

The Maritime Ambassador Speaks

If I were Ambassador from the Maritimes to Upper and Outer Canada, here is what I would say to the befuddled heathens of Ottawa and the lesser capitals: You will never understand the Maritimes without understanding Buddhist economics.

In Buddhist thought, says E.F.Schumacher, work has three main functions: to allow people to develop their abilities; to enable them to overcome their preoccupation with self by working with others at a shared task; and (last and least) "to bring forth the goods and services needed for a becoming existence." To think that work is primarily about production and consumption and money is simply primitive.

Maritimers know this almost instinctively. Survey after survey shows that Maritimers care more about the quality of their lives than about economic opportunity. They like their communities more or less as they are. (How many people in the industrial world can say as much?) They find it important to be close to their families, to make music with friends, to trust and rely on their neighbours, to work collectively on boats and in workshops and on community projects. If the house and the truck are paid for, and your work gives you (in a revealing Maritime phrase) "enough to get by," what more would a sane person want?

The fact that most Maritimers are not strongly motivated by individual greed seems to infuriate Canadian pundits and policymakers. The fact that we are deeply motivated to preserve our communities and our lifestyle seems to elude them.

Case in point: I live on Isle Madame, pop. 4300. When the cod-fishing crisis struck here, 500 jobs vanished. That's the equivalent of 277,000 jobs disappearing overnight in Toronto. But since 1994 the island has undertaken a surprising transformation.

A committee of island residents hired consultants, who trained local people as facilitators. The facilitators fanned out to the kitchens and workshops, asking what a good future would look like. The committee established Development Isle Madame Association (DIMA) with cunning old codgers on its Board and sharp, educated young people on its staff. DIMA polled 140 businesses and many community groups about economic opportunities. Then it asked the whole population to rank the resulting 443 business ideas.

That poll identified six areas of interest: aquaculture and seafood, wood products, niche tourism, information and culture, crafts and small manufacturing, and specialized agriculture. And, since our island offers superb low-cost sailing, we decided to lure "Grey Tigers," early-retired boaters with relevant skills. If you're an out-placed skipper with marketing smarts, come on down.

Meanwhile, a Social Renewal Task Group had contacted every unemployed fisheries worker, linking each to training, counselling and support. More than half are now employed outside the fishery or are taking training. And we hit on a model of renewal which knits training and job creation together in a single continuous process.

For example, our first Grey Tiger, Graham Reeve, noted that most of our people are French-speaking Acadians, and proposed a bilingual call centre. DIMA set up a joint venture with him -- Reeve holds 10%, DIMA 90% -- and got federal funding for a training program at the local "campus" of the all-electronic College de l'Acadie. Trade Winds Call Centre opens next month, with nine employees and the prospect of 50 more jobs within a year. Both the call centre and the College are located in a splendid new Acadian cultural centre called La Picasse.

A training program in video production prepared us to open a community TV studio for the local cable system. Four jobs, and a new source of community information. DIMA created a Small Options home to train and care for challenged people within the community. Seven more jobs. We've just instituted the province's first functioning Community Investment Co-operative, so we can use RRSP savings locally. The CIC raised \$150,000 for aquaculture ventures. Twenty-odd seasonal jobs now, and the potential for dozens more.

DIMA isn't the whole story of renewal on Isle Madame. Other entrepreneurs operate wood kilns and seafood plants, buying raw materials off-island and selling into Europe and the US. A hard-driving local oil dealer established a chain of service stations across the Maritimes. We've seen new restaurants, bed-and-breakfasts, taverns, food stores. Overall, Isle Madame has created perhaps 150 new jobs in three or four years.

DIMA operates on about \$85,000 a year. It survives on grants and guts; when it runs dry, its young staffers draw pogeey and work as volunteers. We've had our failures -- but, says Alvin Martell, once president of the fish-plant union, "in a few years we'll be better off than we ever were."

People were not made for the economy; the economy was made for people. In my country, we understand that. Deep thinkers in Canada apparently don't. The Ambassador thanks you for your time.