

# NEW STORIES FROM NEWFOUNDLAND: From Poverty to Prosperity?

BY KEVIN MORGAN

THE TWENTIETH 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.

*Little did I think that on my maiden trip to Newfoundland some things would feel so familiar. Yet, as soon as I arrived, I encountered the same issues that I had just left behind in Wales – urban growth, rural decline, restructuring old industries, the lack of affordable housing, cultural stereotyping, food security, local government amalgamation. And, underlying all these issues, the burning question of how government needed to craft smarter, more innovative partnerships with business and civil society.*

**A**lthough I have travelled to Canada many times since my first trip in the 1970s, when I undertook a Masters degree at McMaster, the opportunity to visit Newfoundland never arose until an invite arrived from Rob Greenwood, the director of the Harris Centre at Memorial University. Too good to ignore, the invite involved two formal events – giving a public lecture on food security and attending a regional development conference in the Irish Loop.

## **What's For Dinner?**

The food security lecture was part of the *Memorial Presents* series of public lectures, an event that turned into a lively and well-informed debate with local people about the impacts of food on our bodies, our society and our planet. Food planning, I argued, was set to become a major issue for all sorts of communities, from the largest cities to the smallest municipalities, because of two threats in particular – the burgeoning cost of diet-related diseases (like obesity, heart disease and diabetes) and the looming threat of climate change (which would induce more sustainable patterns of production and consumption). One consumer response to these threats, I suggested, was the growing demand for more locally-produced food, which was deemed to be better for our bodies and our planet.

But in the ensuing exchanges I was reminded that we were in Newfoundland and Labrador, where the outlook for locally-produced food was extremely poor, not least because of the extraordinarily short growing season. To be honest, I hadn't realised how brief the local growing season is, just 3-4 months it seems, a chastening reminder that context is king when we are trying to fashion practical solutions to challenging problems.

Despite the limitations of its natural environment, I said, surely something could be done to promote healthier diets and create a more secure and sustainable food system. After all, didn't the province have some of the highest rates of diet-related illness in Canada?

The audience needed little prompting to come up with its own solutions. One of the *supply-side* limits to a local food strategy was said to be the shortage of land, but what about all the Crown Land in the province? Surely that is a resource, if the political will was there to make it so?

On the *demand-side* I had identified the potential of the public plate – that is, public sector purchasing policy – as a way to raise the quality of food served in schools, hospitals, care homes and the like. Was the power of the public plate being deployed in the province to raise the demand for better, more

sustainably produced food? Apparently it wasn't.

One of the final arguments that I sought to make, an argument that seemed to resonate with many people in the audience, was that *all* institutions have a food policy. Some practise it by *design*, in the sense that they are fully conscious of its multi-dimensional effects on human health and ecological integrity, while others practise it by *default*, in the sense that they are wholly oblivious to the quality of food flowing into their premises, thereby perpetrating a “cheap-food” culture which makes a mockery of their duty of care<sup>1</sup>.

I left the public debate with three overriding memories of the event: (i) the well-informed contributions of the local audience; (ii) the deep anxieties that people nursed about the quality of food in the province; and (iii) the exemplary nature of this “town and gown” event, proving that Memorial University is second to none when it comes to community engagement.

### **Local Governance, Creativity and Regional Development**

Moving from St. John's to Bauline East in the Irish Loop was another memorable experience. Quite apart from the unforgettable landscape – replete with ecological reserves, archaeological sites, hiking trails and whale-watching tours – I was culturally discombobulated to encounter the local dialect – a thick Irish brogue that one usually associates with the Irish Republic. The aptly named Celtic Rendezvous was the setting for a warm and stimulating conference on local governance, creativity and regional development.

To my mind four themes recurred throughout the conference, the clearest being the growing *urban-rural divide* in the province. Rapid urbanization, as we know, poses two very different problems – depopulation in the rural areas that are being abandoned and resource pressures in burgeoning cities. Most people seemed to agree that the existing structure of small rural settlements was unsustainable. In the short term I sensed that rural municipalities would have to collaborate to make public services more cost effective; and, in the longer term, they would have to amalgamate. Although some of these areas would cease to have an employment function, they could become leisure centres, where urban dwellers maintained a presence in the countryside.

A second theme was the shortcomings of *local governance*. Referring to the quality of municipal

government, for example, one Newfoundlander went so far as to say that “we are a basket case below the provincial level.” Everyone agreed that government in the province – both provincial and municipal government – needed to become smarter, more innovative and more

honest. This last point triggered a fascinating debate about the debilitating legacy of the “Westminster” system of government, which meant that government officials could never admit they didn't know the answer to a problem. This pretentious attitude, what we call the “Raj” style of government in Wales, means that public officials are not expected to involve themselves in collective learning-by-doing exercises with their partners in civil society or the business community. Although these local governance problems are in no way confined to Newfoundland and Labrador, they do seem to be particularly acute here, warranting urgent action.

The third theme was the most novel of all for me – the *challenge of prosperity* in a province habituated to poverty. Discovering oil and gas can be a mixed blessing, especially where high revenue streams coincide with weak governance systems, the fatal amalgam called the “resource curse”. Some countries have put their energy revenues to good use, Norway being the best example, while others have been torn apart, Nigeria being the most notorious illustration.

How well is the province managing its oil and gas revenues? There was no agreement on this key issue. Some local experts said it was doing as well as could be expected under the circumstances, while others argued that there was no long-term developmental strategy to lay the foundations for new skills, technology, infrastructure and affordable housing, for example. These anxieties chimed with my conversations with local people outside the conference, many of whom feared that prosperity would induce greater inequality – *spatially* between urban and rural areas and *socially* between the haves and the have-nots. I realise that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, but I came away with the impression that the next five years could make or break the province.

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The fourth theme concerned the negative *cultural stereotyping* of “Newfies” by mainland Canada, a theme that resonated for me because the Welsh are also the butts of ethnic jokes in the UK. What was so refreshing about the conference, however, was the way this theme was handled. Rather than a worthy panel of academics pontificating about how badly the mainland portrays the province, we were treated to a hilarious evening of entertainment, where the issues of creativity, culture and identity were explored with a panel of three highly talented local artists – Andy Jones of CODCO fame, David Maggs, the founder of the Gros Morne Summer Music Festival, and Jillian Keiley of the Artistic Fraud theatre company.

Despite the burden of mainland stereotypes, in which Newfoundlanders were deemed to be odd characters, the artists saw opportunities as well as threats in the metropolitan provincialism of the mainland media because it allowed them to challenge these stereotypes through probing political comedy. This was especially the case with the wonderfully engaging Andy Jones, whose special talent was to get people, locals as well as mainlanders, to laugh at these stereotypes and, through laughter, to subvert them.

Reflecting on the cultural evening, I realised that something else was going on amidst the mirth. The local artists were telling *new stories* about the province, about its people and about their complex (and changing) relationships with the rest of Canada. In doing so, it seemed to me that they were also re-inventing what it meant to be a Newfoundlander - an identity that is far more capacious than the stereotype, an identity that is broad and multiple rather than narrow and singular, an identity that is becoming more cosmopolitan as it absorbs the “come-from-aways” as well as the “been-aways”. Through their storytelling, artists can help people and places to think of themselves in more creative and confident ways, a process that can leaven the worlds of business and politics because it helps to fashion new place-based narratives on which other storytellers can draw.

Most regional development conferences tend to follow the same trajectory – they begin by discussing the “hard” economic trends, but end up engrossed in the “soft” or intangible issues of culture, cooperation, governance, trust, etc. This is no bad thing because the greatest economic development theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Albert Hirschman and Gunnar Myrdal in particular – attributed great significance to the role of “non-economic” factors in economic development. <sup>2</sup>

## Finally...Whither St. John's?

The significance of these “non-economic” factors was unexpectedly confirmed by the final event of my trip – an unscheduled presentation on St. John's “strategic economic roadmap” designed to solicit the views of outsiders like me. With nearly 40% of the provincial population, St. John's was clearly looming larger and larger in the life of the province. One of the main problems, we were informed, is a chronic shortage of premiere (“Class A”) office space, leaving the city ill-equipped to cater for the more creative functions of the knowledge economy.

Trying to be constructive, I suggested that this problem might be solved if the economic strategy was framed in the wider context of the city-region, which is what cities and their regional hinterlands are striving to do everywhere these days. The response was honest but shocking. Apparently, city planners in St. John's are not allowed to think in city-regional terms because it raises the spectre of amalgamation with the neighbouring city of Mount Pearl, which is jealous of its independence.

To an outsider this looked like parochialism on a grand scale, a denial of what was most urgently needed here – namely high level political agreement on a sustainable city-region strategy to help the province mobilise its limited resources in a balanced and equitable fashion.

I had naively assumed that politicians and planners on the Avalon peninsula would be well aware of the dividends of the city-region framework, not least because researchers at Memorial University were part of a five-year Canadian research project on this very subject, a project that demonstrated the tangible economic benefits of city-regionalism if local politicians, planners and entrepreneurs had the talent and the vision to fashion more enabling systems of local governance.

This is exactly the challenge we are facing in Wales, where Cardiff and its regional hinterland are trying to bury the political rivalries of the past for what they hope and believe will be a more fulfilling future. Small world. ☞

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- 1 K. Morgan and R. Sonnino (2010) *The School Food Revolution: Public Food and the Challenge of Sustainable Development* (Earthscan).
- 2 A. O. Hirschman (1958) *The Strategy of Economic Development* (Yale University Press); G. Myrdal (1957) *Economic Theory and Under-Developed Regions* (Duckworth).