

January 19, 2004

## **The Maritimes would be better off without transfers, and so would all of Canada**

They say in a democracy people get the government they deserve. I say they get the government they expect.

This is what Conservative Party leadership candidate Steve Harper was getting at when he went to New Brunswick last week and spoke the unspeakable truth-- again.

Two years ago he went out there and said the biggest problem facing Atlantic Canadians is their defeatist attitude. They expect to be poor and politically dependent, and so they are.

Such candor may be impolitic, but I think Harper's right, and it's time a federal party leader said it. When someone in the Alliance misspoke himself before the last election (I think he called Nova Scotians lazy) then-leader Stockwell Day felt obliged to twist himself in knots insisting that Nova Scotians are the "hardest-working people in Canada." Oh really.

Harper isn't saying Maritimers are lazy, of course. He's saying they think they can't make it on their own steam. And because they assume it, it's true.

They assume they need about 30 cents of every dollar in their economy to come as a net federal transfer from the economies of Ontario and Alberta. They needed that \$250,000 to keep Piccadilly

Plastics going in Port au Port, Newfoundland, and \$480,000 for the Atlantic Canada Cruise Association, and \$173,000 for a new sporting-goods manufacturing company in Yarmouth.

They assume they need the special eligibility rules for EI that Ottawa gave the Atlantic in 1971 - rules that siphon billions of federal dollars a year from Alberta into eastern Canada.

In short, Atlantic Canadians expect special treatment and they get it, and it does them no good. It just makes them more politically dependent and defensive.

But nobody's supposed to mention it. It's like being on welfare: too painful and embarrassing to talk about.

Of course, we've been brain-washed into believing that until the Liberals began funnelling gobs of money to so-called "have-not" provinces in the 1960s, Maritimers lived like beggars in Calcutta.

In fact, they were only slightly less prosperous than other Canadians. True there were poor folks in the outports without electricity, and kids in Halifax and St. John with bad teeth. But the same was true in Ontario, the Prairies and B.C.

The economist Fred McMahon, formerly of Halifax, wrote about

this problem in the November edition of Fraser Forum.

Canada, he says, transfers more regional equalization funds than any other country in the world. As a direct result, other countries or regions that were stagnant a generation ago (i.e. Ireland, the Dixie cotton states, Taiwan) have adapted and are now prosperous in their own right while Atlantic Canada is still hooked on political hand-outs that Ottawa transfers from Alberta.

However, if Atlantic Canadians are saps for taking the money, contributing regions are even worse saps for paying it. They have never seriously attacked the system. How often have we heard provincial politicians in Alberta, Ontario and B.C. fall into the fatuous federal rhetoric of "national sharing," instead of telling Ottawa to back off and leave everyone alone?

It isn't "sharing," and it benefits nobody except the federal politicians and bureaucrats who make their living handing it out.

But to put a stop to it, we must raise our expectations.

- *Link Byfield*

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