



# Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada

**We Can Do Better,  
We Must Do Better**

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The views expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada.

This paper is an attempt to look at Newfoundland and Labrador in the Canadian federation through the perspective of Canada in the world; how others view us; how we see ourselves in the context of the world and the implications that should or could have for the federation and Canadians generally. It is a personal view moulded by nearly 30 years in politics in our province and country and by nearly 10 years of living and working in places like Ukraine, Kosova and most recently Afghanistan. In that time I have worked directly with political and community activists as they try to build democratic institutions and a civil society that can nurture and encourage activism by people who believe they can contribute to their communities and countries becoming better places. Most of the places I have worked have either gone through dramatic revolutionary changes or emerged from tragic conflicts, or both; my counterparts have had to muster courage and strength to match their commitment and determination. Many have failed but most have succeeded. All of them looked at the challenge on the basis of what was possible, often in the face of systems and powerful people who believed or desired that the goals of the reformers were not achievable. Success comes to those who know what they want and are able to articulate the goal and how to realize it; individuals and groups who can convince their neighbours and their leaders that the lives of their countries and their people can be made better by doing things differently. Demands do not work, designs might. More often than not it is a long and frustrating struggle but one worth waging.

## **Success Abroad**

It seems to me that our country and province are at a crossroads. We know as we start the new millennium that the country is not working as well as it could, more importantly, not working as well as it should. Many other Canadians share the frustrations that we as Newfoundlanders and Labradorians feel towards the political, economic and social conditions in the country. We have a choice: Do we content ourselves with being mediocre, taking satisfaction that “the UN says we are the best place in the world to live”? Do we give up on the whole country and lose something that clearly we all cherish or do we try and do something about it? Surely we try and do something about it.

There is no doubt that if we as Canadians could see ourselves as others see us we would have a completely different attitude towards Canada and what it means to be Canadian; there is no doubt that if we as Canadians could see what it means to be a Newfoundlander and Labradorian we would have a completely different attitude.

The sacrifices of Canadians and Newfoundlanders and Labradorians in both world wars are well known to Europeans and as peacekeepers we have made friends and loyal allies from Korea to Afghanistan. Our artists, scientists and entrepreneurs are stars around the globe. We have played a vital role in developing and leading a number of international multinational and multilateral institutions, most especially the United Nations. Our contribution to development and international assistance has long been misunderstood and underestimated by Canadians but not our partners in the world’s poorest and most needy nations. For years we were seen as the leader of the “middle nations”, providing links between the super powers and from them to less and underdeveloped countries. Around the world we are held up as a bastion of democracy,

civility and compassion. It is no coincidence that for more than a century we have been the country of choice for millions of immigrants, displaced persons and refugees and the fact that we are the most multicultural country in the world is a testament to the esteem of so many across the globe and the generosity of Canadians.

For years we have been quick to respond to tragedy, hunger, disease and most types of deprivation. Canada's human and financial resources have fed the hungry of Africa, rebuilt devastated Central America and cured the sick all over Asia. We have been innovative and creative; encouraging community-based development, decentralization of authority and the empowerment of the most needy so that they can play a direct role in their own future and building their societies. Our commitment to "Human Security" has made sure that we focus our efforts to reduce poverty and provide peace and security by supporting programmes that promote basic human needs like education and healthcare, peacebuilding, human rights, good governance, democracy, private sector development and economic reform. We insist that those who are to benefit from our support are directly involved from the design to the delivery of the programmes. The premise is that no one is better able to advise and design solutions than those most affected by the problem and that involvement assures ownership and therefore much greater commitment to projects and initiatives. Surely we can combine these same principles of dignity, respect and inclusion with our skills and institutions to make this country truly a nation to be envied by all.

There are some interesting parallels between our province and country. Our fishery is in a state of collapse but we know as much about fish and fishing as anyone in the world. Our fisheries production and technology companies operate around the globe; The College of the North Atlantic operates in Qatar, of all places. Fishermen, union officials and entrepreneurs have shared their skills with developing countries on several continents and our bureaucrats have advised many governments. We have skills in oil and gas production, energy generation, communications, forestry, cold oceans and working in northern climates that have benefited many others. All of these and others provide opportunities in the future.

It has always fascinated me that so many of the institutions and processes that we as Canadians see as being broken are viewed by others as being a model for their own countries. Cameroon prided itself as being one of two truly bilingual countries, along side Canada. South Africa was very interested in our constitution as model for the new and vigorous post-apartheid country. We have shared the efficiency of our civil service with many countries including China and a number of post-Soviet states. Our system of elections and conducting them has been copied around the world. There are many similar examples. The rebuilding of Iraq provides a timely example of what might be possible. This tragic nation is emerging from a short but traumatic conflict after years of oppression and brutality. It is divided by religion, language and ethnicity and areas of potential prosperity are surrounded by those of abject poverty and little hope. A federation is one real option for the political stability of Iraq, a system of wealth redistribution will have to be found, and some way to protect and accommodate linguistic and cultural differences will need to be developed. Canada offers viable and successful models to address all three of these needs, models others envy and emulate.

Coming home to Canada for those of us who spend much of our time living and working in countries devastated by poverty, disease or conflict can often be frustrating and dispiriting

when we see the difficulty we have addressing our problems and living up to our potential. It is not that others have so little, therefore Canadians should shut up and count our blessings. The sadness for me is that a country as lucky as ours, a country as wealthy and successful as ours, a country that has done so much for so many around the world cannot meet the true potential of Canada and her people. We can and should be so much better, we can and should learn from of all people - ourselves. When I see the successful solutions and contributions we have brought to struggling countries around the world, I wonder why we cannot do the same at home. I wonder why we are not able to apply the same values and principles of human security to our own people. I wonder why we cannot make the institutions that so many others venerate and that do work, work better for us.

## **The Will To Succeed**

More than nine years ago my first adventure in this field found me in the very Soviet and wintry city of Kharkov, deep in eastern Ukraine where I was to conduct a seminar for activists and candidates on election campaigns. After nearly 20 years of politics and elections I could easily master the mechanics but quickly came to realize I could not answer the question, “why?” In all that time and activity I had lost sight of the principles of why politicians should speak directly to their voters, the importance of direct contact, the importance of the people we purport to represent. I have learned more about democracy in the last nine years than I did in the 20 that went before. To me it is not complicated, certainly not as complicated as we seem determined to make it. You see, I think more than anything Canadians have lost sight of why our country matters and why we should be committed to all of it. We have lost our sense of community, our sense of what it means to be Canadian and share a responsibility to Canada and other Canadians. We are more committed to our systems and “the way things are done” than the results they are supposed to create. When I think about Newfoundland and Labrador’s role in Confederation and when I read the initial report of the Commission, what is demanded is not primarily a change in policy or an amendment to some law, but the desire and the will of the country and her leaders to actually understand the root of our problems, the effects they have on people, families and communities and try to fix them, only because it is the right thing to do. We do not understand that we are not meeting our potential and seem unwilling to imagine and strive for what is possible. We have the lost the will to be what we so badly want others to believe we are, the best country in the world in which to live.

All of the places I have worked have gone through some sort of crisis that has provided either the necessity or opportunity for change and the trick is in seizing the opportunity. Most countries or movements inside those countries have been successful because they have found allies and partners that share their commitment or will find mutual benefit in success.

Perhaps the next few years offer an opportunity that we have not had for a long time. We will have a new Prime Minister in the next 10 months, we have a new Prime Minister in Quebec who has based his mandate on making the Canadian federation work for his province, the Premier of Alberta has dismissed the debate on separation in his party with more proposals to change the role his province plays in the country, aboriginal leaders are promoting new

and creative forms of First Nations governance, most national political parties are openly discussing reforming the institutions of governance because they simply do not work. Certainly there is no consensus on the maladies and less on the solutions but there is a growing belief that government is not working for all Canadians. There is no intent to pass judgement here except to say so no one is happy, so lets see this as an opportunity. Canada will not go through a civil war or a drought of catastrophic proportions that will pull us apart and surely we will not allow lethargy or lack of courage do the same.

## **Understanding Ourselves**

The first time I went to Africa was by land, through 15 countries in six months. Most of those countries were as different from each other as they were from Canada. In the beginning one could only see the differences but very soon one was struck more and more by the similarities; we have so much more in common then we care to see. We need to see that all across Canada we share hopes and fears. Rural decay, the alienation of youth, the tragedy of aboriginal communities, concerns over healthcare and the challenges faced by women are felt in every city and hamlet in the country. The solutions are in those communities, if the people of those communities can recognize that we face common issues, share similar concerns, and then perhaps we can work together on solving them.

Sometimes I fear that we Canadians don't recognize ourselves. We have become a multi-racial and multi-ethnic society that is more and more urban. For the three founding nations this has come as a bit of a shock and naturally we are feeling not a little bit threatened. For those millions who have chosen to come to Canada, in the last 30 years particularly, their source of identification has been split between Canada and their ethnic and familial roots. To me these changes are exciting and though difficult, provide us an opportunity.

How well do we really know each other? Sure this sounds like a cliché but it is an important question. First, how well do we Newfoundlanders and Labradorians understand each other? How much does the crowd in St. John's really understand what has happened in Notre Dame Bay in the last 15 years unless we come from there? What do the people who live in Labrador West really know about Gaultois? What do any of us know about the real challenges faced by our diverse aboriginal communities? I suspect the answer is we may not know all the details but we have a sense of the loss, the fear and the challenge. All across the country we know a great deal more about our own provinces than we do the rest of the country. No, we should not start down that angst-filled road of the Canadian identity, it is the way it is and again perhaps it is another opportunity.

There is no doubt music, theatre, cinema and television have made Newfoundlanders and Labradorians better understood by Canadians, at least better recognized and, after far too long, favourably. But what do they really know about life in our province, the devastation of the rural life, the tremendous economic and technical success stories, the fears of parents about their kids' futures, the desire of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians to stop getting cheques and handouts and the real sense of unfairness?

And what do we know about the aspirations of Quebecois who see their language and culture disappearing? The prairie farmer who will lose the land his family has worked for 10 generations? Or the family in Oakville feeling threatened by encroaching industrialization and all its implications?

Too many of the world's conflicts are caused by fear and ignorance. So often knowledge and understanding lead to compassion and then to action. We have debated the Canadian identity for far too long and really have ended up nowhere. In the end does it matter other than to realize we share a commitment to the country and to each other? The hearings of the Royal Commission confirmed that commitment in this province and I have no doubt we would find it across the country if we were to ask. The first step, though, is creating the desire to solve these problems. And we need to see that each of us is less because of those ailments, and each of us strengthened when another is strengthened.

## **The Way Ahead**

What role can Newfoundlanders and Labradorians play in beginning to change attitudes in the minds of our leaders and our fellow citizens?

But what of the future of our province? The once life-giving cod fishery has collapsed, thousands are being displaced every year, huge parts of the province are being depopulated, communities are disappearing and a way of life is eroding before us. We have become frustrated that those few opportunities we do have, oil and gas and Labrador power are not helping us at our time of greatest need. It is not about getting more cash today; it is about what would seem fair and just in the country that strives so hard to bring fairness and justice around the world. It is about seizing the opportunity to stop a cycle of economic and fiscal dependence and begin a time of economic renewal and development suited to the realities of today and focused on the generations ahead.

There are no easy answers but the first step is to recognize that we can do better and owe it to ourselves and the world to try. We need the collective will to make difficult decisions and design effective solutions. If it is a matter of setting precedents that affect other provinces, perhaps they have legitimate concerns as well. If it is a matter of money, perhaps we have our priorities wrong. If it is a question of whether we have the mechanisms to move forward, then we need new mechanisms. We should know if we are unable or unwilling to look at the challenges facing Newfoundland and Labrador and those facing other Canadians. In the end it is not about systems or convention, it is about a country and her people. A country is nothing other than people and we are no stronger than the weakest. Each of us and all of us are better when we make decisions that reflect our long-held values of compassion, fairness, respect and decency. We bring this message around the world; it is time we brought it home.

May I offer some suggestions on some of the things we do to begin to develop the attitude we as a country need to develop before we can change our approach to making Canada a truly great country?

We have to communicate better. This does not mean more politicians going to Ottawa to plead our case. We have been doing it for years, explaining, arguing, pleading, begging, raging, demanding, asking, imploring, lobbying. It has not worked in the past and there is no reason it will in the future. We do not just need to tell Canadians what we are up against and how unfair this contract or that arrangement is but what it is doing to our people and therefore the country. We need to be able to articulate what is being lost and how much it matters and explain plainly and clearly that we are not asking for more of the same but something long-term and different. We need to correct so many of the misconceptions about what has happened to the people of our province and begin to put forward the creative options to make things better for us all. We need to be strategic as to who the audiences are: political leaders yes, but also opinion leaders, those who share our aspirations because they are going through the same challenges, such as Newfoundlanders and Labradorians living at home and across the country, Canadians everywhere. The message needs to go to people, they will demand that others who can act, will act. The messengers should be Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who are affected by the economic and social crises we face, our artists, our business, community and labour leaders, recognizable and credible people using the media, the stage, community meetings, universities, political party meetings and any other venue where people come together. The governor of Bethlehem has created a committee of more than 20 community, education, business, labour, religious, women and youth leaders to develop a multidimensional communications strategy to get that community's message to the world: tourists, investors, the Israelis, neighbours, donors, sympathizers and even detractors. It is just one example we can learn from.

We need to build coalitions of these same people to begin the debate, first by recognizing there is a problem in the country and expressing the will to address it. I have nightmares about First Ministers' conferences and Constitution Committee hearings. This should not be a gang-up of the unhappy coming into hotel ballrooms with a litany of complaints but a coming together of those committed to reforming the way the country works. The Royal Commission showed there is a will in our province for this approach; there is no need to think the same will does not exist in the rest of the country.

Without beating a dead horse, Newfoundlanders and Labradorians should continue the discussion started by the Royal Commission, investigating creative methods of community development, human development and economic development. How can we invest more strategically in communities, in young leaders, in new systems? We need to look past the accepted ways of doing things, and to people and places we have believed we have nothing to learn from.

More than anything we need to foster an attitude that we have an opportunity and an obligation to approach our challenges with an attitude of reaching excellence because that is what our country stands for. We need to create the belief that all Canadians can and should benefit from the wealth and prosperity of the country because that reflects our commitment to fairness, respect and dignity. We can show all Canadians that our sense of community is reflected in how we see Canada and that precious value is to be treasured by all Canadians as something that is important to us all.



## **The 100 Words....**

We Can Do Better, We Must Do Better looks at the values and expertise that Canada has exported around the world to improve the lives of so many people and countries in need. It draws parallels between what we have done abroad and what we should do at home. Canada offers so much to the world that is good and has so many advantages at home, but as a country we are not everything we can be. Many Canadians, especially those in Newfoundland and Labrador, face economic and social challenges and are frustrated that as a country we are unable or unwilling to address; we can and must do better.

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