

The Atlantic Provinces and the Problem of "Regionalism"

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The Atlantic Provinces and the Problem of "Regionalism"

In the Atlantic provinces probably the most basic "problem of Confederation" has been regional disparity. The historical case against Confederation is an old tale: coerced into a political union in which the major economic powers and sources of revenue were assigned to a distant central government, which was controlled by and in the interests of Central Canada, the Atlantic region has been reduced to a state of economic dependence and colonial subservience. As a result the region has suffered population loss, the flight of capital, arrested industrial development, inferior social services and lower living standards. Other explanations of the region's relative economic stagnation have also been advanced, such as the absence of natural resources, lack of entrepreneurial talent, distance from markets, and low literacy rates, but these explanations have gained fewer converts, and as a result external political causes have remained the most popular explanation for the plight of Atlantic provinces.

All of this is a familiar story and the subject of considerable historical literature. What is less well known, and until now never the subject of systematic analysis, is the extent to which this academic case against Confederation has influenced contemporary regional attitudes and political options. One of the by-products of the recent "national unity" crisis, which in 1977 spawned the Task Force on Canadian Unity, has been a useful attempt to understand the attitudes of people in Atlantic Canada. At the insistence of Richard Cashin, the Atlantic provinces' representative on the eight-man panel of inquiry, the Task Force commissioned an historian, G.A. Rawlyk and a political scientist, George Perlin, both of Queen's University, to make a comprehensive study of the Atlantic region. As originally proposed by the principal researchers, the study had two objectives: first, to produce an informed, authoritative report on regional opinion which would "compel" the Task Force "to consider seriously the special and sometimes disorienting problems confronting the Atlantic region in the 1970s"; and second, to trigger a "widespread public debate in the region about the future of Canada". To achieve these ends the Rawlyk-Perlin study not only examined the region's history but also undertook a systematic survey of the perceptions of its newspapers, elites and general public. The results of a portion of their study are contained in *The Atlantic Provinces and the Problem of Confederation* (St. John's, Breakwater Books, 1979), edited by G.A. Rawlyk and written in collaboration with eight research assistants, Doug Brown, Terry Campbell, Mary-Pat MacKinnon, Jerome McDonald, Pat O'Brien, Ron Zukowsky, Tom Box and Tom Wien.

Part I, the historical section of the book, contains a comprehensive overview of the political economy of the Maritime provinces and Newfoundland, based on a thorough reading of the rather extensive recent literature. Written largely by Rawlyk, whose own research, publications and supervision of graduate studies at Dalhousie and Queen's have contributed considerably to the renaiss-

sance of Maritime historiography, these chapters are probably the best synthesis of the region's history to date. Above all this is a reasoned plea for an understanding of the historical case against Confederation. In these chapters Rawlyk places much greater emphasis on the importance of external economic and political forces in shaping the region's history than he has in some of his earlier writings.

Part II, which takes up two-thirds of the book, is a detailed, province by province, review of editorial opinion on the subject of national unity in the ten years from 1967 to 1978. According to the findings of this study, it is here, among the region's newspapers, where one finds the purest contemporary exposition of the historical case against Confederation. In the view of the region's fourth estate, national disunity is but another way of writing regional disparity, the root cause of disaffection in all regions, even in Quebec. Seizing the opportunity provided by the Confederation crisis to make their case — a case which in the past has been often ignored or dismissed by the spokesmen of more satisfied, affluent sections of the country — the region's newspapers seem to reflect the reputed fear, anger and frustration of the Atlantic provinces.

Yet for all their indignation, their case is frequently contradictory and self-serving. For example, while convinced that Ottawa's past policies have created a flood of hard times, they believe just as firmly that "Only Ottawa Can Turn the Tide", to borrow the title of a Moncton *Times* editorial in 1970 (p. 211). Although they remain adamantly attached to the virtues of self-reliance, local government and provincial autonomy, the Atlantic provinces seem to fear, perhaps more than other regions, the emasculation of the central government. Ambivalent and often hostile toward granting Quebec a special political status within Confederation, they see no contradiction in demanding a special economic status for themselves; this attitude is best illustrated by their frequent advocacy of a Maritimes-New England free-trade zone or by their vociferous opposition to the extension of the Department of Regional Economic Expansion's programmes beyond the boundaries of the Atlantic provinces. An almost obsessive economic perspective seems to have shaped their response to each national issue, be it bilingualism and biculturalism, the Official Languages Act, the rise of the F.L.Q., the October crisis or the Parti Québécois. Perhaps it is for this reason that the region's firm federalist moorings remained unshaken throughout the decade, despite the appeals of several dissident groups. For example, the Maritime Loyalist Association, the so-called Canada Party, and Moncton's own Leonard Jones, all seem to have had little impact if one can judge by newspaper opinion. Nor have those advocating union with the United States fared much better; their call upon the region to repudiate their Loyalist heritage, "to remain English even at the expense of not remaining British", have encountered little more than ridicule. In other words, despite all their well-worn grievances, the Atlantic provinces' editorial writers remain firmly wedded to the

Canadian option, if only because existing economic exigencies seem to make it the best bargain available.

The extent to which newspaper editorials speak for a larger society is the subject of the remainder of the book. Unfortunately this is the most unsatisfactory section of the study. In Part III, the researchers have analysed the attitudes of the economic, educational, professional, religious and labour elites in each of the Atlantic provinces. A methodological note or paragraph explaining the authors' rationale and criteria for assigning people to these groups, together with some information on their social origins and linkages, would have given greater authority to the research. In reporting their findings, it would have been preferable, too, had the authors broken down the elite's responses into their five constituent occupational categories; unfortunately they have simply lumped the five groups together on a province by province basis. Moreover, the apparent lack of uniformity in the evidence solicited, or at least reported, from province to province, makes comparative analysis difficult, if not impossible, and seriously limits the value of the exercise. These are clearly flaws caused by the constraints of time and the ambitious nature of the assignment but which, as the editor warns in the preface, give "a hurried and disjointed quality to the volume".

Nevertheless, this section contains some interesting insights and raises a number of questions. Generally, it seems that the region's elite possessed a more realistic view of the area's economic potential and its relationship to power structures, as well as a more liberal approach to the country's linguistic, cultural and political problems, than that found in the editorial columns. Not surprisingly, too, the elite retained a firm, but pragmatic attachment to Canada, and are convinced of the need to maintain a strong central government. Although not great, the differences between elite and press opinion nevertheless arouse one's curiosity as to the results of the final portion of the Rawlyk-Perlin study, the survey of public opinion.

However, this book devotes only two pages to the subject of public opinion "at the grass roots level". Indeed it is perhaps unfair to suggest that the book attempts to give the reader more than an enticing preview, since the editor makes it clear that the results of their "carefully conceived sample survey", which is available at Queen's University to interested scholars, is to form "the basis of a series of monographs" now being planned by Professor Perlin. All we get here is an epilogue consisting of an article by Jeffrey Simpson in the *Globe and Mail*, which was based on a document leaked to the press by the Task Force. From this item it appears that the region's newsmen have had relatively little success in selling the historical case against Confederation to the general public, 80 to 90 per cent of whom, we are told, believe Confederation to have been "good for the region". Here one also finds a substantial desire to accommodate French Canada, short of special status, preferring instead "a general

decentralization of powers to the provinces". How will social control theorists explain this apparent discrepancy between "grass roots" opinion and that of the elites and the press? Has there been a faulty connection? Or are there other formative influences ignored by the Rawlyk-Perlin study? Or perhaps it is simply a question of language and methodology. All of this is a tantalizing preview, but until the Perlin volumes appear, it is difficult to do much more than speculate.

To what extent the Rawlyk-Perlin report influenced the deliberations of the Task Force is not clear from a perusal of the Force's *Observations et recommandations*. Not that the point and purpose of the Force was to deal with Maritime discontent. For however one might try to disguise it by talk of regionalism, the chief task of the Force was to deal with the more pressing "crisis" of Confederation created by the accession to power of the Parti Quebecois. The report's prime concern was how to solve the problem of cultural-linguistic duality, in short how to complete the task of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism.¹ Only incidentally did the Task Force confront the problem of regionalism, and then only as a means of defusing the Quebec/Canada confrontation. To those interested in the larger issue, the Rawlyk-Perlin report provided the Force at least with an informed, 'disinterested', background paper. More than that, the Rawlyk-Perlin report has generated a great deal of information which ought to be of interest to scholars of federalism, regionalism, public opinion or the Atlantic provinces. It is hoped, too, that the report will encourage comparable studies of other Canadian regions. Only then will one be in a position to assess the significance of the Rawlyk-Perlin findings as an expression of regional opinion. Unfortunately, apart from the 1980 conference at Acadia University, the report has not yet generated that larger public debate which Rawlyk and Perlin had anticipated.²

One of the weaknesses of this report and numerous other studies is the lack of a clear definition of region and regionalism.³ Recently, many scholars, journalists and politicians, wishing to escape the homogenous connotations of the words "nation" or "national" have seized upon the concept of region or regionalism as terms which suggest a larger vision than province and avoid considering touchier social cleavages such as class and ethnicity. Despite its current popularity, regional identity has been as elusive as national or provincial identity, perhaps more so since at least the latter correspond to jurisdictional realities. Moreover, as William Westfall has pointed out recently, scholars have been woefully careless in their use of the word region,⁴ often as in the Task

1 For a good review of the Task Force's report, see Michael D. Behiels, "Forging Canada's Destiny", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*. XI, 2 (1979), pp. 110-117.

2 See J.R. Winter, ed., *The Atlantic Provinces in Canada: Where Do We Go From Here?* (Wolfville, 1981).

3 In making this criticism I include my own article in David Bercuson, ed., *Canada and the Burden of Unity* (Toronto, 1977), pp. 44-59.

4 William Westfall, "On the Concept of Region in Canadian History and Literature", *Journal of*

Force's *Observations*, using it simply as a synonym for province.⁵ To place a geographical box around an area, oblivious to its ties and similarities with contiguous areas, does not make it a region, either in what Westfall calls the formal or functional sense of the word. We need to know the boundaries of a region and why and how they constitute borders.

In this context it is difficult to see how the Maritime or Atlantic provinces are, or perceive themselves to be, a region distinct from contiguous areas. Their geographical, ethnic, and economic diversity and fragmentation, together with their strong support for Confederation, their reluctance to endorse Maritime Union, and their intra-regional jealousies, fears, suspicions and rivalries, as revealed in the Rawlyk-Perlin survey, scarcely suggest an emerging community of mutually binding interests in search of a more ambitious political expression. Furthermore, apart from those things which divide, there are the class, professional, institutional and associational, ethnic and linguistic identities which transcend provincial and regional borders and which make inhabitants of the Atlantic provinces part of a larger community. In fact there remain so few truly regional structures or institutions to support regionalism that one is tempted to agree with Joseph Smallwood's exaggerated statement that the only significant boundary in Canada is a poverty line along the Ottawa River, dividing the rich West from the poor East. The difficulty with Smallwood's definition is that riches and poverty are not so neatly circumscribed, nor does one expose one distortion by espousing another. But if the national unity debate is to make any progress, definitions will have to be more rigorous and analysis less designed to cater to contemporary sensibilities.

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Canadian Studies, XV (Summer 1980), p. 7.

⁵ See La Commission de l'unité Canadienne, *Se Retrouver: Observations et Recommandations* (Ottawa, 1979), pp. 28-29, 75, 149.