

Comment/Commentaire

Hard Luck: The Failure of Regional Planning in Nova Scotia

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Canada is a confederation of regions, each with different heritages and resources, divergent needs and desires. Since 1867, politicians have faced the daunting task of meeting competing regional claims for advantage and development. Successive governments have attempted to improve regional economies in an effort to enhance national growth and prosperity.

According to Robinson and Webster (1985), government initiatives since the 1950s have featured two forms of regional planning: regional (economic) development planning and regional land-use planning. Regional development planning in Canada began in earnest with attacks on "regional economic disparity" after World War II. Land-use planning on a regional basis characterized some government efforts during the 1960s and 1970s, although, as Robinson and Webster have indicated, it proved poorly formulated and relatively unsuccessful.

This paper examines the failure of regional planning in Nova Scotia. While it seeks to explain the short life of regional land-use planning initiatives in the late 1960s and early 1970s, of necessity it also explores some of the problems of regional development planning, for in fact the two are closely linked in Nova Scotia. Indeed, regional land-use planning served as a means of trying to achieve regional economic development. Neither type of regional planning met the objectives set for it, however, and neither persists in a meaningful form today. Efforts to bring regional planning to Nova Scotia failed because

they ignored the political culture of the region and the realities of the modern political economy. Experience illustrates the gap between theory and practice in regional planning: the best-intentioned plans cannot produce “development” when they disregard either international economic realities or community values and structures.

Regional Development Planning in the Maritimes: A Brief History

The Maritimes faced de-industrialization and disinvestment as early as the 1890s, long before the heartland of North America experienced high-wage job losses (Lorimer 1986a, 1986b; Williams 1987). In fact, the depression that hit the region in the 1920s never really ended (Cook 1987). Although Ottawa spent millions of dollars over the decades trying to turn a “hopeless basket case” into a prosperous industrial centre, instead it fostered dependency and underdevelopment (Surette 1988: 30).

Regional development planning in the 1950s and 1960s sought to redress perceived inadequacies in the Atlantic Region. Various programmes poured money into infrastructure development: roads, bridges, and wharves (Howland 1957; Savoie 1986). Moreover, federal transfer payments rapidly raised average incomes in the province toward the national average, but economic prosperity remained elusive.

During the 1960s the “growth centre” theory began increasingly to dominate regional development planning decisions. It argued that viable urban centres stimulate regional growth more efficiently and effectively than dispersed settlements. In the post-World War II era industrialized cities grew rapidly; planners believed that if Maritime centres grew, they too could enjoy industrial advantages. While the growth centre approach contributed to the dominance of such regional centres as Halifax-Dartmouth in Nova Scotia, the benefits of such growth did not trickle down to other communities (Matthews 1977). Out of such urban-centred regional development initiatives came Nova Scotia’s brief foray into regional land-use planning.

Regional Land-Use Planning in Canada

According to the father of Canadian planning, Thomas Adams, regional land-use planning was the most efficient and most scientific way to manage urban land (Adams 1921), but for 30-40 years most provinces and municipalities ignored his message. Cultural events in the late 1960s, however, finally put regional planning on the national agenda.

A number of factors contributed to the public perception that regional planning might offer a solution to urban ills. First, rapid urban growth and population restructuring in the post-war years placed an incredible strain on municipal services such as schools and roads. Planners recognized that the problems they faced surpassed the mandates of existing governmental structures (Gertler 1984) and perhaps exceeded the ability of local politicians to manage (Richardson 1968). Hans Blumenfeld (1960: 124) insisted that “the time is ripe for regional planning”. Planners, as well as many senior bureaucrats and politicians, believed that regional problems demanded regional solutions.

Second, the political and social climate of the late 1960s spurred politicians to head in new directions. Urban citizens movements demanded action on all kinds of problems (Higgins 1981, 1985). The success of Expo '67 and Canada’s Centennial made the nation and its planners eager to set challenging goals for the next century (Richardson 1967).

Regional planning, then, became part of the “modern-thinking” provinces such as Ontario, embedded into such programmes as the “Design for Development” in the late 1960s (Thoman 1971: 26). Such ideas permeated the profession, spread through the pages of *Plan Canada*, and guided the practice of such influential Canadian planners as Leonard Gertler and Hans Blumenfeld.

Regional Planning Comes to Nova Scotia

In the mid-1960s the director of the Community Planning Division of the Nova Scotia Department of Municipal Affairs, Reg Lang, convinced the provincial government to review town planning legislation passed in 1939, with subsequent amendments. From that review came a new planning act in 1969. According to Lang (1972: 152), “[The review] concluded that regional planning is the key to effective, coordinated planning; that the Province had to play a stronger role in regional planning; and that the final planning system created by the Act had to strengthen, not weaken, local planning”. As a planner, Lang saw regional planning as efficient and comprehensive; as a government bureaucrat, he recognized that it would work only if municipalities cooperated; as a pragmatist, he knew that municipalities would cooperate only if given appropriate incentives or explicit directives to do so.

Circumstances converged to create the first true regional planning commission in the province just as Lang and his staff worked on drafting the 1969 act. Although 1964 provincial legislation had

established the Halifax-Dartmouth and County Regional Planning Commission with limited advisory powers, no regional planning occurred. In 1969, however, Ottawa offered the Halifax region nearly \$2 million in Department of Regional Economic Expansion (DREE) funding, provided that it commission a regional development plan. Thus, the province hired consultants to draft a plan and formed the Metropolitan Area Planning Committee or MAPC (Lang 1972).

At this stage Nova Scotia terminology blurred Robinson and Webster's (1985) distinction between land-use planning and economic development planning. The 1969 Planning Act called for "regional development plans", which were really regional land-use plans. In effect, through the MAPC process regional land-use planning served as a means to the end of regional development. The term "regional development planning" subsumed land-use planning as a series of tools and techniques used to create conditions favourable to development.

The problem of how to forge co-operation between competitive municipalities became apparent immediately. The consultant hired to produce a regional development plan ultimately offered two options—one that made Dartmouth happy and one that satisfied Halifax—but the municipalities did not fully implement either version. Public frustration over the secrecy in which MAPC cloaked itself spawned a new citizen's group, MOVE (MOVEment for Citizens' Voice and Action). Nonetheless, the region received, and spent, the DREE funds on infrastructure development but then effectively shelved the regional plan.

In 1971, as bureaucrats waxed enthusiastic about the potential of regional planning, the Nova Scotia government initiated an inquiry into "education, public services and provincial-municipal relations" (Graham Commission 1974). Reporting in 1974, the Graham Commission recommended a revolutionary restructuring of municipal government. Eleven county councils would virtually replace the existing 60-odd municipalities and make sound planning possible. But municipal politicians refused to accept the scheme,¹ and the province never implemented the commission's recommendations on regional government.

Under the Metropolitan Authority, MAPC continues to operate, but it has not produced a regional plan since the mid-1970s. Municipalities in the region continue to fight one another for industrial and commercial opportunities. The authority manages the

¹Although municipal politicians have fought amalgamation proposals in the past, the Federation of Nova Scotia Municipalities passed a resolution at its 1989 meeting calling for some rationalization of municipal government. As the federal and provincial governments pass an ever greater share of the burden for social services and physical infrastructure maintenance on to local governments, municipal politicians are perhaps beginning to accept restructuring as inevitable.

transit system, the regional landfill site, and the water system, but seems otherwise inactive in regional planning.

Perhaps the politicians of 1969 did not fully appreciate the political implications of regional planning when they approved the 1969 act. During the 1970s, Department of Municipal Affairs staff visited various regions of the province in a vain effort to "sell" regional land-use planning, but virulent opposition developed (Hawboldt 1976). In the late 1970s, with Reg Lang long gone, and following a succession of provincial governments lacking the political will to force bureaucrats' visions on constituents, regional planning drew its dying breath. In the early 1980s the province began another review of its planning act. This time "regional development planning" disappeared in the revisions, replaced by weaker forms of intermunicipal, co-operative "land-use" planning. Thus, provincial land-use policies, promised since 1969, remain a dream, and regional problems linger unresolved.

Why Did Regional Planning Fail?

As one of the earliest colonies in Canada, Nova Scotia has had over two centuries in which to develop a distinctive political character. Unlike provinces farther west, it always has had a fairly homogeneous population, mostly of Scottish and English origin. Political values developed in a centrally controlled system where responsible government arrived only in 1879. By the 1840s or 1850s conservatism and acceptance of the status quo figured prominently in Nova Scotia political values (Beck 1973).

Patronage

In his monumental study of patronage in Canadian politics, Jeffrey Simpson (1988: 172) noted that "in the 1980s Nova Scotia's political culture was fundamentally the same as in the 1860s". Simpson argued that particular men, not ideas, have always dominated Nova Scotia politics, making the province especially vulnerable to patronage.

Thus, the massive grants funnelled into the province through regional development planning became grist for the patronage mill, doled out of the pork-barrel into the ridings of loyal government members. As Savoie (1986) recognized, all politicians want the benefits of government spending for their own communities, for therein lies the key to re-election. Hence, the rationale for project selection often included "irrational" political factors, which undoubtedly frustrated the planners with their logical theories and comprehensive plans for regional development.

Patronage politics tends to make politicians wary of bureaucrats who argue that governments should base spending decisions on the logic of "experts". While DREE planners set up criteria by which the regions would attain development through a comprehensive planning process, they could not influence the dynamics of government spending traditions in Nova Scotia; DREE money followed old patronage habits and went into road building and other politically productive projects.

Provincial planners probably believed that MAPC could bring rational regional land-use planning efforts to fruition. Instead, provincial politicians spent the funds for their own political ends as they always had; they saw no lasting benefit in forcing regional planning on municipalities. Besides, if the province had given MAPC the necessary authority to develop and implement a meaningful regional plan, then it would also have had to give MAPC spending control. Politicians hate to give up patronage opportunities, and neither the Conservative government of Robert Stanfield nor the Liberals under Gerald Regan did so.

Territoriality

Municipal politics are intensely local in Nova Scotia, as in most of Canada (Higgins 1986). Beck (1973) has suggested that even the smallest municipalities will not amalgamate with others unless forced to by the province. While they acknowledge that common efforts, through regional action, could increase efficiency, they fear that regional government (or anything that approaches it) will undermine local authority and autonomy.

In some parts of the province, district planning commissions, serving several towns, villages, and the surrounding county, struggle through petty rivalries and squabbles. Bidding wars for major industrial employers continue to pit community against community, with any hope of a "rational" distribution of opportunities lost to competitive localism. Achieving the level of co-operation needed to make regional planning work does not come easy in a region where every politician desperately wants jobs to offer his or her constituents.

Conservatism

The editor of the *Halifax Mail-Star* boasted in November 1988 that Nova Scotia is "rich in its conservatism". Dominated over the years by powerful premiers enjoying long terms of power (Simpson 1988), the province finds strength in tradition and stability. Beck (1973) has discussed the suspicion of innovation that characterizes local government: Nova Scotians, he argued, like strong provincial governments and fear change.

Over the years rural interests and the business community have largely set the political agenda and encouraged a conservative outlook. Doucet (1965) explained that until fairly recently, voters in some rural ridings enjoyed twice as many provincial legislative representatives (by population) as did city-dwelling voters. A history of Voluntary Planning, a provincially funded group of business people who advise the government on economic development matters, indicates that the business lobby has a direct line into Province House (Lampert 1988).

As a result of years of patronage politics and conservative values, Nova Scotia voters seem more cynical and disaffected than the average Canadian (Brym 1979). They have a tendency to keep their heads low and to expect material inducements in return for political support.² They suspect those who promise instant prosperity from megaprojects or new-fangled ideas because they remember the litany of failures. Why should they believe civil servants who assured them that regional planning would solve their communities' problems, when so many previous development projects simply lined the pockets of loyal government supporters? They trust the past that they know rather than the promise of a "better" future.

Distrust of Upper Canada

Nova Scotians believe that confederation cost the province its affluence, and hence they blame "Upper Canada" for many of their economic woes (Surette 1985). As Savoie (1986) noted, the Maritime provinces feel that Ottawa owes them compensation in the form of regional development grants.

In its annual report for 1984 the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council (1985: 25) warned that "any tampering with the concept of regional development, even in its present diluted form, will probably provoke a united and vocal response from the Atlantic region". Nova Scotians feel frustrated because they realize that they have no power to alter their dependency on Ottawa. That dependency creates a reluctance to experiment, to abandon traditional ways, and to restructure political or economic systems. When Ottawa bureaucrats suggested "regional planning", Nova Scotia complied but manipulated the programme so that it resembled its Upper Canada cousin in name only. Nova Scotians worry when Upper Canadians fool with the status quo.

²Following the 1988 provincial election, workers from both the Conservative and Liberal parties (in two different ridings) were convicted of vote-buying with liquor, cash, and loads of gravel.

What Other Factors Affected Regional Planning?

Most commentators agree that the millions of dollars spent on regional development in the Maritime provinces made no dent in economic disparity. Many critics claim that the policies actually increased dependency, enticing only a few industrial branch plants into the region for all the wrong reasons: low wages, cheap resources, and tax incentives (Chorney 1977; Clare 1987; Goldberg and Webster 1977). In his book *Regional Economic Development: Canada's Search for Solutions*, Savoie (1986) concluded that tinkering will not make regional differences disappear. Instead, he argued, the Maritimes have to adjust to hinterland status and cease the fruitless search for regional prosperity.

Theorists of the Right and the Left seem to converge in certain elements of their assessment of the failure of regional development planning. For example, they agree that government spending cannot thwart international economic trends. Centralization of wealth in capitalist economies, well under way by the turn of the twentieth century, continually drains "slow-growth" regions. Investments in road building or experiments in regional land-use and development planning, cannot influence the entrepreneurs who make significant economic decisions in Canada. Business continues to invest in the industrial heartland.

Some regional planners still hold that comprehensive regional planning can overcome some of the problems faced by cities and regions (Gertler 1984), but such arguments no longer convince politicians. Increasingly, the latter espouse a hands-off approach to regional development. Instead of funding megaprojects aimed at developing an entire disadvantaged region,³ governments promote entrepreneurship and small business. Private-sector initiative has therefore replaced public-sector action.

Down-sized regional development programmes such as the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) handle requests from small and medium-sized businesses while the provinces "adjust" to the new realities. Meanwhile, fish processing plants, steelworks, mines, and other major production centres close down with alarming regularity. Even provincial employees have begun to worry that many of their jobs, funded through federal-provincial development

³There are some notable exceptions to this generalization, of course, such as the plan to develop the Hibernia oil fields off Newfoundland. If one examined the proposals in detail, however, one would probably find that they will benefit the industrial heartland as much as, if not more than, they will help the people of impoverished Newfoundland.

agreements, may disappear to budget cuts (*Mail-Star* 1989). Regional development planning for job creation is heading the way of the dinosaurs.

Did Regional Planning Accomplish Anything?

Although regional land-use planning never really got far off the ground in Nova Scotia, the Halifax-Dartmouth metropolitan area benefited from the growth centre philosophy that guided regional development spending during the 1960s and early 1970s. It ended up with a strong industrial and service base and an excellent infrastructure. The Cape Breton area, however, suffered chronic de-industrialization despite the dollars invested in heavy-water plants and other doomed projects. In fact, rural areas may have ended up poorer after Ottawa spent millions in the region than they were before (Coffey and Polèse 1985). In sum, regional planning intensified the dominance of the provincial capital at the expense of the rest of the province.

In the Halifax area itself, MAPC had limited success in regional land-use planning. The municipalities seemed decidedly ambivalent toward MAPC. After the first few years the agency stopped developing regional plans. The province never gave the Metropolitan Authority any greater powers than the municipalities offered it, so MAPC's potential remained unrealized. Today it falls to the provincial government to resolve regional problems such as municipal sewage treatment and the pollution of Halifax Harbour.

Conclusions

A generation ago an editor of *Plan Canada* condemned planners for flitting from theory to theory without giving ideas time to work (Gertler 1963). He urged planners to examine theory in practice and to learn from what they see. When one follows his advice and looks at the regional planning experience in Nova Scotia, one finds little to recommend regional planning as an answer to the problems faced by Nova Scotia communities. Given existing political values and structures in the province, regional planning cannot work. And given international economic restructuring, planning cannot overcome the centralizing trends that create and perpetuate regional disparity.

Over time, society redefines the nature of its problems and the appropriate solutions to them. During the 1950s regional economic

disparity in hinterland areas was seen as a problem, and planning strategies were designed to overcome the lack of infrastructure believed to cause slow growth. In the 1960s and 1970s rapid urban growth and inefficient resource allocation were identified as problems, and regional land-use planning in urban-centred regions was advocated as the solution. Today, as a result of the fiscal restraints of the 1980s, regional disparity is seen as a problem of dependency and inappropriate government spending, and local entrepreneurial initiative and community development are promoted as the solution (see, for example, Lorimer 1988; Ross and Usher 1986; Savoie 1986). As the 1990s begin, regional planning has gone out of fashion.

The approach that currently dominates public discussions of regional problems and guides government decisions on public spending leaves little scope for regional planning. Planners who appreciate that reality will recognize that while in theory regional planning offers a "rational" approach to regional problems, many parts of the country do not consider regional planning a culturally appropriate solution to the real problems they face.

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- HARD LUCK: THE FAILURE OF REGIONAL PLANNING IN NOVA SCOTIA 283
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