

A fear of losing connection to place

Rapporteur's report from "The Geography of Governance" Public Forum, February 25, 2016

Opinion piece by Jim Randall, *The Guardian*, March 9, 2016

I served as rapporteur for the symposium on "The Geography of Governance" hosted by the Institute of Island Studies on February 25th. As such, it was my pleasure to summarize the ideas and discussion from the meeting. Ms. Diane Griffin, a Councilor from the Town of Stratford and a Vice President of the Federation of PEI Municipalities, gave a powerful keynote address. She reminded the approximately 60 people in attendance that ninety percent of the province still has no land use zoning and those living on the seventy percent of the Island that is still unincorporated have little recourse when developments are proposed in their backyards. There is very little to prevent someone from building an incompatible activity right next to you. Moreover, you and your neighbours will have to share the additional costs of servicing this ad hoc development; everything from snowplowing to road maintenance. Borrowing from Justice Ralph Thompson's recommendations in the 2009 Commission on Land and Local Governance, the provincial government is kick-starting the conversation by trying to get us to think about what constitutes a viable community. Is it a minimum population (i.e., 4,000 people)? Is it a minimum real property assessment (i.e., \$200 million)? Or is it about following natural or social features like watersheds or cultural homogeneity?

Dr. Ryan Gibson, a geography professor from Saint Mary's University and an expert in rural governance, provided lessons learned from Manitoba, Newfoundland & Labrador and Ireland. He started with this quote, "The current system does not work – everyone knows it, yet no one will make a change." Although this line did not come from PEI, it could easily be applied to almost every jurisdiction going through the process of reform. One of the lessons he provided was that simply legislating change does not work, and that to be successful reform has to be inclusive and not hurried.

The final two speakers provided their visions on how communities can be defined apart from population and property value. Dr. Michael van den Heuvel, a professor at UPEI and the Director of the Canadian Rivers Institute, asked us to recognize the importance of natural boundaries such as watersheds, pointing to New Zealand and the Grand River Conservation Area in southern Ontario as two jurisdictions that have developed fiscally and environmentally viable communities on this basis. Therefore, land use planning, environmental management and the delivery of other public services can be accomplished efficiently and effectively at a regional level instead of at the scale of an incorporated municipality. Ms. Jeannita Bernard, a community leader from St. Philippe, PEI, made a compelling case for communities to be organized by cultural features, including a shared language and history. She spoke specifically about the Evangeline region as having a vibrant Acadian cultural identity that could be matched with territorial integrity.

All of the speakers recognized that PEI, and especially rural PEI, is going through massive change, including the aging and out-migration of population. They pointed to a situation where there are few financial resources left to guarantee due diligence on local land issues. Perhaps more importantly, the volunteers that serve as the glue to maintain a rural civic society are burning out. Not only is the

decentralized physical infrastructure crumbling but the human capacity to support that built environment is also crumbling.

There was remarkably little direct discussion during the evening of changes in taxation that might accompany changes in municipal boundaries, or even of efficiencies gained or lost. Although service delivery was discussed, it seemed less important than the loss of local identity. Often this identity was synonymous with the place name of a community or region. In fact, this fear of a loss of identity was less about what the new boundaries might mean for current residents, and more about how their children and grandchildren might no longer have a connection to the place that they and their ancestors have called home for hundreds of years. In a place that prides itself on its deep roots, this is a powerful force for resistance to change.

Dr. Jim Randall
Chair, Executive Committee, Institute of Island Studies
UPEI