NOT A NATION!

(OR WHY NEWFOUNDLAND NATIONALISM DOESN'T MAKE HISTORICAL SENSE)

BY SEAN CADIGAN

The fifteenth in a series of articles developed from regular public forums sponsored by the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development. Memorial Presents features speakers from Memorial University who address issues of public concern in the province.

Since 1949, appeals to nationalist sentiment have been important in our provincial governments' negotiation of their relationship with the rest of Canada. Newfoundlanders and Labradorians often respond positively to this nationalist appeal because they apparently share a strong identity defined by a common sense of place and experience. The problem is that the ethnic, gendered, and class differences in our experience should make us skeptical about the extent to which our interests are the same. Rallying to the nationalist call has often meant that we diminish the history of struggle and conflict among ourselves. By ignoring this history, we are not setting aside our differences. Instead, nationalists ask us to pretend that these differences do not exist, or that they are somehow much less important than their goals.

Newfoundland nationalism grew in environmental conditions that permitted great fisheries but poor agriculture. Elsewhere, commercial agriculture fostered stronger local commercial, industrial, and urban development throughout the 19th century. This development, in turn, promoted earlier colonial self-government than in Newfoundland, and much earlier independence from merchant capital. Political reformers argued that Newfoundland would have kept pace if its development had not been stymied by a mythic cabal of fish merchants and officials. This reform fiction appealed to British authorities. Newfoundland gained colonial self-government by 1855 with the understanding that colonial governments would foster economic diversification. Throughout the late 19th century, mostly Liberal governments fought for control of the French Shore, built railways, and let mineral and forest resources on easy terms to international corporations. These efforts saddled Newfoundland with more debt than development, which eventually drove it into economic and political bankruptcy in the 1930s, the loss of responsible government, and then Confederation with Canada. The reform legacy meant that it was often easy to blame outside influences for what were mostly internally created problems.

Within Confederation, J.R. Smallwood's governments pursued development policies like those of his Liberal predecessors. While Smallwood's rhetoric suggested that he stood up for ordinary Newfoundlanders, his actions demonstrated otherwise. In 1959, Smallwood stood with international paper companies against striking loggers, denigrating their union – the International Woodworkers of America – as a fifth column of communists, gangsters and pimps. The wily Premier diluted public anger about his actions through his battle with the federal government over subsidies in the Term 29 debate, but he continued to favour corporations, handing over a large part of the Labrador interior to the British Newfoundland Corporation (Brinco) for development, and dispossessing the Innu of their rights to the interior through resettlement and attempted assimilation.

While many Newfoundlanders cry foul about the unequal deal struck between Hydro Quebec and Brinco in 1969 for the hydro development of Churchill Falls, we rarely consider that the project subsequently flooded thousands of square miles of Innu land without their being consulted or compensated. "Churchill Falls," for

many, became symbolic of Newfoundland's weak position within Confederation, but it also represents Newfoundland governments' historical inability to come to terms with the rights and needs of the various peoples, particularly of Labrador, who live within provincial boundaries.

A younger generation was rejecting Smallwood by the late 1960s partially through rediscovered nationalism. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Brian Peckford simplified the complex problems facing the peoples of the province; Newfoundlanders, he argued, always got poor deals such as Churchill Falls because of their colonial mentality. We had simply transferred our inferiority complex from Britain to Canada through Confederation. The latest example of this was in federal control over offshore oil development. The provincial government fought the federal government over controlling offshore development, ultimately losing the legal battle in the Supreme Court, but winning the hearts and minds of many people in the province to Peckford's nationalism.

The case of the *Ocean Ranger* suggests that the Peckford government looked after some interests much better than others. Newfoundland and Ottawa rushed oil exploration in the 1970s. Both governments paid little attention to offshore workers' safety. This inattention proved tragic in February 1982, when a storm damaged and led to the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger* with the loss of 84 lives, including 56 Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. Later investigations attributed the tragedy to poor rig design, poor training for crew members, and inadequate safety equipment. A later provincial royal commission suggested that the Newfoundland government's local hiring preference may have lessened safety on the rig. Some relatives of the lost workers reported that the provincial government treated them as nuisances in the wake of the disaster.

Working people made less dramatic sacrifices for the national good throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Tory governments decried fish harvesters who tried to get better prices for fish by selling their catches over the side to foreign vessels. These fishers were supposed to protect "our Newfoundland way of life" by accepting lower prices offered by Newfoundland processors. Improperly laid off miners and paper workers in Wabush, Baie Verte and Corner Brook had their unpaid wages swept away in 1984 by Bill 37, even as the provincial government provided Kruger with $64 million in financial support to take over the paper mill in Corner Brook through Bill 52. The province also restricted public-sector workers' right to strike through Bill 59, which the Newfoundland Association of Public Employees appealed in the Supreme Court in 1985. Although the appeal failed, Memorial University philosopher F.L. Jackson, occasional apologist for Peckford, attacked the union's president, Fraser March, as a traitor to the true Newfoundland.

Many in the labour movement reacted against Peckford by turning to the Liberals under Clyde Wells, who took office in 1989. Wells garnered popular support partially from those who thought he was standing up against Ottawa and Quebec in the case of the Meech Lake Accord. A strong federalist and fiscal conservative who opposed the erosion of federal authority and distinct status for Quebec, Wells's opposition helped defeat Meech Lake. This defeat was cold comfort to the provincial labour movement, which faced more provincial retrenchment and even abrogation of existing union contracts. The public-sector unions' campaign against the Wells government was overshadowed by the ecological and economic disaster that led to the cod moratorium of 1992.

The fisheries crisis, which federal fisheries management helped create, deprived thousands of people of their livelihoods. However, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador and many people in the province had either participated with the federal government and/or pressured it to permit over-expansion of our own fishing capacity. Ultimately, it was the Fish, Food, and Allied Workers (FFAW), led by Richard Cashin, which pushed Ottawa hard for compensation and adjustment programs, limited and problematic as they subsequently proved to be. The fisheries crisis boosted local nationalist sentiment, but it was fishers and plant workers, working through their own union, who found a way to cope with the moratorium.

There are other examples of what people may achieve when they pursue their own interests. The Tobin and Grimes governments expected greater provincial benefits from the mining of the Voisey's Bay nickel discovery. However, it is clear that the Innu Nation and the Labrador Inuit Association (LIA) would not permit development on their lands without agreements for acceptable local benefits and greater progress on land claims with the federal and provincial governments. Even among First Nations, nationalism may obscure important social divisions. In the case of the LIA, for example, Inuit women spoke in 1998 about how they felt that male negotiators from the LIA and the federal and provincial governments were more interested in the industrialization of natural resources than in the social and cultural impacts of such development. Arguing that they would bear the brunt of such impacts, women wanted negotiators to consider the impact of land claims and industrial development on their lives.

Other divisions among the peoples of Newfoundland and Labrador are becoming sharper. The most obvious is the growing disparity between the people of the northeast Avalon Peninsula and just about everyone else in the province. Rural people enjoy few of the benefits of offshore oil development, and they bear the brunt of industrial shut-downs and high unemployment. This is not a recent phenomenon. In the early 20th century, William Coaker of the Fishermen's Protective Union condemned the manner in which the St. John's economy grew at the expense of outport people.

The nationalism of the 1970s had romanticized the outports, but we should take a hard look at the darker side of an outport champion such as Coaker. The FPU leader's "true Newfoundlander" was a man of British descent only, and he saw people such as the Chinese as "unworthy of being called men." There is always peril in deciding who are the "true Newfoundlanders" or Labradorians, for that matter. If history is any judge, then it seems that most of the peoples of this province have been less than equal members of our "great" nation. Most Labradorians feel used by the island; rural people enjoy fewer benefits than urban people; unionized workers are expected to sacrifice constantly for development; and it goes on and on.

Perhaps such sacrifices might be easier to shoulder if all did so equally, but the prophets of nationalism identify and pursue their own interests without too much regard for the rest of us. Consider one of Newfoundland's leading capitalists, Craig Dobbin, who was well-known for his view that Newfoundland and Labrador failed to get a fair share of the revenues from non-renewable natural-resource exploitation and federal equalization programs. However, in 2004, Dobbin's Canadian Helicopters Corporation moved its head office from St. John's to Vancouver. Although embarrassed, Dobbin defended the move as an act of international corporate concentration and rationalization. "Why Vancouver and not St. John's? Because I had 350 people in Vancouver already working out there and I had 35 in St. John's." Dobbin was clear that individual or corporate interests were more important than any nationalist one when it suited him.

Many people use nationalist sentiment to express common experiences of economic disadvantage, and to blame external forces for our woes. The problem is that the effort to rally against such external forces often blinds us to what we may suffer at the hands of other "true sons of Newfoundland." For example, in 2004, the Williams government legislated thousands of members of NAPE back to work following a bitter public-sector strike. NAPE's president called the legislation "a flagrant disregard [for] the human rights of our members and the basic principles of freedom of association." Nonetheless, the premier's subsequent battles with the federal government over offshore oil revenues and equalization programs obscured our view of Williams' treatment of NAPE workers.

Nationalism fabricates the notion that peoples of diverse interests are really one, that they should mobilize in support of a particular interest group or party, and that some of us have a greater duty to the nation than others. Newfoundland and Labrador is the home of a variety of peoples who, on a day-to-day basis

within the context of their communities, are defined far more by their class, gender and ethnicity than by political elites' nationalism. Since Confederation, politicians have used a particular form of nationalist Ottawa-bashing to distract the peoples of Newfoundland and Labrador from how they have been treated by the provincial government and to co-opt their support. Apologists for our failed national policies of development historically and erroneously blamed "outsiders" – British merchants, Ottawa, and/or Quebec have been the most prominent. The problem is that using nationalism is like uncorking a mean-spirited genie: we begin to identify dissenters as self-interested at best, or traitors at worst. Our history is more accurately one of profound internal social divisions than it is of national oppression or struggle. NQ

This article is based on a presentation at a "Memorial Presents" public forum on nationalism in Newfoundland and Labrador organized by Memorial University's Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development in St. John's on May 13, 2009. The author drew the presentation from his recent work Newfoundland and Labrador: A History, *published by the University of Toronto Press this year. (For a review see p. 56.)*

Dr. Sean Cadigan is a professor in the Department of History, Memorial University of Newfoundland.