

Outing the academics

(Warning: satiric content)

Our resident post-secondary smarty-pants can't be as brilliant as we purport them to be. Either that, or the tenured snoots have been holding out on us.

Think about it: there are more than 16,000 faculty and staff at 17 universities across Atlantic Canada, plus a comparably impressive number of administrative and teaching professionals at a host of private and public colleges. Collectively, they're supposedly enlightening more than double their number in eager young minds and spending billions of taxpayer dollars shamelessly indulging in myriad obscure research activities that we hardly ever hear about. And for what? Excepting rare pockets of prosperity, such as the petroleum-powered boom on Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula, the Atlantic economy is in perpetual turmoil.

Consider, for a moment, the decades of intense mental acuity that have been focused on expanding an increasingly creative class of socially conscious, environmentally aware, continuously innovative community contributors, and you have to ask: where the heck are the results? Rural populations are still in decline. Health care is in an incessant bind. It's hard to find a continuous mile of pavement that isn't in repair. There are never enough jobs to go around. And yet, some of the region's greatest minds have devoted their academic lives to investigating ways and means to sustainable prosperity.

Which leads me to two possible conclusions: either they aren't as clever as their multiple degrees would lead us to believe, or the dirty blighters have been keeping the secret formula for themselves. Having met more than a few of them, I'm more inclined to believe in the latter, and personally speaking, I think it's about time they coughed it up.

Hence, the impetus for my recent incursion to the Harris Centre at Memorial University. There, sequestered in the Centre's windowed boardroom overlooking the quasi-rural idyll of Long Pond, I interrogated ubiquitous university pitch man, Dr. Rob Greenwood. The following is a transcript of our conversation, paraphrased for editorial convenience.

Editor Extraordinary (leaning menacingly across the table): Why haven't you brainiacs made us all rich?!

RB (surprised at the attack): But, that isn't our job.

Me (turning up the heat): What is your job? What secrets have you been hiding in your 'ivory towers'?

RB: (flushing under his turtleneck collar): We haven't been hiding. We've been reading and researching, teaching and serving on committees. The traditional scholarship

model doesn't leave much room for outreach. And academics aren't gregarious extroverts by nature. It's not like the community has done such a good job of listening to us when we do speak, either. They're always accusing us of 'not being practical enough'. As for policy makers, we're just getting to know one batch of them when there's another election and we have to start educating them all over again.

Me (in snarky response): You're supposed to be the smart ones. If you have such great ideas, it's up to you to figure out a way to make them listen.

RB (warming to topic): That's why we have the Harris Centre. It's a bridge between education and scholarship, government and classroom. I'm not a professor and I don't belong to a particular faculty, but I meet regularly with our varied departments. That way, I know what's going on and I work with the other staff here at the Harris Centre to identify ways and means to spread the word.

Me (jeering): Yes, you're a regular prophet, you are. So, what have you done for the university lately?

RB (with increasing enthusiasm and vocal speed): You may have heard about some research we did into the federal presence here in Newfoundland and Labrador. Our researcher found that the federal investment in this province was lacking on a per capacity basis, compared to other jurisdictions. We believe that report played a role in reversing the decision to close the weather station in Gander. And we organize regional workshops around the province so that MUN staff can speak to people in the community about current and potential future research activities. Did you know that we sometimes have 20 or 30 university

researchers doing work in the same geographic area but on different topics? We're making those connections. And we set up an online searchable database of university research and expertise. That site, yaffle.ca, has been recognized as a world leading initiative as far away as Australia...

Me (cutting him off): Yaffle, baffle. Sounds wonderful, but you still haven't answered my fundamental question: why haven't these so-called brilliant minds found the solution to what ails the Atlantic economy?

RB (determined to have the last word): We never pretended to have all the answers. Perhaps, rather than questioning why the post-secondary sector hasn't solved all your woes, you should instead give some thought to where you'd be without us.

Me (deep in thought): Yes, where indeed? 🤔



The dirty blighters have been keeping the secret formula for themselves.