suffering the ill-effects of capitalism's crisis. Herbert Hoover's announcement, made in 1930, that the Depression was over was the first of many such declarations. "False optimism took the place of despair" in this period, according to Paul Mattick (1978: 124). This optimism was based on nothing more than the belief that it was simply not possible for the slump to last much longer. From the USA to Canada, Britain and Newfoundland the problems were thought to be of a temporary nature. Recovery was just around the corner. Soon, however, the mood began to change. By 1932 it was more common to hear fearful prophecies from politicians, academics and civic leaders. Unrest became the focus of much anxiety as moves by the jobless to organize and defend their interests led to some violent confrontations with the authorities.

By 1933 Philip Gibbs (1933: 3-4) had identified a widespread sense of bewilderment and uncertainty:

It is a most extraordinary thing (quite new, I think, in the history of a thousand years) that millions of men and women, including the intellectual leaders of this modern world, should have this sense of bewilderment and uncertainty, not only about the immediate future of civilization but about the very foundations on which their own ways of livelihood are built.

It was not only the economic hardships faced by many people, but also the uncertainty, which undermined confidence. The "collapse of prosperity" was more than just about hardship, it was about the shattering of a vision of the future to which many people had subscribed. Nor was this a vision that applied only to those who lived in New York or London or Toronto. It was a vision that inspired J.R. Smallwood's optimistic book *The New Newfoundland* published in 1930.

Prosperity, even in the richest country of the world, collapsed "suddenly, like a house of cards" (Gibbs, 1933: 5-6) and there was a "failure of hope." Thus



part of the damage caused by the Depression was psychological. Many a person's faith in the future was shattered. "Numbed stoicism" is how Stephen Baskerville and Ralph Willett (1985: 3) describe the mood of a majority of the American people. There was forced good humour and there was a market for "How-to" books. Popular music and movies and public leaders played and replayed optimistic themes of the "Cheer up" variety, while those who could afford to cultivated the art of "escapology." The steady stream of "rosy promises" even gave the public something to focus their "dour cynicism" on:

The people have decided that the professional optimists are funny, and have even made a hobby of collecting the more hideously optimistic remarks of recent years (Lippmann, 1963: 123).

But not too far below the surface the people were fearful and anxious, while their leaders continued to hold to the view that "the way to please and to reassure the people is to pat them gently and feed them pap" (*Ibid*). When people responded pessimistically to this, it was assumed that it was their pessimism that was the cause of the "crisis of confidence" in the first place. By 1932 Lippmann reported a "falling off in the demand for rosy promises" (Lippmann, 1963: 132). People began to lose confidence in their illusions and a new mood emerged in which people looked towards strong measures and firm leaders for solutions to their problems.

The devastation of the period was not just economic, social and psychological. It was increasingly political. Everywhere the economic crisis produced a political crisis. When Lippmann (1963: 121) stated in 1931 that "the extent to which government by elected officials has been discredited is impressive" he was talking about the United States, but he could have been talking about Newfoundland where a strong movement to end democracy arose in 1931 and responsible government was suspended in 1934 (Overton, 1990).

Countering the black mood of the people soon became a preoccupation with politicians. Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous re-working of Thoreau in his "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," remark made in his March 1933 Inaugural Address, was one such effort. Politicians and others with a vested interest in "the system" had much to gain from efforts to restore hope. Without hope people might become disaffected, they might even "reject capitalism altogether in favour of some alternative system: perhaps socialism, perhaps fascism, perhaps something fundamentally new" (Baskerville and Willett, 1985: 5). Words like those uttered by Roosevelt might reassure, liberal optimism might take the edge off peoples' fear in the short run, but the task of providing the security and certainty that they craved proved much more difficult.

The 1930s was an era of conscious cultural myth-making. The emphasis was on reassurance and pride. And these served the restoration of hope. Cosy images stood over and against the stark realities of deprivation and disorder. In the past was plenty and happiness. In the future new technology would mean

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progress and comfort. As with today, the extent to which politicians and other public figures peddled optimism, positive thinking and hope is but one indication of the extent of the hopelessness of the period.

As Paul Mattick (1978: 125) notes of the USA, one of the curious first reactions to the deepening depression was the promotion of "various self-help schemes." By and large these were makeshift arrangements. However, in a number of situations such schemes took on a rather different character. Many people promoted land settlement because they were convinced that the future held no promise for urban-industrial expansion. The long-term solution to a surplus working class population was to return them to agricultural pursuits and to a situation where they would be able to provide for themselves rather than be dependent on state support. This was based on the principle put forward by many governments and many middle class individuals that the crisis should be met by encouraging the spirit of self-help and voluntary giving (*ibid*: 126).

With the onset of the depression a movement to promote self-help among the lower classes developed in Newfoundland. The recently-formed Adult Education movement was a key actor in promoting this response to the crisis, but the self-help movement encompassed a large number of middle class organizations and individuals.

One significant event in the promotion of self-help was the publication by the Newfoundland Adult Education Association of the circular *THE RESTORATION OF HOPE* in December 1932 (NAC MG 30, Vol. 13, File 8). Almost certainly written by W.W. Blackall, the question posed was "What shall be done to rehabilitate and strengthen our people?" Recent events had been traumatic:

In many a lonely settlement of our country the harvest has been for the toiler a blank. The promising load of fish has not yielded enough to meet costs, the potato crop has been ruined by blight or other disease; the winter approaches; the larder is poorly stored; the children are in rags; no labour is in sight; the mother is in great distress and the father downcast.

With distress came potential danger:

From those parts of the country of which this picture is true hope is about to vanish, and as hope goes out through the window the spirit of desperation enters at the door. This spirit is a dangerous citizen.

The problem for the likes of Blackall was how to restore hope "in the despondent hearts of our people."

The belief was that much good might be done "through the instrumentality of adult education." Immediately "consolation should be carried to, and courage inflamed in" the despondent. But even this task was beyond the ability of an Adult Education Association only able to maintain a small band of six teachers in the field. The larger task of "helping our people help themselves" could only

be undertaken by organizing the adult population into community clubs. Such clubs would encourage "good-fellowship and co-operation" and they would help develop farming and gardening by means of the study and discussion of Department of Agriculture pamphlets on such topics as the Breeding and Feeding of Pigs, Poultry Raising, and Insects and Pests. But the whole movement would have a broader focus:

Those who are at the back of this movement are convinced that the proposed clubs should have the welfare of their country at heart and that consequently at their gatherings the spirit of patriotism should be fostered by the singing of patriotic airs and where possible by a study of the history of their country. It is thought that the Adult Education Association may be able to supply little books of songs and some historical matter either free or at a very low cost for the use of the clubs. In order that this patriotic phase of the movement may be indicated in the name of the club, the name suggested is the *Newfoundland Community Club*.

How are we to understand this effort to restore hope to the devastated population of Newfoundland? My argument is that it is first necessary to appreciate that these efforts were part of a largely middle and upper class movement to promote self-help among the masses. To understand why this movement developed it is essential to appreciate something of the political economy of Newfoundland in the period.

The promotion of self-help came as part of an overall attack on a system of public relief that was felt to be out of control. It grew out of a belief that charity and state relief were debilitating and degrading. But, more than this, the self-help movement was part of a patriotic movement to save Newfoundland from bankruptcy. The country would be saved even if the poor had to be jettisoned in the process, along with democracy (Overton, 1990).

Overall, the provision of public relief was a measure of last resort, something to be provided by the state when everything else failed and when they were forced to address the needs of the destitute through threat, protest, and riot. Not surprisingly in this context the state attempted to promote self-sufficiency. And clearly the struggle by the state to impose self-sufficiency upon the destitute population was part of a strategy to limit as far as possible expenditure on public relief. At the heart of the struggle was the issue of who was to be responsible for providing for the destitute. Were they to be left to their fate? Or was it the responsibility of the state to see that its citizens did not come to harm?

In the 1930s there was an on-going struggle over the question of support for the destitute. The question of self-sufficiency is at the heart of that struggle. The assumption was always that people could and should provide for themselves. Even the destitute who were lucky enough to obtain public relief were expected to provide an estimated fifty percent of what it was thought was necessary to keep body and soul together.

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The roots of the 1930s self-help movement are deep. They can be found within the many nineteenth century movements designed to rescue the shipwrecks of society. The social roots of the various rescue and rehabilitation movements are rather complex. Most such movements, like those in Newfoundland, had middle class origins. Their aim was to save the downcast and give them hope. The religious origins of such concerns were obvious, but very often, too, they grew out of acute concern about what might happen if something was not done to improve the condition of at least a section of the downtrodden masses. Such concerns were especially acute in periods of economic crisis and difficulty. It is fair to say that one of the main themes running through the thinking of many of those involved in promoting various types of self-help was that such efforts were necessary to protect the interests of those who benefitted from the capitalist status quo. Without some means of diffusing dangerous situations, the masses might even take to revolution and then the game would be over for all those who had a stake in the system.

Middle class self interest led them to promote self-help for the lower orders. This can be brought out through a brief discussion of land settlement.

If surplus population cannot be absorbed in fishing or mining or industry, if emigration is impracticable, the only alternative is settlement on the land (Lodge, 1939: 172).

The hope for the future of the many is greater attention to the land to improve their standard of living by producing at home substitutes for imported supplies such as pork and beef, beans and peas (Gorvin, 1938, Vol. 1: 13).

The appeal of Markland is that it is not a mere experiment in land settlement. It is in conception and in execution something far more important. It is an attempt at complete social reorganization (Lodge, 1937: 66).

These statements are typical of the public pronouncements made by those involved in the land settlements movement in Newfoundland in the 1930s. Schemes for the settlement of people on the land and the promotion of agriculture and gardening as a means of easing poverty, cutting requirements for public relief, and the rehabilitation of destitute people have a long history in Newfoundland, as elsewhere. In Newfoundland a movement to restore hope was considered an urgent necessity by those who feared the effects of the economic and political collapse. One expression of this movement was the promotion of land settlement.

The land settlement movement got under way in early 1932 at the height of the country's economic and political crisis. While ex-servicemen protested pension cuts, while the unemployed marched for work or adequate relief, while people argued that the government would soon have to use its newly acquired tear gas, the respectable middle class of St. John's and elsewhere organized to promote the "soil as our salvation." Again, it was W.W. Blackall, of the

Newfoundland Adult Education Association, who played a key role in this effort. But he was assisted by no less a person than Inspector General Hutchinson, whose Constabulary troops were locked in an on-going tussle with the unemployed. Church leaders also joined the back to the land movement.

Many saw in land settlement a hope for the future, the “silver lining to the cloud” (*Evening Telegram*, January 26, 1932: 9). They even claimed that the depression and hardship that it generated were in some sense a good thing. J.A. Cochrane, president of the Newfoundland Teachers’ Association, argued “adversity is a great teacher” and that “good often comes out of evil” (*Evening Telegram*, March 6, 1932: 6). His position was that, if events forced Newfoundlanders to regain their lost independence, then all the suffering might not be in vain. Economic collapse might force people to “show some initiative” and sharpen their “sense of responsibilities.” Similar views were expressed by many religious leaders. Archbishop Roche, in his 1932 Lenten Pastoral, called for “penance and self-denial” (*Evening Telegram*, February, 8, 1932: 5). He argued that the Depression was God’s punishment for wickedness. Roche thought that a “purifying” of society was necessary and to this end he promoted a Christian revival as the correct response to the crisis. He later repeated this message with the following call to the poor and destitute:

Rigid economy, economy to the point of sacrifice and self-denial, economy that will make relentless war on all waste, extravagance, luxury of every kind (*Evening Telegram*, March 12, 1932: 10).

People were to cut their coats according to their cloth.

The Anglican Bishop of Newfoundland, The Right Rev. William Charles White, also thought that the “present distress” could be turned to “spiritual profit” by the Church (*Evening Telegram*, February 16, 1932: 5). He acknowledged that it might be necessary to feed the unemployed in the short-term, but his main concern was to minimize the “dangers of moral degeneration” and to this end he supported efforts to cultivate the soil.

The back to the land movement was fed by the idea that much of the unemployment and hardship of the Depression resulted from the fact that people were no longer willing to work as their ancestors had worked. Canon Facey was convinced that “the way had been made too easy” and that people had become “soft and ease loving” (*Evening Telegram*, March 7, 1932: 7). The old type of thrifty people had gone and simple living had been abandoned. If the Depression revealed to people the error of their ways, then it would be a good thing. For such people the depression was evidence of a “spiritual malady” and:

Only the application of the teaching of the Gospel to our everyday life will bring about a permanent cure (*ibid.*).

Rector H. G. Peile also supported self-help (*Evening Telegram*, March 14, 1932: 10). It was unreasonable to blame God for the hard times, he argued, adding:

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He has given us the treasures of the soil if we will only cultivate them. He never promised to throw our food at us without labour on our part. As our Wayside pulpit said some weeks ago "God feeds the Birds but He does not throw their food into their nests."

Back to the land, "work or perish," but there would be "no room for loafers, grouches or suckers," according to W.W. Blackall (*Evening Telegram*, March 22, 1932: 5). In April, 1932 a private Land Development Association was inaugurated, with Blackall as its Chairman (*Evening Telegram*, April 1, 1932: 10). An allotment scheme was started in St. John's and groups to promote "outport gardening" were formed.

Eventually, much more elaborate land development plans were put into action with the establishment of the land settlement schemes. The effects of Markland – and we should not miss the significance of the name – on the resettled men were described thus by W.W. Blackall in 1935:

They had either to perish or live as parasites on their fellow-citizens. They were, therefore, men of despair, and despair is a deadly thing. In Markland, under encouragement and guidance, also with some skilled help, they have erected homes, stores, barns and a school house; they have cleared land; they have built roads; they have sown and reaped crops; they have converted large quantities of standing timber to lumber; they have clothed and fed their families and themselves; they have found the joy of work and independence; and above all – far above all – they have found their self-respect and recovered their souls. Hope has driven out despair. St. George has vanquished the dragon (Blackall, 1935).

Markland was promoted as part of an attempt to "build afresh" in Newfoundland (*Ibid.*). It was part of an experiment designed to encourage people to "take up a new life."

In Newfoundland, people lost faith in democracy in the early 1930s. They did so for very good reasons. Why do people accept a particular political system? In part, they do so as long as they believe that what they desire for the future is a possible and likely product of this system. They do so if there is no apparent alternative. People will fight to the death to defend something they value and believe in, but they won't mourn over what they feel to be worthless and harmful to them. The political crisis and the collapse of democracy was a profoundly disturbing event, but probably only for a few people. For the rest, the loss of responsible government probably had little to do with their everyday lives. It might even be viewed as a good thing. The period of storm and stress was over. Britain had stepped in and the future might even be bright. People such as J.R. Smallwood viewed Commission of Government as an opportunity for change. The unemployed of St. John's expected an immediate and substantial improvement in conditions. That they were very soon disappointed was a source of some anxiety on the part of the new government (Overton, 1990).

It was feared that lack of improvement in conditions would lead to sporadic outbreaks of protest or violence or, much more seriously, to the

emergence of well-organized opposition. The anxiety underlying this was based on an awareness of the vulnerability of Commission of Government and the British government to criticism. But Commission of Government was also vulnerable locally to protest and opposition, not least because it lacked the resources to effectively police the country (Overton, 1992).

Under Commission of Government, the new system of magistrates was to serve a very political purpose. They were to be the eyes and ears of government, recording, assessing and reporting. They were to be particularly sensitive to signs of trouble and dissatisfaction. But the magistrates were also to play an active role in the restoration of hope amongst the people of the outports. What this meant in fact was that the magistrates were to direct people's activities and attentions in a particular direction. It was to be their responsibility to promote a self-help solution to the problems of poverty and unemployment. The political dimension of this was most clear. Without hope people might become desperate and dangerous.

In this arrangement there are echoes of the settlement movement. The magistrates were akin to colonial District Officers. The new magistracy consisted of young, dynamic, highly educated individuals. Their task was to be one of social reconstruction:

It is an undoubted fact that the majority of depressed communities in the outports, upon new hope and outlook being placed before them and intelligent leadership being furnished them, are ready to respond in a gratifying manner. (PANL GN 13/1 Box 164 File 121: Draft statement, Department of Justice, January 2, 1936)

The argument here was no different from that advanced earlier by W.W. Blackall. But here we have the state becoming firmly involved in the promotion of local economic development. The overall aim here cannot be understood except as part of an overall strategy to limit expenditures on public relief. The aim was as far as possible to make people responsible for providing their own poor relief. Nor can this strategy be appreciated except as an attempt to lessen the likelihood of further confrontations with the authorities over the issue of public relief, like those characteristic of the period 1931-33.

### SMALLWOOD AND THE EDUCATION OF DESIRE

I was never so close to our toilers as during those years of the dole, and always, so long as I live, I will remember those years of the dole, and always, so long as I live, I will remember those friends of mine, those toilers who were stricken down by beri-beri, those children who felt the pinch of hunger – J.R. Smallwood 1948 (Newfoundland National Convention, 1948: 2722).

Many argue that utopian thinking plays a key role in the education of desire (Wainwright, 1987). Through this the moral assumptions and values of existing society can be interrogated and our social desires challenged. Such a process is but one step in the opening up of paths to aspiration. In this view

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utopian thinking is liberating. Here we are in interesting and difficult terrain. What is the relationship between utopias and social change? Does the utopia act as a catalyst for social change? (Levitas, 1982). Is it the carrot which when dangled before our eyes stimulates us to act?

There is no doubt that utopias have been used in this way. Movements which seek to mobilize popular support for change are usually faced with the problem of educating desire. People have to believe that something is both desirable and attainable before they will struggle to attain it. Very often people will not even admit their desires if they think that it is improbable that they will be fulfilled. Very often these desires are themselves limited by what seems possible or probable. Perhaps the hungry person finds it difficult to think beyond the possibility of a full stomach?

Joseph Smallwood, in seeking to promote Confederation with Canada, had to actively engage in the education of desire. He sought to overcome people's acceptance of things as they were, to persuade them that another world might be possible, and that they could bring this world closer by voting to join Canada:

We have grown up in such an atmosphere of struggle, of adversity, of mean times that we are never surprised, never shocked, when we learn that we have one of the highest rates of tuberculosis in the world; one of the highest maternity-mortality rates in the world; one of the highest rates of berri-berri and rickets in the world. We take these shocking facts for granted. We take for granted our lower standards, our poverty. We are not indignant about them: We save our indignation for those who publish such facts, for with all our complacency, with all our readiness to receive, to take for granted, and even to justify these things amongst ourselves, we are, strange to say, angry and hurt when these shocking facts become known to the outside world (Smallwood, 1967: 35).

People, he argued, were accustomed to Newfoundland's lower standards. So used to things were they that they failed to even "see their inadequacy, their backwardness, their seaminess." It's not that people were unaware of conditions elsewhere, but that they accepted that these conditions somehow belonged elsewhere and were not possible in Newfoundland. Thus, in returning to Newfoundland from abroad, Smallwood argued, "our minds undergo a reverse transformation." Elsewhere things were expected and accepted as normal which it would have seemed "ridiculous or even avaricious to expect at home."

Smallwood would not have been able to make these remarks, nor would they have worked if there had not already been a major shift in attitudes underway in Newfoundland. What he was doing was giving expression to already existing feelings. He was shaping them and giving them political direction. This suggests that without the devastating experience of the 1930s and the relative prosperity of the War, Smallwood would not have had the raw material to work with in his campaigns of the late 1940s. People had experienced poverty and despair and they were not prepared to risk their return.



Smallwood's success in the pro-Confederation campaign has often been put down to his skill as an orator and his use of radio for propaganda purposes. But surely his arguments would not have carried weight unless they spoke to people's hopes and fears. What value the pre-Confederation independence that has been so much lauded in recent times, if that political independence was empty and its price was hunger, disease and desperation?

### CRISIS AND THE WANING OF HOPE

Newfoundlanders who have always lived in hope may be finally facing despair (Walsh, 1993).

The problem here is a difficult one, yet one that must be recognized. It is easy to assert that we are living in a period where many people are relatively hopeless, but to demonstrate this is much more difficult. Even when we are dealing with the problem of whether or not Newfoundland is becoming more violent, a problem where we can appeal to official statistics of one kind or another, we still face insurmountable obstacles when it comes to comparing the amount of violence "then" and "now" (Leyton, O'Grady and Overton, 1992). How much more difficult would it be to measure hope.

I accept that hope is something that cannot be measured with any degree of accuracy. All we can do is look towards certain things which we think provide some guide to people's emotional state. But looking for telltale signs is always risky and it is as well to acknowledge this. Signs always require interpretation. The fact that so many people are now urging us to "think positive" might not indicate a surfeit of hope and optimism, but, in fact, the opposite. And even if there are many public expressions of hopelessness and pessimism it is very difficult to determine the extent to which such feelings are common to all members of society or the expression of the concerns, anxieties and experiences of particular groups. The official statements of politicians and those involved in the image-making industry may not be a good guide to what most people are thinking and feeling. We have recently seen a very graphic example of this with the rejection by the majority of Canadians of the constitutional settlement arrived at by Canada's political leaders.

Nevertheless, we do have some clues. The surveys tell us that Canadians are suffering from a "bad case of the blues" (*Globe and Mail*, October 1, 1992). Disturbingly high levels of distress and depression have been found by the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Canadian Psychiatric Association. Work and money problems are behind this, according to 58 per cent of the respondents to a questionnaire. But stress rises with income, while depression declines. Would you rather be stressed but wealthy or depressed but poor? And the evidence suggests that living in rural areas is just as problematic as living in urban areas, perhaps more so, since income tends to be lower for rural dwellers. Whether you are hopeful perhaps depends on where you sit in the social

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hierarchy. It does depend to some extent on where you live. And counter to the stereotypes, dwellers in Atlantic Canada and the Prairies are the most depressed, British Columbians the least.

In Newfoundland, we are seeing attempts to mobilize such feelings by the opposition political parties. We are told by the leader of the opposition that there is an "emptiness in Newfoundland these days" and by others that there is a "malaise." (*Express*, May 1, 1991). The recent election campaign has produced Progressive Conservative advertisements which have mined this vein. In fact, the current election campaign has seen considerable talk about hope and despair. The recent budget used the hope of economic recovery to try and persuade us that wage and program cuts are needed to deal with the deficit. We don't want to mortgage the future of the provinces' children by spending today, the argument goes, so we have to cut child care facilities, medical care, education, etc. as well as public sector wages. In the current situation, arguments about protecting future generations simply become part of a cruel deception designed to get people to accept policies that will inflict damage on children in the here and now.

But hopelessness is not easy to work with politically. And perhaps Joe Walsh (1993), the *Evening Telegram* newspaper columnist, is correct when he suggests that it is because Newfoundlanders are "facing despair" that the current election campaign is "such a dull, lack-lustre affair."

Talkers may talk about loss of hope and despair. They may talk about the future and its limited possibilities. But for most people this is little more than the elevator music that is the background to their lives. It is when people's everyday experience tells them that something is wrong that the public mood changes. It's when you and your friends and family can't find employment, decent housing, make ends meet or live in the style to which you have become accustomed that you start taking notice of the background music. Talk of conflict and war is again part of the background. We hear it, we feel bad, we forget it until the next news item. But when our lives are disrupted by it, we suddenly take a very great interest in what is going on.

My feeling is that there is a sense of hopelessness in Newfoundland and that this is related to the crisis in the fishery, high unemployment, lack of opportunity, static or falling standards of living, and cuts in government spending in the social sphere. You can, if you look, literally "see" the crisis in the potholed streets of St. John's, the picket lines, the closed restaurants and retail stores, etc. A certain disillusion with politics is also evidence of the despair which is widespread, a despair which is surely reinforced by the failure of politicians and political parties to do anything to protect, let alone improve, the basic conditions of life for the majority of Canadians.

There are, of course, some aspects of the current crisis that are more or less peculiar to the province of Newfoundland and much of Atlantic Canada. The partial collapse of the fishing industry is a case in point. But the crisis in

Newfoundland is part of a much larger crisis. There is a world economic crisis and, related to this, there is a profound political crisis which is manifest in Canada, as elsewhere, in terms of the emergence in recent years of New Right political agendas.

I agree with Christopher Lash and Harvey Kay that what emerged in countries such as the USA, Canada and Britain in the 1970s was a profound sense of crisis. Political ideas were exhausted. Keynesianism was a failure and with it went west the hope of subjecting economic and social life and modern capitalism to rational direction. The post-war consensus disintegrated. Full employment, only ever half-heartedly pursued, was abandoned. People began to talk about the limits of the welfare state and the unworkability of democracy.

What disintegrated in the 1970s was a style of politics, a governing grand narrative and a hope for the future. Labour parties turned on their supporters, Liberal parties threw "Just Society" ideas out the window and joined "red" Tories in converting to monetarism. The trigger for this crisis of confidence was the economic crisis which developed in the early 1970s and matured in the wake of the oil crisis.

The rise to dominance of the New Right is the most important political feature of the landscape of the 1970s. In the US, William Simon and Irving Kristol spoke for the New Right when they identified the main targets for this group of people as being "adversary sentiments" and "utopian expectations" (Stone, 1981; Kaye, 1991). And the New Right through a growing network of organizations and individuals, through the media, etc., became heavily involved in the business of total re-education. The population would be taught the lesson of hard times. Utopianism would be forced to give way to realism. Pragmatism would replace idealism and principle. It was a war of ideas, but not just that. The war was also to be fought against organized labour, against public interest groups, against liberal academics and against what was defined as "socialism" wherever it reared its head.

In the 1970s the effects of economic crisis began to be felt in Newfoundland. This was manifest in terms of a rise in the unemployment rate and in difficulties in some of the major sectors of the economy. Starting in the late 1970s, the federal government's policies towards the country's poor regions also began to shift. The message that Ottawa is no longer as willing to support Canada's poor regions as in the past has been conveyed loud and clear since the late 1970s, but it is under the Mulroney Conservatives that this message has been more and more translated into a new "reality".

It was "A Time for Truth" and by the early 1980s Newfoundland's Brian Peckford had consulted his William Simon. Soon he was putting many of the New Right's ideas into practice, albeit adapted to Newfoundland conditions. But while the New Right's agenda was being worked out in Canada and Newfoundland it was paradoxically the oil crisis which provided Newfoundland

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with a ray of hope for the future. Hibernia had been discovered and, with oil prices high, the future looked reasonably bright for even the expensive Grand Banks oil. Peckford even skilfully used the promise of Hibernia to deflect dissatisfaction and limit opposition to his government's program cuts and public sector wage controls (Overton, 1985a; 1985b). Austerity was temporary, we were told. It would just last until the oil revenues rolled in. Then all would change. The sun would shine and have-not would be have-not no more. In fact, the quest for provincial government control of offshore resources led Brian Peckford to mount a large campaign to persuade his fellow Newfoundlanders to support the Mulroney Conservatives in the election of 1984. These Conservatives, under Mulroney, formed the government which oversaw far-reaching changes in the relationship between the federal and provincial governments.

And here it should be pointed out that a key role in the lowering of provincial expectations has been played throughout this period by John Crosbie. He has performed stalwart, if not always successful, service in the quest to downwardly adjust the expectations of Newfoundlanders. As noted above, by the late 1970s the existence of utopian expectations linked with adversary sentiments were everywhere being identified as a target in the "war of ideas" by writers of the New Right (Stone, 1981). The class struggle from above was an attempt to curb the former and undermine the power of the latter (Kaye, 1991). John Crosbie, claimed as the 1980s "hero of the Tory Right" by the *Financial Post's* David Frum (1993), carried on his campaign to lower the expectations of Atlantic Canadians by arguing that we should no longer compare ourselves with Ontario and the richer parts of Canada. We should accept that the game of catch-up which inspired much provincial politics in the 50s, 60s and 70s is now over. The poor provinces will increasingly have to fend for themselves. The desire for equality is seen by the Right as an obstacle to capital accumulation. Justice is no longer affordable. So Newfoundlanders should no longer compare themselves with Ontario and feel hard done by. They should look to the South and East, to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and begin to think about just how well off they are when compared to most citizens of those countries (Overton, 1991). It is not surprising that with leading ministers expressing such sentiments, the very notion of Canada is weakened. If, even at the level of rhetoric, a country is not about helping all its citizens to achieve the good life, if it is not about equality of treatment, if it is not about a vision which means something in terms of the daily lives of people and life chances, then what does it mean?

Another attempt to downwardly adjust expectations was made by the Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment established by Brian Peckford in 1985. The head of the Royal Commission Doug House's idea that the limits of the welfare state had been reached found its way into the Commission's final report as did the idea that people in Newfoundland should

accept that full employment in anything but a Newfoundland sense is impossible to attain. House continues to preach this doctrine in his capacity as head of the Economic Recovery Commission. If you want jobs, create them yourself. Be more self-sufficient. Don't depend on government to solve your problems. These are the messages of the ideologues of economic recovery. And, of course, think positive. The glass is half full, although presumably this image will have to be adjusted in the near future. Soon we will be told to think of our glass as one-quarter full rather than three-quarters empty.

It is not particularly surprising that a Conservative government in Ottawa has followed a policy of abandoning any pretence at regional equality of treatment or condition. The talk these days is all of aiding winners, not losers. Justice and equality are more and more seen as obstacles to adjustment, competitiveness and economic recovery. What is rather surprising is that a Conservative federal government has been relatively successful at imposing its right wing agenda on provincial governments whether they be Conservative, Liberal or New Democrat. What is even more surprising is that provincial governments were seemingly unwilling to use the leverage they had over the constitutional issue to prevent the Mulroney government from following policies which negatively affect the interests of the provinces. The Liberal government of Clyde Wells in Newfoundland, for example, presents the province's financial problems as simply the result of the economic crisis rather than the outcome of the federal government policies which have led to the high interest rates that are to a large extent responsible for the deficit. The Liberals would rather blame the deficit on the unreasonable demands of public sector workers and other citizens than deal with the federal government's cuts in funding to the provinces which are a major cause of Newfoundland's financial problems. Granted, it may be reasonable to assume that the federal government's decision to proceed with Hibernia was a payoff for Clyde Wells' change in position on the constitution to one of support for Mulroney, but the question of why Wells was willing to settle for something that will be of little benefit to the vast majority of Newfoundlanders is an important one. Hibernia will be great for a small number of businesses and the few people who will get jobs. It's an even better deal for the oil companies who get to reap benefits without risks. But for everyone else, in Newfoundland and elsewhere, it will not only fail to provide benefits; it will cost a great deal. If Peter Foster (1991: 33), writing in the publication *Canadian Business*, is believed, then "Canadian taxpayers are shelling out \$100,000 per man-year for each temporary job building production facilities" for Hibernia.

The recognition that the revenues flowing to the provincial government from Hibernia will be almost nonexistent because they will be offset by Ottawa's cuts in equalization payments to Newfoundland, is not seen as a problem by Brian Peckford. He may have built his political career on the promise of Hibernian benefits, but his great expectations have shrunk and now he seems

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happy that the project will simply “help us get over the equalization syndrome” (Foster, 1991: 33). A better system of transfer payments would have been of much greater value in protecting the interests of the majority of the province’s population and stemming the rising tides of unemployment and poverty. But to argue for this would have gone against the prevailing ideology of the Liberals. For them, as for the Peckford Progressive Conservatives, dependency is bad and to be avoided at all costs, even at the cost of increasing poverty and misery for those who are to be denied support. And in a peculiar twist of logic, in spite of its multi-billion dollar handout to business, Hibernia can be embraced as a monument to free enterprise and the market, independence and effort while transfer payments cannot.

Peckford was the ideal leader to restore the fortunes of the Conservatives in Newfoundland. But it was a new brand of conservatism, not one wedded to the welfare state and to Keynesian policies. Peckford’s main contribution was the selling of austerity to the population, ushering it in under the guise of promoting a new age of responsibility and independence. But Peckford did not work alone nor has his work been abandoned. The Liberal government of Clyde Wells is now following policies which differ little from those followed by the Progressive Conservatives except that they are harsher and they come at a time when conditions in the province have worsened since the recession of the early 1980s. And the Liberal government, elected with strong support from the province’s public sector labour unions, has proved the ideal vehicle for mounting a harsh attack on the public sector and those very people who worked to get it elected.

What Peckford, Crosbie, Wells and others are doing is taking the frontline in the battle to teach Newfoundland’s population the lesson of hard times. What is happening is a campaign to persuade us that it is natural, inevitable and desirable that we curb our rapacious appetites for wage increases, rising standards of living, equality with the rest of Canada, access to government services, etc. The overarching message coming from politicians and from the economic recovery brigade is that the limits of the welfare state have been not just reached but passed. In future we will have to do with less. Less employment, fewer services, less education, in fact less of everything except positive thinking. Thus, while university positions are cut and student fees increased, we are urged by people such as University President Art May to see the glass as half full not half empty. This is a “time for positive thinking” we are told even if this requires much hard work in the exercise of our imaginations (May, 1992).

In the 1990s, as a result of the Mulroney government’s deficit cutting agenda, we face what conservative economist Thomas Courchene (1991: 57) describes as, “the most thoroughgoing ‘decentralization’ of the postwar period.” He outlines the effects of this on social policy:

There are many ways in which this decentralization may manifest itself. First, if the provinces maintain existing programs in the face of the cuts, this will then imply

an increase in provincial taxation relative to federal taxation, which is one measure of decentralization. Alternatively, the provinces may decide to “pass on” the cuts in terms of program paring or program redesign, which is another measure of decentralization, given that the end result could be the replacement of “national standards” by “provincial standards” (*Ibid.*).

It is now clear that part of the underlying motivation of the Conservative’s recent constitutional agenda was to further this economic and political agenda.

Hope is most dangerous when it is frustrated or disappointed. It is disappointment which leads to pessimism, the disappointment of those denied what they consider to be their due and their right. What do we have a right to expect? The political crisis of the 1970s and the collapse of the liberal consensus began to negatively affect Newfoundland in the mid-to-late 1970s. Changes in regional policy and in transfer payments, cuts in Unemployment Insurance, etc. were ominous. However, it was the prospect of a successful development of the Hibernia oil field that in a sense provided the gloss for what was really happening. All attention was focused on this issue, on the battle with “the Feds” to gain control. Meanwhile the basis for the well-being of many Newfoundlanders was being eroded, by and large without protest. Ottawa’s cuts were passed on to the long suffering population of the province. Belts were tightened. And free collective bargaining was abandoned, while we were assured that this was just a temporary measure until the oil revenues started to flood into the treasury. Then all would be changed. Women would be granted equality of treatment. There would be hockey rinks galore. Wage increases for everyone. And the have-not province would be have-not no more.

Rosy pictures of a Hiberian future of wealth appeared. Optimistic pictures of oil and fish in harmony. The romance of Hibernia captured the hearts and the money of not a few starting in the late 1970s. The lame would walk. The sick would recover. And no-one is more susceptible to the lure of the hope-mongers than those who face a bleak future. They long for a miracle, for light at the end of the tunnel, for a path to salvation.

Read the headlines that continue to echo down the years. Nor do what were fresh-baked items in the late 1970s and early 1980s appear to become stale with the passing of the years. At least James Dingwall’s 1980 article title “Newfoundland: The Next Alberta?” was a question (Dingwall, 1980). Ten years later the Wells government’s Mines and Energy Minister, Rex Gibbons was repeating the phrase, but without the question mark. The *Evening Telegram* (December 12, 1990) headline reads “Hibernia to make Newfoundland like Alberta of the ‘50s: Gibbons.” This is a strange statement to make these days. Not even Alberta in the 1990s is like the Alberta of the 1950s! But nothing will be allowed to burst Gibbons, the booster’s, balloon:

Let the nay-sayers be silent – if that’s not too much to hope for – as we move this project forward to a successful completion and first oil in 1997 (*Evening Telegram*, January 29, 1993).

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It is clear from the headlines that politicians, business types and headline writers are as hopeful and chirpy as ever. But others are concerned about the underlying current of despair.

As we have seen from the 1930s, many feared the loss of hope which the economic crisis brought. The fear was that as hope flew out the window, something sinister and dangerous would creep in through the door. People might become desperate. They might fight.

Recently, remarkably similar ideas have been expressed by philosopher F.L. Jackson (*Evening Telegram*, November 18, 1990). In response to the findings of a poll sponsored by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the *Globe and Mail* which revealed the extent of Canadians' pessimism about the country's future, Jackson accused the media of "aiding and abetting these negative attitudes." He went on to argue thus:

Reinforcing public cynicism and uncertainty is a dangerous game. Intense political frustration inclines people to shut their minds, flee from the challenges of the present into reactionary extremes or political quick fixes. In such a mood people too easily forsake their institutions and principles and look around for a "fuhrer" to lead them into some fake promised land.

Jackson's argument is that "reactionary sentiment" is on the rise. As evidence of this he cites the growing power of the Reform Party and the election of a "socialist" government in Ontario. The antidote is to expunge negativity. And presumably it is quite legitimate to use a little fake promise in the service of this aim.

What Jackson seems unable to recognize is that if people are pessimistic and cynical about government, if there is a profound sense of "political aimlessness," then this might have a basis in people's everyday experiences. If people show willingness to forsake "their institutions and principles" maybe this is not a bad thing. Maybe those institutions have proved to be inadequate. Maybe those principles are outmoded. If people have ceased to believe, perhaps this is not irrational. Perhaps it is not because the media has been swamping us with negativity. Are people not pessimistic and cynical because the political system has ceased to work and people have lost faith in their politicians? Jackson seems unable to grasp the fact that a rejection of old ways of doing things or at least a sense that they are inadequate may very well be the precondition for action to change things for the better.

However, Jackson is also guilty of misunderstanding the relationship between loss of hope and action, as the discussion of the holocaust, and my writing on the 1930s (Overton, 1992), shows. Loss of hope and depression were most likely to lead to inaction and acceptance. Poverty does not spur the poor on to resist or fight. More likely both the ability of the body and soul to fight are undermined. Life shrinks. People withdraw. The future contracts to the next crust of bread. In the 1930s it was those who were inspired by political beliefs who



resisted. For them the actions of the state were intolerable. It was they who set out to resist and change. It was they who formed a movement. They marched and protested.

### THE ECONOMIC RECOVERY BUSINESS: THE MERCHANTS OF HOPE

Fear and apathy breed in these shadows (Williams, 1989: 281).

On CBC's Morning Show on February 24, 1989 John Snow told us about the recently formed Positive Thinkers Club. His was a personal testimony. In his past there had been times when he couldn't even get out of bed in the morning. Now all that has changed. Norman Vincent Peal got him started. It worked for him and now he is out there working to help others. He is selling his services. There are seminars and videos. There is a newsletter. Newfoundland is "sitting here with 4th and 5th generation welfare recipients" while there are Hibernian opportunities out there. Throw off the "stamps mentality." Forget UI, he urges. "Get out there and get it." Welcome to the world of "challenges."

Promoting optimism has become a light industry in recent years. Believing that "perception is a tool to ward off recession," Newfoundland's "corporate optimists" are everywhere insisting on the importance of "looking on the bright side." The logic of their argument is intriguing – "There's not a reason in the world to be optimistic," however, we must "look on the bright side" because "perception is reality." But the words of the entrepreneurs hint at difficulties, secret battles to be fought daily against dark forces. For example, it's remarkable how many business types seemed to have a particular problem with overcoming the lure of their beds in the morning – they have to fool themselves into getting up:

In this province, you couldn't get out of bed in the morning if you weren't positive-thinking (Doyle Roberts of Robinson-Blackmore Ltd., *Sunday Express*, December 17, 1989).

If you sat down and said, "Oh, my God..." I mean, that's like a fellow giving up and staying in bed in the morning... (Harold Duffett, Standard Manufacturing, *Sunday Express*, December 17, 1989).

"We can recover if we and others believe we can," according to Doug House of the Economic Recovery Commission (*Evening Telegram*, September 25, 1990). "We are what we believe," in the words of business activist Dave Rudofsky (*Evening Telegram*, September 13, 1989).

The ideology of economic recovery is the message of the positive thinkers club writ large. The patient will recover if only he/she is able to get out of bed. The biggest challenge for Dr. Doug and other promoters of economic recovery is to get Newfoundland out of bed. Not surprisingly, then, boosterism is a very important part of the work of the Economic Recovery Commission formed by the Liberal government of Clyde Wells in mid-1989.

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For the boosters, then, “negativity” in any shape or form has to be attacked once it rears its ugly head. Like Doug House, they think it is catching. If some are infected the greatest fear is that they will pass it on to others. Any sign of negativity brings forth swift action from the Economic Recovery medical team. Nor is the St. John’s Board of Trade left behind in the quest to counter negativity, judging by the speed with which it has taken on even the mighty *Time* magazine for publishing a less than boosterish article about Newfoundland’s fishing crisis (Fedarko, 1993).

In the world of the booster there is no place for “critical thinking.” In the end it’s all down to “belief.” And that is why they are so uncomfortable with liberal education. And they are uneasy with newspapers which, as a matter of course, seek out anything unsavoury, tragic, negative and shocking to be presented as “news.” Where are all the nice stories about how much we love and help one another?

The words “confidence” and “optimism” slip easily from the mouths of those who are in the business of selling hope for the future to those who are mired in the depression of the early 1990s:

Too many Newfoundlanders today are sceptical, negative, cynical or pessimistic about the future, for themselves and their society (Government of Newfoundland, 1986: 33).

If despair is the disease, then a good dose of the power of positive thinking is the medicine that will put the patient back on its feet again:

In order to succeed, a nation (or a province) needs to have confidence in itself and to approach the future with optimism. But to possess confidence and optimism, one needs pride of place and people. To achieve this attribute, the ERC will undertake four initiatives during the next year that will help create a positive business climate: demonstrate that Newfoundland and Labrador is a good place to do business; develop more positive attitudes about our province, its people and its products; promote a more accurate picture of the province and its capabilities; and develop positive attitudes about entrepreneurs and their role in our economy. (Economic Recovery Commission, Report, 1990/91: 5).

The restoration of hope has emerged as one of the key tasks of Doug House of the Economic Recovery Commission. Most of his public appearances are little more than a rather crass boosterism. The dominant line that emerges in these appearances, in his writings, and in the publications of the ERC is that one of the main barriers obstructing the work of those trying to solve the economic problems facing Newfoundland is the attitude of the population (Overton, 1993). House (*Northern Pen*, December 5, 1990) has identified what he describes as “the Newfoundland disease” from its six symptoms:

- a lack of confidence in our own abilities
- too much negative thinking
- resentment of the efforts of others

- failure to co-operate to meet our goals
- an overdependence on government
- a tendency to blame others for our problems

A great deal of attention is now being given to the “attitude problem” of Newfoundlanders by those involved in the economic recovery business.

House’s most recent pep-talk was given at a conference with the title *The Newfoundland Groundfish Fisheries: Defining the Reality* organized in March 1993 by Memorial’s president Art May. The emphasis at the conference of “professionals” was to be on “facts rather than rhetoric.” The remarkable thing about House’s presentation is how little it contained in the way of facts or even argument. But what the speech did contain was the following statement:

While being realistic, we also need to be *positive* and *optimistic* about the future. Attitudes tend to be self-fulfilling in their consequences. If we go about in a cloud of doom and gloom, we can no doubt bring doom and gloom down upon ourselves, and we will have no one to blame but ourselves (House, 1993: 2).

House *believes* that Newfoundland is on “the threshold of a major transformation, a transformation from being a resource-dependent to being a diversified, balanced economy.” It is on this belief that his *realism* rests. There is no evidence provided that such a transformation is immanent or actually under way. All evidence that might lead to his *belief* being questioned or countered is ignored. There is little or no discussion of what is actually happening in Newfoundland or of the problems faced by the province’s population. All we are offered is the statement:

I believe that the seeds of change have already been sown, and that the transformation we need *will* take place.

What was presented as a plan or blueprint for development in the 1986 Royal Commission report that House chaired has become the basis on which he can assure us all that things will be well. But how can this be? Since the report was written in 1986 the fishing industry has collapsed. None of the forecasts for dealing with Newfoundland’s unemployment problems have come vaguely near being met. The situation of the province deteriorates daily, while for every new business that manages to stagger off the ground with lashings of taxpayers’ money there is at least one other business filing for bankruptcy. Yet, we are assured that all the conditions for recovery are in place.

How are we to deal with this chirpy optimism? We can take it seriously in the sense that we can point out that it does not seem to work. We can argue that there is absolutely no evidence that positive thinking has any power at all when it comes to economic affairs. If will-power and hope and positive thinking had any power at all, then surely Newfoundland would not be in the state that it is today. The history of Newfoundland is nothing if not full of new visions and blueprints. “New Newfoundlands” have been proclaimed many times in the last

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hundred years or so. And even the last fifteen years have seen a bumper crop of announcements that the old days of poverty, dependence and difficulty are over. Such hopes were hitched to Hibernia by Brian Peckford in the 1970s. They were hitched to fishing following the implementation of Canada's 200 mile limit in 1977. Following this we were informed by politicians that the fishing industry was "the real hope for our Province's economic future" (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.: 1). Walter Carter, then Progressive Conservative Minister of Fisheries and now Minister of Fisheries in the Liberal government of Clyde Wells, informed us that "Fish is the Future" (*Ibid.*). But, in spite of assurances that the future would be "ours at last," we are now faced with chaos and collapse. So much for the power of positive thinking. Is it possible that hard economic times create a fertile climate in which these people can operate? In good times we don't have to make do with hope. For many, improvement is tangible and obvious.

But what needs to be understood is the way in which the powers that be seek to get people to subscribe to a vision of the future and then use this to undermine the well-being of many of the province's citizens. And it is important to recognize that in the economic recovery movement we have a movement, like the self-help movement of the 1930s, which is a clear expression of class interests. Economic recovery, when it comes down to it, is attempting to create a climate favourable to business. This is to be achieved, according to the province's Strategic Economic Plan, by tax concessions for business, the restructuring of income support for the unemployed to provide a system of wage subsidies to the private sector and a greater incentive for the unemployed to seek work, privatization, and even the establishment of a Free Trade Zone. No stone will be left unturned in the quest to create an "enterprise culture" in the province. And to provide the funds for concessions to business, programs and public sector wages and benefits will be cut and to this end free collective bargaining has been essentially outlawed. Overall, the Liberal government's political program turns out to be little different from that pursued by Thatcher, Mulroney and the Reagan/Bush Republicans. In fact, in some respects the Liberal government, like the New Democratic Party in Ontario, may be much more dangerous than the Conservatives. Like the NDP, it was elected with strong public sector union support and, at least initially, these unions turned out to be totally unprepared to resist the savage attack launched by those elected as their protectors.

In the name of economic recovery, hardness, selfishness and even cruelty are sanctioned. As concessions are given to business and Ministers spend taxpayers' dollars to buy top of the line briefcases, Clyde Wells unleashes the welfare police on the poor. The road to recovery is a hard and lonely one. It is one where the Samurai of the Economic Recovery Commission do battle with the Newfoundland disease in an effort to foster an enterprise culture. It's a devil take the hindmost, social Darwinist road that has no place for nay-sayers.

negative thinkers and losers – where negative thinkers are defined as anyone who dares to utter a “but wait a minute” statement or who points to the plight of the poor. Modelled on the doctor-patient relationship, Clyde Wells and Doug House are the ones who see, diagnose, and administer the cure to us, the patients.

The chirpy vision of a Newfoundland building on its strengths and recovered from its diseased state, with the electronic outport humming its way to prosperity, is the utopia of those selling economic recovery. This vision is the carrot that will give us the will to get out of bed and make something of ourselves. And just in case the carrot is not attractive enough there is a stick. The deficit is the stick that is currently being used to beat public sector workers and all those who depend on government services, whether they be hospital services, education or income support. And what competition is there for the happy jingles of the economic recovery brigade? How do we reply to the “chirpy superficialities” of the Doug Houses of this world?

For all its problems and limitations the Keynesianism of the post war period did offer a future. The belief was that it might be possible to produce a new reformed regulated capitalism where the problems of poverty, inequality, unemployment, etc. were, if not eliminated, then at least reduced and managed. This has proved not to be possible. Perhaps at the peak of the worst depression since the 1930s it is time to begin to explore alternative futures. What has been lost is a vision of the future, a vision of a sharing and caring. A vision of a society in the true sense of the word. An equal, just society. A democratic society. We have to find a way to begin again to talk about these things as possibilities and necessities.

The hard times of recent years in Newfoundland have produced a bumper crop of hope merchants as did the 1930s. The Positive Thinkers are busy purveying their particular brand of hope and these sentiments have easily found their way into the writings of the members of Newfoundland’s ironically named Economic Recovery Commission. They are working hard at the problem of “building confidence” and optimism in the firm belief that these are needed for the patient, who is sick to the death, to pull through. They are in the business of selling a vision of the future to a demoralised and desperate people. And perhaps it is not surprising that some are willing to buy the wares that are being offered in a market where the shelves are all but bare of other visions of the future.

## THE RESTORATION OF HOPE

Men die in hope, live in hope, but hope brings them nothing – wishing ain’t ketching any fishes. It’s organized economic action that brings the roof over our heads, puts the Ostermoor in our bunks, and escorts the good old custard pie back to its place of honour, at the head of the table – T-Bone Slim, 1922 (Slim, 1992: 46).

If not now, when? If not here, where? (John Berger, 1991: 402).

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I pondered...how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name (William Morris, 1903: 36).

We live in an economic system which needs and feeds our hopes, which educates and develops our desires in certain directions. But that same economic system denies the fulfilment of these desires for many people. And during its periodic crises it dashes our hopes. Then we are told, as we are now being told by the Wells government, that we have "false expectations." We are informed by the Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment that the limits of the welfare state have been reached and that it is unreasonable to expect full employment in anything except "a Newfoundland sense."

What I have explored here is the idea that attempts to get men to cut their clothes according to the cloth in both depressions have marched under a banner which has read "The Restoration of Hope". Very often the purveyors of hope are precisely those who would force people to make downward adjustments in both expectations and patterns of consumption. It is they who offer people half a job when what they want is full employment. It is they who talk about the need for optimism, confidence and hope while people experience destitution and hopelessness. It is they who call for faith in the future at the same time as they preach realism and the necessity of imposing limits on people's desires and needs. It is they who urge the cripple to hope for the best as they kick away his crutch.

Is the statement that "we must live in hopes" an expression of resignation and acceptance? Or can it be something else? Does it imply that perhaps we should live our lives through our hopes or that we must live in hope because our expectations are not and will not be met in the present or immediate future?

To enquire into the politics of hope is to look at who the purveyors of hope are. It is to look at what they are selling and why they are selling it. This is essential to the process of assessing whether or not what we are having thrust down our throats will provide us with succour. The lesson of this paper is one of warning. When *they* start talking about the restoration of hope, the need for optimism and the power of positive thinking, then it's time to *Watch Out!*

As Peeler (1987: 276-8) observes, "Hope is not a method." We must act. We must have a coherent plan, a method for dealing with the problems we now face. Merely wishing to avoid such problems as unemployment is not sufficient. Hope will not help us here. Nor will optimism and confidence, in spite of all the statements beamed at us by the purveyors of Economic Recovery. Hope and anger must be channelled towards some end. This means that we not only have to set goals, but we must work out a set of instructions on "how to get there from here."

Surely a precondition for hope is our ability to say “no” to deprivation, declining living standards and chaos. To say no to the fraudulent vision of economic recovery we are having forced upon us. But saying no to this depends on our having examined and evaluated its program. It depends on us arriving at the conclusion that a) it won’t work or b) it is a vision of the future that we won’t subscribe to because it denies all that we value and desire. We have to be wary of false prophets. There is no magic in technology. The information revolution will not end inequality. The poor will not be plugged in. As things presently stand, the have-nots will only become haves because others become have-nots. The sun will not shine unless we make it shine.

What gives us the will to fight? We fight because we know and have known fear and we want to end it. Because we have experienced injustice, poverty, and discrimination and there must be an end to it. Because we have seen our parents, relatives, friends, lovers cast aside and degraded and we want to build a world where this cannot happen. The will to fight is based, then, on our experiences and on a vision of the possibility of a better life.

If, as Skillen (1977: 172) suggests, “the struggle for liberation is itself liberating” then it is reasonable to see such a struggle as being essential for the restoration of hope. What could be more hopeful than the emergence of a mutually supporting network of people committed to and struggling for a world of equality, justice and real democracy? And it goes without saying that this would be a movement against poverty and discrimination. It would be a movement dedicated to making the economic system serve our needs and requirements, rather than, as now, standing between the needs of people and their fulfilment. Let’s, for the sake of argument, call it a socialist movement.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Paper presented in Edinburgh at: “We Must Live in Hopes: A Symposium on Literary and Political Discourse in Atlantic Canada, 7-9 May, 1993.”

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