

History and Prince Edward Island's Population Dilemma

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At a recent public symposium sponsored by UPEI's Institute of Island Studies, speakers explored the current population landscape. Geographer Jim Randall laid out the demographic challenges facing our province: an aging population, a declining birth rate, a shrinking workforce, chronic out-migration, rural decline. Cultural geographer Katie Mazer profiled the new face of out-migration, inter-provincial workers (that is, Islanders who live here but work Out West) and the regulatory system that encourages that trend. Finally, Tony Wallbank prefaced the imminent arrival of Ontario Amish families who are moving to the Island against the grain of rural depopulation. In their particulars, these are all recent developments, yet the general trends have a long, tangled history that helps inform our present dilemma.

Islanders have long been obsessed with out-migration. Between the 1890s and the 1930s, despite one of the highest birth rates in the country, our provincial population actually fell. Even as immigrants poured into Canada, Islanders left home in search of better opportunities. Our population only began increasing again during the Depression years of the 1930s when the North American job market collapsed, leaving prospective out-migrants with no place to go. When prosperity returned, the slow haemorrhage of our youth resumed, and it was well into the 1960s before the Island matched the population level of 1891.

Conditions change, people change, societies change, the nature of outmigration changes. Yet, the mantra for leaving remains the same. When your fear for the future where you live is greater than your fear of the unknown, then, if you can, you will leave. Where do you go? You go where there's work, to the easiest, most convenient location, to a place that is as much like home as possible. For generations of Islanders, that meant "the Boston States." In my lifetime the destination has been southern Ontario and Alberta. The transportation revolution has created a new mobility, and that has made possible new variations on the old

patterns of seasonal migration. We no longer go to work in the winter in the lumber woods, and we don't head West in the fall on the annual harvest excursions. Instead, Islanders fly out to work in the oil patch, and in the spring when the rigs shut down, they come home. At some point, though, the pendulum of seasonal migration stops. Very often, it stops "Away."

Island leaders have done more than bemoan the loss of population. Beginning in the early 1900s, despite a lack of both resources and authority (immigration is a federal jurisdiction), we tried to ride the coattails of national population strategies in order to recruit immigrants. But we were pretty choosy about the sort of newcomer we desired. Lebanese families were already filtering into the province, but we weren't interested in recruiting Lebanese people. Chinese immigrants were also trickling in. We had no interest in them either. What we wanted were well-capitalized English farmers. By 1914 we'd gotten maybe a hundred. Most didn't stay. In the 1920s we tried again. This time we courted intending emigrants from the Scottish Hebrides, given that nearly half of our population was Scottish in origin. Those people went to Alberta instead. We even tried to attract settlers from Denmark. In the 1950s a group of Mennonites from the United States explored the possibility of buying land and moving to PEI. Asked its opinion, the Island government advised Ottawa that it didn't want Mennonite people in Prince Edward Island. They were too different, too "other." Even land-hungry Dutch farmers, though acceptably Christian and Caucasian, encountered their share of quiet prejudice.

As the recent public symposium demonstrated, population remains very much an issue in this province. Familial trauma aside, it might not matter that so many people are leaving the Island – people move out of Toronto all the time – if more people were coming. The challenge for this province is to find ways to make this a desirable place to stay. Whether or not we welcome newcomers is one of the few things each of us can control. Yet it is simplistic to expect that Islanders should rush to embrace them. If fear of the unknown daunts the immigrant, that same fear of the unknown – of people who are strange or different – haunts many Islanders, even though our own immigrant ancestors encountered and experienced comparable

fears. Population health is about jobs, to be sure (although, more properly, it is about opportunity), but it is also about finding ways to build, preserve and extend community. That is the true challenge.

When Back-to-the-Landers arrived on Prince Edward Island in the 1960s and 70s, they might well have been rejected, given their unconventional lifestyles. Perhaps because they seemed to respect and appreciate our rural culture, they found instead a measure of cautious acceptance (if not approval) and, in time, inclusion. The same possibility exists for today's newcomers, whether Buddhists, Amish, economically motivated Chinese immigrants, or refugees from war-torn homelands. If we can discover in them values that we also think are important, if we feel that they honour our ways, then the building blocks for community – mutual respect and tolerance – are present. If not, today's newcomers will be sojourners only, not tomorrow's Islanders.

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