

# The Idea of Newfoundland and Arts Policy Since Confederation

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# The Idea of Newfoundland and Arts Policy Since Confederation

RONALD ROMPKEY

THE STRATEGIC ECONOMIC PLAN (SEP) promulgated by the Newfoundland government in 1992 laid out a broad vision of the future. Cast in marketing language, this ambitious and inventive programme offered fresh initiatives for the provincial economy in manufacturing, new technology, petroleum development and energy efficiency. It also introduced twenty-two proposals for the enhancement of the cultural sector so as to capitalize on what it called the province's "unique history, environment, culture and lifestyle," a "resource" as yet "underdeveloped." These proposals constituted perhaps the broadest attempt ever made to bring cultural life within the ambit of the provincial government. With proper development and promotion of its "traditional, indigenous qualities and advantages," it predicted, the province could create a "niche" as a holiday destination and "cultural region" in North America.

The promotion of culture in the SEP rested upon a perception of the province's aesthetic and human qualities: its "scenery" and its "relaxed pace of life." It also recognized the existence of a "vibrant cultural community" and a "rich folklore preserved through five centuries of continuous settlement" (*Change and Challenge*, 47-8). Furthermore, it claimed that the province possessed artists "in numbers that are disproportionate to our population," opening thereby the possibility for improved facilities and services for artists as a means of making Newfoundland even more congenial as a place to visit or establish a business. But while the SEP offered a framework for economic change based upon the idea of the province's traditional way of life, it left open the question of how to promote and assist artists. The subsequent reluctance of government to develop an arts policy is characteristic of a sometimes confused relationship between an openly hospitable government and the arts community, one that has existed since Confederation.

The SEP was not the first attempt to link cultural policy to a perception of cultural difference. Since Confederation, various commentators had already associated the peculiarity of Newfoundland life with the notion of an independent and self-reliant people living in small outports, struggling to preserve their milieu against the encroachments of industrialization, welfare, urbanization and the so-called North American values of the late twentieth century—a romantic view based on a reconstitution of the past and perpetuated by folk song collectors and advertisers. (Overton, 9; Rosenberg, 55; Byrne, 58) Governments had heretofore embraced such a notion of difference as a doctrine and promoted it as a way of fostering tourism and economic development. But what were the grounds for such a doctrine?

Newfoundland began to develop as a settled society towards the end of the eighteenth century, bearing the cultural signs of its British and Irish origins. By the Peace of Paris (1763), the wintering population of the island is said to have risen to around 12,000, one-eighth of the population of Canada at the time (Head, 141), and from as early as 1794 we have references to the distinguishing features of that population, like the following by the mariner Aaron Thomas, who observed,

As this Island has been inhabit'd for such a number of years and was peopled by British and Irish, you frequently meet with Familys whose Grandfathers were born in Newfoundland. These are what I call the Natives. They speak English but they have a manner peculiar to themselves—the common people Lisp . . . for every Out-harbour I visited on conversing with the people, they would on answering my queries say — “Yes, *dat* is the way” or “O No, we *tant* do it so; but *den* we do it the other way, *tafter* we bring it home because it is *taffer*” (Thomas, 137).

Although Thomas referred to the permanent inhabitants as *natives*, the term *Newfoundlander* had also entered the lexicon (Griffiths, 9), and by the end of the nineteenth century Newfoundlanders had emerged as an identifiable group. To visitors, adventurers and missionaries, they exhibited contradictory traits (O'Flaherty, *The Rock Observed*, 87), but despite these contradictions there was a growing acknowledgement of the existence of Newfoundlanders as a *people* with identifiable peculiarities of pronunciation and idiom, of song, proverb and folk tale. Such peculiarities were at times regarded as adaptations of existing English and Irish practices but at other times as consequences of the struggle against climate and terrain.

Lewis Amadeus Anspach, a Swiss-born clergyman, declared in 1827, “. . . they are either natives, or descendants from natives, of Great Britain, Ireland, or of the islands of Guernsey and Jersey. The latter have generally retained the manners of their respective ancestors, with some qualifications arising from the difference of climate and of the mode of living, so as to exhibit rather a compound of all.” Anspach subscribed to the fashionable theory of climatic influence on national characteristics, and he continued,

These principles concerning the effects of a cold climate on the temper and dispositions of mankind, though questionable in several respects when applied to man in the uncivilized state [aboriginals], are perfectly applicable to the natives of Newfoundland of European origin. Let me add, that their intellectual capacity, the acuteness of their understanding, and aptitude to improve in the arts or in learning, are as remarkable as their courage, perseverance, and industry. (Anspach, 461-3)

In 1860, John Mullock, the Irish-born Roman Catholic bishop of Newfoundland, invoked the same theory in predicting,

... The few people who now fringe its shore (for 130,000 inhabitants are but the germ of a future population of millions), sprung from the most energetic nations of modern times, English, Irish, and Scotch, possessing in themselves and intermingling the poetic and fiery imagination of the Celt, the steadiness and perseverance of the Saxon, and the enterprise and coolness of the North Britons, are destined to be the founders of a race which, I believe, will fill an important place hereafter among the hundreds of millions who will inhabit the western hemisphere in a few ages. (Mullock, 4)

The attribution of specific racial or national qualities is always a risky business; however, the identification of Newfoundlanders according to their presumed ethnic origins prevailed. The population, thought Hatton and Harvey in 1883, was derived from "Saxon and Celtic stocks," the same blend of endurance and imaginativeness, but forged from the struggle with physical difficulty. If Newfoundlanders lacked the privilege of education, they noted, they did not lack the aptitude for it. "Indeed," they wrote, "anyone who comes in contact with the people will be struck with their mental quickness and intellectual aptitude" (Hatton and Harvey, 223).<sup>1</sup>

The acknowledgement of such qualities entered the tourist discourse in the 1920s, much of it produced by the Newfoundland Tourist Commission. In presenting Newfoundland as hospitable to the tourist, the commission advised prospective visitors, "Hardy descendants of British, Scotch, and Irish pioneers [*sic*], the Newfoundlanders have become moulded into a distinct type" (*The Story of Newfoundland*, n.p.) Later, we learn that "Inheriting the sterling traits of their English, Irish and Scotch ancestors, Newfoundlanders still exemplify their pioneering spirit, which is amply borne out by the hardships they are called upon to endure in search of their livelihood in reaping the harvest of the sea" (*Newfoundland*, 4).

Wresting a livelihood from nature, however, was not considered especially conducive to the cultivation of the arts. In Newfoundland, at least, hardship and creativity appeared inimical to each other. Joseph R. Smallwood drew a distinction between the two as late as 1937 when, in the ringing introduction to his *Book of Newfoundland*, he suggested that the very nature of the struggle to survive precluded "creative and constructive effort." He wrote, "It is a fact that for centuries we have lived by *killing* cod and other fish; by *killing* seals in the water or on the ice, and animals on the land; by *killing* birds, and *cutting down* trees. Has all this

developed in us a trait of destructiveness, or narcotised what ought naturally to be an instinct of creativeness?" (Smallwood, "Newfoundland To-day," 1-2).<sup>2</sup> Life in Newfoundland required adaptability and independence. It took creativity to build houses and boats, to make furniture and produce fishing equipment from basic materials. As Patrick O'Flaherty reminded readers in 1975, "Outport life had a raw edge, a harsh and violent tenor, which was linked with the oppressiveness of the milieu. It cannot be stated too often that while a life of fruitful work nourishes, that of grinding drudgery and dependence impoverishes the spirit" (O'Flaherty, "Looking Backwards," 5) Newfoundlanders did not lack creative power. They lacked an authoritative voice within the imperial context. That voice started to be heard between 1946 and 1948, during the National Convention elected to deliberate upon their future.

The National Convention did not devote itself directly to questions of identity or to the promotion of the arts. It was consumed by practical and political questions. But in the debate on the report of the Education Committee of 22 May 1947, wherein it was proposed to raise Memorial University College to the status of a university, the argument for creating an institution of higher learning made an important connection between government policy and culture. "We have in this country a very definite character of our own," Gordon Higgins proclaimed. "One might call it the Newfoundland character, and we have a culture of our own; but a culture needs enrichment and development; only a university can adequately provide the necessary stimulation." Culture was to be enhanced not by encouraging art but by founding a university and making it a centre of broad cultural effort. Higgins continued, "Newfoundland people are not devoid of talent, and a university would be the most practical way of giving these talents and interests a real chance of development" (Hiller and Harrington, vol. 1, 578-79).

When the debate resumed on 26 May, Smallwood chimed in. One must note here that prior to the National Convention, from 1937 to 1943, he had been the moving spirit behind the *Barrelman* radio programme, an idiosyncratic representation of regional folklore he wrote and broadcast six nights a week.<sup>3</sup> Through a judicious selection of reference and language, he had constructed a national mythos for Newfoundland, so that in 1947 possibly no one else was more ready to pronounce upon its tradition and culture. "This is a country in which we have developed very distinctive peculiarities," he declared. "We have our own traditions. We have our own folklore. We have our own folkmusic .... We have got a distinctive culture all our own, and yet we have nothing . . . with the exception of the O'Leary poetry award which is given annually, we have nothing, nor have we had anything to foster and encourage the development and growth and recognition of a distinctly Newfoundland culture. And one of the most attractive possibilities of the Memorial University, if it became a university, would be that of having the university become a dynamo, a power-house, in the inculcation and dissemination and encouragement of a distinctly Newfoundland culture ..." (Hiller and Harrington, vol. 1, 580-1).

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Smallwood imagined the university in industrial terms and considered it a locus for perpetuating an awareness of Newfoundland life where no such locus had existed before.

On the brink of Confederation, after the long silence during Commission Government, Newfoundland was experiencing renewed self-consciousness. The case was put forcefully by William Keough, who like Smallwood had never studied at a university but who nevertheless recognized the need for government patronage and placed the matter of culture in a broad humanistic perspective. He said,

The unrelenting struggle we have known has never left us with much margin of time for accomplishment of other than the making of both ends meet. We have been far too busy out on the squid-jigging ground to have made many songs. We have spent so much time in little yellow dories as left us but a meagre margin for literature and the drama. Our hands have been too busy with the "knots rotted with the salt water" to have given them to painting and sculpture. We have had to put so much effort into making cod as to have had none to spare to put into making concertos. (Hiller and Harrington, vol. 1, 583)

For Keough, the native culture was to be measured not only by artistic production but by its contribution to social order. He added,

There were Newfoundlanders who were indeed giants in their day and generation. And they have bequeathed to us many things of which we may well be proud—a tradition of great endeavour to make the most come of the land's meagreness; a native culture which the philistine may dismiss as a "fish-and-brewis" culture, but which is of considerable consequence and meaning to us; and a structure, and a way of life, Christian to the core. Because our fathers were what they were, we are still secure in this island in the realms of the mind and spirit. (Hiller and Harrington, vol. 1, 584)

The motion carried, and in 1949 Memorial University began its systematic investigation of the folklore, history, literature and social configurations of Newfoundland and Labrador, the schooling of young artists being deferred to a later date. (The School of Music was not founded until 1975, the School of Fine Arts at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College not until 1988.) Meanwhile, as political power shifted from one administration to another, arts policy advanced through what might be regarded as three separate ideological phases: the developmental, the nationalistic and the industrial.

### DEVELOPMENTAL

The Smallwood years constituted a period of basic development in every respect. But in its encouragement of the arts, the new government took its first steps in 1951

by instituting the influential Arts and Letters Competition, a programme of awards for historical essays on Newfoundland, for poetry, the short story, portraiture, landscape painting, radio scripts and drama to replace the O'Leary competition, and in due course artists recognized in this way made their presence felt. (The competition was administered by the Department of Education until 1972, and it continues to the present day.) The same year, the government created Atlantic Films, a private company of European filmmakers formed to produce documentaries, educational and instructional films, travelogues, film strips and slides for use in schools and other institutions. It also supported the founding of an extension service at Memorial University in 1961 with resident specialists in visual art, drama and music and a programme of outreach aimed at rural communities, in keeping with Smallwood's vision of the university as "dynamo." The creation of the Extension Service came closest to a formal expression of arts policy until the Division of Cultural Affairs was established in 1971. Since then, a tension has existed between the need for a long-range policy and the serving of short-term economic goals.

The first signs of this tendency may be traced to the mid-1960s, when a voluntary group formed itself under John Perlin, later the director of Cultural Affairs, to produce performing arts events for Come Home Year 1966, a scheme of the Smallwood government to induce thousands of expatriate Newfoundlanders to visit the province and share what was advertised as its characteristic milieu. The St. John's Folk Arts Council was also formed in 1966, and following upon its early successes during the Canadian centenary it too received government support in 1968. The spirit of nostalgia incited by Come Home Year would stand as a model for festivals in the years to come, its tone captured in the opening lines of a song written for the occasion:

Come home to old Newfy, the land of your birth,  
From your lands of adoption all over the earth;  
Come home to the smell of the kelp and the fir,  
To the taste of the caplin, the lobster and turr.  
Come home to the scrunchions, the praties and fish  
All mixed with the brewis in the fisherman's dish. (Earle, "Come Home to Old Newfy")

Quite apart from its successful appeal to the longings of expatriates, Come Home Year accomplished two things: it created a link between public funding and the arts, and it entrenched the idea that traditional outport life could be commodified and marketed. The government went a step further when it authorized the construction of an arts and culture centre in St. John's as its major centennial project, based upon a decision made by Smallwood for the disposal of the federal government's contribution from the Canadian Centennial Fund. For as John Perlin recalled, "To

the best of my knowledge there was no public discussion on what the Province would do for a permanent memorial to mark the celebration of Canada's centennial, and presumably it was with the agreement of the Provincial Cabinet that the decision was made to build such a facility in St. John's" (Perlin, 1). The St. John's centre was the first of a network of community arts and culture centres to be built in Corner Brook, Gander, Grand Falls, Stephenville and Labrador West, the last completed in 1986. Perlin himself was invited to administer the St. John's centre, also housing the art gallery of Memorial University, but he claims he was given no clear direction about how to proceed, except to report through the deputy minister of the Department of Provincial Affairs.

After Smallwood's defeat in 1972, the Moores and Peckford governments took new measures based on an appeal to nationalist sentiment. Moores transferred responsibility for the Newfoundland Public Libraries Board and the Arts and Letters Competition to the Division of Cultural Affairs, funding them directly out of departmental estimates, and brought into being the Outport Art Foundation for the training of young visual artists. He also planned a modest celebration for the 25th anniversary of Confederation under the chairmanship of Robert Nutbeam, his brother-in-law, who seized upon the anniversary as an opportunity to promote Newfoundlanders as a "special race." Reinforcing the appeal to cultural identity surrounding this event, Nutbeam (an Englishman) announced, "We are a very special race of people but in danger of losing this culture and so the first concept was that we would try and get our people to practice being what they naturally are, Newfoundlanders" (Nutbeam, 8). Regardless of the paradox inherent in such a statement, it gave voice to the lingering fear that in embracing Confederation, Newfoundland risked what Nutbeam called the "withering away" of its own culture. Thus, the committee planned for the occasion a variety of contests and "way of life" activities and travelling exhibits to demonstrate to the population that they were "a people with a unique way of life" (Nutbeam, 8).

## NATIONALISTIC

The government of Brian Peckford was the first to openly embrace the arts as an expression of the provincial culture. After Peckford took power in 1979, the fear of losing a characteristic way of life was invoked for a variety of political purposes ranging from the defence of the seal hunt to the appeal for greater control of the fishery and offshore petroleum resources. By then, however, a new generation of artists had come of age, and the explosion of creative energy Sandra Gwyn imagined as the "Newfoundland Renaissance" had gathered force. How remarkable was it? To fully appreciate what had happened, one must go back to the previous decade.



Shortly after Smallwood assumed power in 1949, a survey of the arts conducted by Louise Whiteway marshalled a striking catalogue of pre-Confederation activity but came rapidly to the conclusion that "Newfoundland has yet to create an atmosphere favorable to building up of an indigenous esthetic tradition on a scale characteristic of more advanced countries before it can exploit what is indisputably its own territory" (Whiteway, 16). By 1956, the novelist Margaret Duley was still regretting the scarcity of Newfoundland writing and linking that scarcity to the myth of survival, to the difficulties presented by a harsh environment where a man was, as she put it, forced to fight for survival "before a thought of the arts ever crossed his mind" (Duley, 20). As late as 1962, Paul West, an English novelist and critic teaching literature at Memorial University, pronounced that St. John's, the presumed centre of cultural activity, was still "bewitched" by colonial attitudes. "Newfoundlanders still acquiesce in the stock Canadian myth of the Terra Nova marine idyll which insists on having salty little outport plays and stately schooners," he wrote (West, 22).

Sandra Gwyn was the first to recognize and name something extraordinary in the making and the first to link it to a sense of the past. "A society turned in upon itself and threatened from outside . . . is undergoing the agony and ecstasy of a revolution," she announced. "Newfoundland artists are discovering, as their Québec colleagues did before them, that their life force flows out of their folk tradition: Celtic and passionate, funny and tragic, salty and earthy" (Gwyn, 40). Indeed, the importance of the "folk tradition" and the notion that it was central to the survival of Newfoundland society lay behind the movement to improve arts education in the 1970s. George Story, in his foreword to the report of the task force on the arts in education (1980), went so far as to say that the nurturing of the creative process in schools and colleges was a means of ensuring the survival of Newfoundland society as "a recognizable people and culture" (*Comin' to Our Senses*, iii).

That report failed to be adopted, but the sentiments have remained embedded in policy statements about the arts ever since. Thus, in 1980, when the Peckford government created the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council, the council was tasked not only with funding the visual, performing and literary arts but folk arts and crafts, not simply to promote artistic production but to encourage the preservation and public awareness of cultural heritage, not merely to adjudicate applications but to advise the minister responsible on arts policy. For a time, the Division of Cultural Affairs also provided an annual Publishers' Assistance Programme to assist provincial writers and publishers and began a Sustaining Grants Programme for professional performing arts companies (followed by a second for literary and visual arts and provincial arts organizations). A yearly Art Procurement Programme for the adornment of public buildings was begun in 1982. Thus, by 1985, as the *Newfoundland Quarterly* was about to celebrate its eighty-fifth anniversary, Percy Janes felt confident in affirming that an "explosion" had indeed occurred amongst a people "released" by the benefits of Confederation from the struggle for existence.

“So it is clear that with all this literary activity and the critical response to it within Newfoundland as well as elsewhere in Canada,” he wrote, “there has been created here for the first time a *climate* of culture in the form of writing, drama, art and many other disciplines” (Janes, 22).

The early success of Come Home Year and other events contrived to attract tourists and expatriates reinforced the possibilities of the arts as cultural capital. After the celebrations in 1983 to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Sir Humphrey Gilbert, the Peckford government appointed a permanent committee to identify major anniversaries which could be linked to its tourism agenda. That committee survived until after the provincial festival Soirée '88. It also established the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador and funded it with an annual grant. But Peckford deflected a proposal for a cultural and educational broadcasting authority on the model of Radio-Québec and TV Ontario in 1983 when cabinet rejected a draft for a white paper on communications. More important, he inadvertently dislocated arts policy for the long term in 1985 when he appointed the Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment, chaired by Memorial University sociologist Douglas House, with a mission to investigate the provincial labour market. Following the commission's report *Building on Our Strengths* (1986), introducing a new vision of a post-industrial economy centred upon the Newfoundland outport and its traditional features of “flexibility, adaptability, occupational pluralism, home production, the rhythm of a season life-style, household self-reliance” (*Building on Our Strengths*, 24),<sup>4</sup> plans for diversifying the rural economy swept along with it further opportunities for an arts policy. The inadvertent consequences of that report for the fortunes of the arts community would be played out during the governments of Clyde Wells and Brian Tobin.

## INDUSTRIAL

In 1989, the Wells government appointed House director of the Economic Recovery Commission to develop a new economic strategy based on small communities, and the commission's devotion to an integrated approach to economic development shifted the arts and cultural industries further towards the industrial model. Before the commission could publish its first recommendations, however, a committee of artists and cultural workers produced the watershed report *Drawing Conclusions* (1990). This committee,<sup>5</sup> also appointed by government, was asked to examine a different range of policy questions, ones related to the economic status of the artist, to existing government programmes, arts education in the schools, working conditions and the role of government. The motion to appoint it had been moved by Gene Long, the NDP member for St. John's East, who in a speech to the House of Assembly had connected the difficulties of the arts community to the lack of a coherent long-term plan with clearly defined objectives. In keeping with the spirit

of this motion, the report that followed opened with a prophetic statement. "There is an urgent need for the provincial government to develop and implement an arts policy for Newfoundland and Labrador," it began. "It should do this in a decisive and rational way. If it doesn't do so, arts policy will emerge as a result of uncoordinated government action, through action by other parties, or through no action" (*Drawing Conclusions*, 1). *Drawing Conclusions* (also known as the O'Flaherty Report) reflected the tendency to define cultural policy in terms of consumer products, one already established by the federal Applebaum-Hébert report (1982). Ranging widely, it made fifty recommendations aimed at improving the lot of provincial artists, and it introduced the economic imperative into the provincial discourse when it declared, "The arts are not a frill, but an industry which is worth investing in. Public money put into the arts is no more a 'subsidy' than taxpayers' dollars put into the fishery, agriculture, mining, forestry, post-secondary education, and offshore oil. Artists are just as deserving of government support in their efforts to make a decent living as other occupations and professions" (*Drawing Conclusions*, 3).

The O'Flaherty Report was soon reinforced by *This Business of Culture*, an independent financial study of the arts and cultural industries carried out by John H. Barry and published by the ERC in July 1991. The aim of this study was to identify existing cultural industries and demonstrate their economic advantage, and it revealed some startling findings. Despite the presumed richness of the provincial culture, Barry reckoned the size of the cultural industries to be about one third the national average. Furthermore, he estimated that only about 15% of the overall budget for culture was devoted to artists and cultural workers. The rest paid for staff, operations and the maintenance of government-owned buildings such as the arts and culture centres. Barry's study was the first to link the strength of the cultural industries to the participation of "creative artists" and the organizational structures supporting them. These he divided into four areas with economic potential: the performing arts, visual arts, literary arts and media arts (Barry, 6-7).

The ERC's position paper on new industries, part of the series *Opportunities for Growth* (September 1992), substantially agreed with this position and reflected the language already introduced in the Strategic Economic Plan, published the previous June. (The release of the *Opportunities for Growth* reports was delayed until the publication of the SEP so as not to diminish its political impact.) But the position paper went a step further in recommending, among other things, the establishment of a provincial arts policy. It also called for the restructuring of the Division of Cultural Affairs to incorporate planning, marketing and industry development and for the formation of an advisory committee representing the related government departments as well as "appropriate industry associations" (*New Opportunities for Growth*, 51-52).<sup>6</sup> Thus, all three documents — *Drawing Conclusions*, *This Business of Culture* and *New Opportunities for Growth* —

advocated a policy to recognize the increasing influence of professional artists, but they were all overwhelmed by a sequence of political events.

In 1992, the Wells government signed the Canada/Newfoundland Co-operation Agreement on Cultural Industries, providing \$5 million for research and development, product development, marketing, distribution, and training for individual artists—70% of it funded by the Mulroney government in Ottawa. Prompted by Ottawa, it thus gave tacit assent to the industrial model. At the end of the agreement in 1996, the process was extended for two more years under the Canada/Newfoundland Agreement on Economic Renewal, \$3.75 million of it set aside for culture and tourism. The Wells government consolidated its broader programme of cultural activity by creating a new Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation, and it promised to begin consultation with the tourism, culture, environmental and recreation communities with a joint “task force.” It would also give priority to the celebration of important public events such as festivals, tournaments, and the marking of historical events and celebrations, those great public occasions of the later twentieth century Daniel Boorstin called “pseudo-events” (Boorstin, 34-35). It also intended to capitalize on the 500th anniversary of John Cabot’s landfall by organizing a series of spectacles and building a provincial archive/museum/art gallery provisionally named the Giovanni Caboto Centre.

*A Vision for Tourism* (1994), the Wells government’s subsequent policy statement, linked the tourist industry directly to the activities of local performers, artists, filmmakers and writers who were, as the document put it, “becoming recognized for their unique styles and points of view” (*A Vision for Tourism*, 11-12). In preparation for the Cabot anniversary in 1997, it also established a free-standing corporation to manage an ambitious range of public events. However, this corporation was marginalized in 1995 in response to suggestions of mismanagement and political cronyism, to be replaced by a new structure formed within the public service.<sup>7</sup> Plans for the “Caboto Centre” were abandoned when it became obvious that a major grant for its construction expected from Ottawa would not be forthcoming.

Contrary to the spirit of the SEP, two subsequent political decisions delayed the possibility of a new arts policy. Government did begin the process of consultation in 1994 by appointing an advisory committee (not the expected “task force”) to the minister, Roger Grimes, under the chairmanship of the principal of Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Dr. Katherine Bindon. But the objectives of the committee remained undefined from the start, and during its half dozen sittings the group did hardly more than go through the motions of reviewing existing plans. The government, in its report on the status of the SEP (1995), recorded that the advisory committee had indeed held its first meeting on 14 November 1994, that it was “having input” into the development of government policy and that it would meet

“monthly” (*Status Report*, 42). But the minister abruptly dissolved it a year later, explaining in a letter to the chair,

At the time when the Advisory Committee was established, no time limits were set on your work. However, my feeling is that the Advisory Committee’s role has perhaps been completed for the moment. We needed you to take a clear and objective look at where tourism, culture and recreation is going. I feel that this has been accomplished successfully and rather than continue meeting on a regular basis, I would prefer the Committee be available for comment on issues as they arise. While this may not be satisfactory to you, I feel it to be in the best, most cost effective interest of all of us. I would hope, as well, that you would continue to dialogue with the three Assistant Deputy Ministers or other members of the department (Grimes to Bindon, 13 December 1995)<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, the advisory committee was dismantled in the “best interests” of all concerned, without the opportunity to give advice or make fresh recommendations. Secondly, in creating the John Cabot (1997) 500th Anniversary Corporation, government created the framework for the so-called Year of the Arts, a complex of 78 artistic events juried and managed by the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council. The Year of the Arts was to be financed with a fund of \$1.2 million, based on the estimated costs of arts projects, but it was made available only as a last resort. After the arts community had been invited to apply for project grants, government suddenly announced that only \$500,000 would be available. The arts community was outraged. Faced now with a general election, Brian Tobin, who had replaced Wells as premier in the interim, succeeded in extracting the additional \$700,000 from the Department of Canadian Heritage through the intervention of the minister, Sheila Copps. The estimated \$1.2 million was therefore preserved intact, but the Year of the Arts was not the extravaganza originally promised.

These apparent changes of direction appear consistent with Douglas House’s assessment that the ideas created by the ERC were not widely supported by the Liberal Party or by the Liberal caucus and that with the arrival of Brian Tobin the thinking of the previous years was swept away with the new broom.<sup>9</sup> As one of its first acts, the Tobin government dismissed the ERC and abandoned the economic policy of community development. Meanwhile, it endorsed the work of the arts community openly but as an adjunct to major cultural events. The document *Ready for a Better Tomorrow*, heralding the election of the Tobin government in 1996, made no mention of funding for the arts but concentrated exclusively on tourism and ecotourism, turning its attention to succeeding anniversaries such as the 50th anniversary of Confederation (1999) and the millennium of the Viking settlement in Newfoundland (2000). Meanwhile, at the end of the first federal-provincial cultural agreement in 1996, it signed a fresh Canada/Newfoundland Agreement on Economic Renewal, setting aside \$1.5 million for cultural industries (80% of it from Ottawa) and a Living Interpretation Initiative which would provide \$1 million

for “anchor products” to serve as “tourism generators.” It also created in 1997 the Newfoundland and Labrador Film Development Agency with a budget of \$1 million over three years to support local filmmakers and entice producers from outside the province.

In its election platform of 1999, the Tobin government appeared bent on a similar plan for the commodification of the nostalgic and the picturesque with proposals for new buildings and spectacles, not for artists and arts organizations. Under the rubric of the “new economy,” a legacy of the ERC, cultural initiatives were grouped with tourism, ecotourism, advanced technologies, IT skills, aquaculture, and environmental industries. The government promised another Canada/Newfoundland agreement on cultural industries, support for “living interpretation” projects (festivals and special events), another festival of the arts for Soiree '99 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Confederation, and a proposed celebration for the Viking millennium. (To administer these events, in 1998 it created the Special Celebrations Corporation under the aegis of the Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation.) Under cultural infrastructure, it returned to projects left undone by previous governments. If provided with a fresh mandate, it undertook to create a Task Force on Cultural Infrastructure chaired by the visual artist Mary Pratt (formerly a member of the Applebaum-Hébert Commission and of the Canada Council) to give advice on the development of a new art gallery, museum and archive. It also offered to continue promotion of telefilm production through the Newfoundland and Labrador Film Development Corporation, a Tele-Film Equity Programme to lever investment and a film tax credit. Finally, it would maintain the increase of \$200,000 provided in 1998 for the procurement of visual art to be installed in public buildings.

What has happened to arts policy in Newfoundland? One must remember first that arts policy throughout Canada, no matter how extensive the consultations with artists, is ultimately the product of élites and governments. In Newfoundland, things were supposed to be different. The provincial government has flirted with the development of a formal arts policy with gestures of consultation, but in the end support for the arts, regardless of the esteem for cultural tradition expressed by premiers and cabinet ministers, has been enveloped in a wider agenda. The government of Newfoundland is fixed on a course of action linking the promotion of the arts to anniversaries and omnibus programmes contained in federal-provincial agreements. Throughout the 1990s, the annual budget of the Arts Council for new projects and for the support of sectoral organizations was increased once by \$100,000 and then reduced by 3%, along with all other government agencies. Today, its budget stands at \$477,500. Despite the repeated invocation of Newfoundland's “distinct culture” and its “rich heritage,” direct support to artists and the provision of public buildings remains a low priority. Whether or not subsequent governments will possess the courage and insight to promote artistic expression as an end in itself remains to be seen.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>As late as 1943, A.P. Herbert, a sympathetic member of the British parliamentary mission sent to investigate the future prospects of the colony, was struck by resemblances to the British isles. "If you fell 'blindfolded' by parachute onto any part of Newfoundland and you listened to the talk," he concluded with some exaggeration, "you might say you were in Devonshire, in Dorset, Cornwall, or Somerset, or Yorkshire: you might say you were in Ireland or Scotland (not often in Wales). But you would never say you were in Canada or the United States" (Herbert, 257).

<sup>2</sup>Sir John Hope Simpson, one of the first members of the Commission of Government, wrote his daughter in 1935, "This is a cruel country in many ways. Life is maintained by killing something — fish or seals or deer or beaver — or birds — and from their babyhood the children learn to kill. The result is indiscriminate killing" (Neary, ed., 137).

<sup>3</sup>For a full discussion of Smallwood's radio career, see Philip Hiscock, "The *Barrelman* Radio Programme, 1937-1943: The Mediation and Use of Folklore in Newfoundland." Ph.D. diss., Memorial University, 1994.

<sup>4</sup>The model of the "sustainable outpost" formed an important assumption of the ERC. See J. Douglas House, "The Sustainable Outpost: A Model for Community Development," *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health*, 8, no. 2 (1989): 25-40.

<sup>5</sup>Chaired by Patrick O'Flaherty, the committee was composed of Donna Butt, Carol Brice-Bennett, Joan Clark, Alice Dicks, Jan Grebneff, Peter Soucy and Cheryl Stagg.

<sup>6</sup>See also *A Strategy for Development of the Craft Industry of Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's: Economic Recovery Commission, 1991).

<sup>7</sup>Seven employees of the Cabot 500 Corporation dismissed in December 1995 sued the government for wrongful dismissal. Millar Ayre, who was then chairman, testified in provincial court on 12 April 1999 that cabinet ministers had told him members of the Liberal caucus were dissatisfied with the number of "known Progressive Conservative backers" employed by the corporation. (*Telegram*, 13 April 1999) On 17 September 1999, Roger Grimes testified in the same case that in fact the Cabot 500 Corporation had never been dissolved. (*Telegram*, 18 September 1999)

<sup>8</sup>Author's copy.

<sup>9</sup>House claims in *Against the Tide* that the demise of the ERC was made easier by a lack of support within the provincial public service.

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