

The Botheration Scheme Revisited

ISLE MADAME, NS –

by Silver Donald Cameron

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In Edmonton, on a crisp April morning, the A Channel is doing its Big Breakfast broadcast on the sidewalk of Jasper Avenue. The Oilers have won their first playoff game, and everyone is wearing Oilers jerseys. The sidewalk is crowded with bystanders, dog-owners, singer Bobby Curtola, and one Maritime author, flogging his book.

"Hey, great to have someone from home on the show," says host Mark Scholz. "I'm from Halifax. Love your work. You've gotta say Hello to Steve Antle, my co-host. He's from Sydney. Over there – the guy in the purple hair."

The Maritime Underground is everywhere. The car-rental agent in Vancouver is from Concession, NS. The Toronto TV interviewer is a Haligonian. So is the woman who does the make-up. The guy shooting pool in Egmont, BC, is from Edmundston, NB. In Ottawa, a woman from Isle Madame brings me photos of Pondville Beach, which I discuss in the book. The guy at the CBC reception desk hails from Saint John. Because my book is about beaches, their nostrils recall the iodine scent of the Atlantic landwash, their ears hear the echo of the surf. Most of them didn't want to leave. But most will never move home.

This tells me two things. First, the dispersion of the Maritimers demonstrates the failure of Confederation. Second, after 130 years there is a Canadian family, and Maritimers have everywhere become part of it.

Confederation was intended to solve the intractable problems between Upper and Lower Canada by submerging Quebec in a larger union. Maritimers didn't want it. Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland didn't join, and New Brunswick had to be bribed. Nova Scotians overwhelmingly rejected the union in an election held three months too late. Joseph Howe said "the Botheration Scheme" would be a disaster for Nova Scotia, and it was; it turned a small, nearly-independent marine trading nation situated in the middle of the North Atlantic market into a peripheral outpost of a continental empire centred on the St. Lawrence. The most persistent separatists in Canadian history have been Nova Scotians, whose agitation continued well into the 20th century.

After 130 years, however, we have been Canadians for almost half our history. We can't just walk away; we have family all over Canada. But Confederation still isn't working. What do we do?

In Calgary, I lunched at the Petroleum Club, a citadel of political primitivism. (Albertans tend to think they are rich because they are politically clever. I think they are rich despite their ideas; their province is swimming in oil.) My host, however, was no primitive; he was Grey Austin, a geologist and semi-retired oilfield consultant raised in Barbados and educated in Quebec. (His wife is from West Bay, NS.) Grey Austin thinks we are engaged in a sterile debate based on a false premise. Canada, he argues, includes not two nations, but six. Who can negotiate with Quebec – especially since our most powerful "federal" politicians are Quebecers, enmeshed in Quebec's internal debate?

Austin proposes that we start with a clean sheet of paper. Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairies, BC and the North represent natural communities of interest. Suppose they were separate nations negotiating a common market, like the Europeans. What would each be prepared to sacrifice for the advantages of being in a larger whole? What would be the deal-breakers for each unit? Atlantic Canada and BC would insist on control of the fisheries. Quebec would claim jurisdiction over language and culture. The Prairies would demand control of oil, gas, potash, agriculture. But -- negotiating as equals -- we might agree to share a currency, an army, a passport, a set of minimum environmental and social security standards, and an Olympic hockey team. And we could count on a reservoir of goodwill rooted in 130 years of shared experience.

I put this idea to my top adviser on constitutional affairs, a distinguished professor of politics who happens to be my brother. An interesting thought, he said, but it would require that the Prairies and the Maritimes develop mechanisms for working together. So it would, and that would be a useful evolution in any case.

Few Canadians really want to dismantle Canada. But the Botheration Scheme still doesn't serve its people well. We have spent 30 sterile years tinkering with it. What if we really went back to first principles, striving to build a country based not on a bogus unity, but on ties of history and affection, and on values which we deeply share?

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