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Volume 18, numéro 2, fall 2002

The New Early Modern Newfoundland: Part One

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds18_2rv03

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Melnyk, G. (2002). Compte rendu de [A Response to "Our Place in Canada"]. *Newfoundland Studies*, 18(2), 299–303.

A Response to “Our Place in Canada”

GEORGE MELNYK

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE of Alberta, Newfoundland and Labrador is an unknown land, mysterious in its otherness. Newfoundland is far away both geographically and psychologically, neither a threat nor an ally. The two provinces share an imperial colonial history that goes back centuries and a twentieth-century status as provinces of Canada. Since Alberta has become a destination for Newfoundlanders in search of work, a recent link has been made between both provinces, a link created by the flesh and blood of migrating workers and even more recently, an economic connection with off-shore oil and gas exploration and development.¹

When I was asked to comment on the report of the Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada, I agreed, although I have never been to Newfoundland and Labrador and am not an expert on the region. I agreed because of my own regional aspirations for Western Canada, my interest in and attraction to the predicaments of hinterlands of nation-states, and my growing fascination with island cultures and what they contribute to diversifying human ecology in an age of techno-globalization. It would be wise for me to be frank and upfront about my political bias right at the start. Had I been a Newfoundlander at the time of the referendums on entering Confederation, I would have voted for independence. Even today I support independence, because I remain convinced that independence would be in the best interests of Newfoundland and Canada. This view is rooted in my fundamental belief that Canada is a nation-state with an untenable political trajectory rooted in British imperialism, that has left it with a legacy of contradictory and divisive forces that require vast amounts of energy to contain. The main force for division is Québec, but Western alienation is also a factor, as are recurring drives for Maritime union. When Newfoundland and Labrador joined Confederation, they joined a nineteenth-century political structure that viewed Canada as an evolving east-west entity whose ties continued (via Newfoundland) straight across the Atlantic to the United Kingdom. The twenty-first century is a significantly different place than the nineteenth century, with the reality of the British Empire replaced by the new American empire and its global economic, political and military hegemony as the decisive factor.

As an outsider my judgment and viewpoint may be questioned, derided and discounted by insiders, who might say, “What does he know about us? Who does he think he is? Let him walk in our shoes before he opens his mouth.” But it would

seem that the editors of *Newfoundland Studies*, as well as others in Canada, have concluded that a report on the status and direction of Newfoundland in Confederation is not just for Newfoundlanders, but an issue for other parts of Canada as well. The attitude that outsiders have, and their reaction to the Commission's report, is a factor in how the vision of the report will play out with those outside Newfoundland, and how accepting they are of its main tenets.

I view islands as places of innovative governance linked to entrepreneurial economies of import and export which, because of their size, need to be skilled in maneuvering the political and economic swells created by larger entities. The sea is a welcoming isolator, where the chains of conformity that hold nation-states in their grasp can be challenged. But when I read the summary of the report I was struck by its mainstream orientation, its inherently provincial parameters. The issue was not Confederation as such, but how Confederation might be of more benefit to Newfoundland and Labrador. The report seemed to want to rock the boat, but only enough to get more. Its call to end the dependency of the last half-century is meant to raise "hope for its residents." Hope and promise are the basic currency of political discourse between rulers and the ruled.

The report claims that Canada is not meeting the expectations of the population. True enough, but what are the sources of such expectations? How are they formed and by whom? How do they evolve? The report states that residents feel "ignored, misunderstood and unappreciated" by Canada in the person of the federal government. Again, this may be true, but don't many people everywhere in the world feel the same way about themselves in their jobs, in their personal relationships and so forth? The use of individual psychological terms is a neat rhetorical trick, a transference game that personalizes collective disenchantment. Of course Newfoundland is ignored, misunderstood and unappreciated by Ottawa. So is Alberta, if you want to think of Alberta and its three million people as a single mind, which is what political rhetoric does. How could it be otherwise for Newfoundland and Alberta in a nation-state that is built on the centrality of Ontario and Québec?

For centuries, Newfoundland was an outpost of the British Empire, a colony with a distinct culture on the fringes of European civilization. Unlike Québec, which nurtured centuries of distinct nationality through language, civil law and religion, Newfoundland retained colonial ties and a colonial identity. When it transferred its allegiance to Confederation, its colonial status continued, a status based on economic need, historical precedent, and a mentality of traditionalism and isolation. Royal commission reports do not terminate such legacies, though they can lay the groundwork for change.

A comparable example of island history within the British Empire is offered by Ireland. Here is a place once subjugated by an imperial power, economically exploited through centuries of grinding agrarian feudalism, which in the twentieth century rebelled, gained its independence, and many decades later, through the miracle of EU investment, became a transformed society. Newfoundland may secretly

dream of being another Ireland, or if not Ireland, maybe another Alberta, living off the fat of off-shore oil, transforming itself like Scotland did through North Sea oil.² These are legitimate and popular aspirations that look to the promise of a new economy rising out of the fishless sea. That promise does not come through in the report. Instead the report lists the barriers and obstacles that stand in the way of prosperity. It continues the historic dialogue with Ottawa.

The report is written in the language of an east-west entity that belongs to a Canada whose horizontal continuum has been increasingly shattered since the Free Trade Agreement of the late 1980s. A new, more powerful north-south continuum has made continentalism a greater force for economic development than the pronouncements of the national government and east-west provincial gatherings. It is the north-south linkages that define Canada today. These include the oil and gas exports of Alberta, the hydro exports of Québec and the auto exports of Ontario, as well as the lumber of British Columbia and the grains and cattle of the agrarian West. How Newfoundland fits into these linkages is the crucial issue, the issue that defines whether or not Newfoundland will garner the equality and success the report euphemistically terms "the future prosperity of this province."³

Because of the history of paternalistic relationships and the nature of the division of powers in the British North America Act, Newfoundland is asking for a "new partnership" between its provincial government and Ottawa. This concept of partnership is based on giving priority to the east-west relationship, rather than developing a north-south relationship as the most powerful entities in Confederation have done in the past two decades. Requesting that "the provincial government work hand in hand with the federal government" to evolve a new relationship seems to be going back in time, a retrograde concept rather than a progressive one.⁴ If the Commission had called on the provincial government to work "hand in hand" with the American government then something new could be brewing.

The report's slogan, "No to Separation! No to Status Quo!," is a formula for continuing the fundamental relationship entered into in 1949. It legitimizes both government entities. The call for reshaping the federation, which the report does, will always retain both players in their relative power relations. Québec's demand to be recognized as a "distinct society" and its arguments for "sovereignty-association" failed because of a Canada-wide provincialism in which special status is unacceptable to the other provinces. The Commission's call for a Triple-E Senate, a concept developed in the West, is again a throw-back to an idea that Ontario and Québec, the economic and political rulers of Canada, have rejected. The western party (Reform/Alliance/Conservative) that inaugurated the idea has even dropped it in its hunger for Ontario votes. If there is no call for independence, the status quo and its underpinnings of federal-provincial relations remains the order of the day.

The "[e]quality, openness, dialogue, respect and trust" that the Commission makes much of in its call for renewal in federalism are feel-good mantras that again

appeal to individual psychological traits, that attempt to humanize the economic and political self-interests that move political entities and the elites that benefit from these moves. Where is Newfoundland's power to make fundamental change? In the case of Alberta, its power came from a new economy, a new business class that controlled a commodity the United States needed desperately.

The contradictions of the report about Newfoundland making its own way versus its need for outside assistance are most evident in the section on fiscal issues. The province has a large debt. Offshore oil revenues will lower equalization payments and thereby end up being substantially less beneficial, according to the report. So the Commission is calling for *more* money in equalization payments from Ottawa, as well as an increase in the Canada Health and Social Transfer. This is hardly the road to fiscal independence. Amending the Atlantic Accord to make Newfoundland "the principal beneficiary" of offshore oil revenues is a laudable goal, but one must ask, why didn't this happen in the first place? Could it be that there is an inherent anti-Newfoundland bias in constitutional and political matters? Likewise, issues around the Churchill Falls development in Labrador, joint management of the fishery, and so on, are all phrased in such a way as to demand more and more from the federal government. The report leaves the responsibility of making "the case for renewing the province's place in Canada to the provincial government."⁵ The case is all about asking for more. Is this not a continuation of the same old government with a begging bowl image that renewal is to end?

When the western provinces finally wrestled control over their natural resources from Ottawa in 1931, they laid the foundation for economic prosperity. Because of a nineteenth-century constitution that makes the oceans a federal responsibility, Newfoundland has suffered because of absentee control of its once-vital resource. The wild fishery, like all wild fisheries around the world, is not a formula for future growth. Like whaling, it will disappear as more and more species are exterminated by industrial fishing techniques. So what is the future for Newfoundland? As painted by the Commission, it is a future where the federal government must devolve powers and hand out more cash and thereby "renew" Newfoundland's place in Confederation. Unfortunately, the steps to this renewal are based on old demands. The report of the Commission has not changed the basic paradigm of Confederation, and how it affects the people of the province. The five major complaints/issues listed by the Summary Report (p. 36) are all based on the requirement that the federal government accommodate the demands of the province.

What if Newfoundland were to move toward independence? What would be the costs? What would be the benefits? A royal commission on such a topic would not be appropriate, considering the niceties of constitutional legality and oaths of allegiance. But this is precisely the kind of report that needs to be done. If the people of Newfoundland and Labrador could look at more radical options than those presented by the Commission, a real, rather than a managed, debate would ensue.

However, the politicians who commissioned this report want to look like they are doing something as long as it is not radical or fundamental.

Notes

¹The Summary Report of *Our Place in Canada* speaks of the “expatriates in Fort McMurray and Toronto,” identifying two major destinations for migrating Newfoundlanders (p. 7).

²The Summary Report states that “the Commission is not suggesting that Newfoundland and Labrador can become an Alberta of the East ...” (p. 19).

³Ibid., p. 17.

⁴Ibid., p. 19.

⁵Ibid., p. 35.