

Wising up to our energy future

Now, it is done: That strange adventure in transformational change; that open-hearted but naively conceived experiment with progress; that sour negotiation which brought most of New Brunswick to the brink of rebellion; that proposition which converted, however briefly, East Coast premiers from friends to enemies, from allies to combatants. And now that the deal to sell NB Power to Hydro-Quebec is dead.... well, what now?

The five-month ordeal, which began last October and concluded in March, was more than a mere test of New Brunswick Premier Shawn Graham's leadership prowess; it was nothing less than a referendum on Atlantic Canadian identity. What price were we willing to pay to settle our debts? What well of despair urged us to seek a Faustian deal with Quebec, to relinquish our self-determination, to become thralls and vassals of another jurisdiction? Such was the super-heated rhetoric that played at least some role in derailing the arbitrations.

For others, including Newfoundland and Labrador Premier Danny Williams, there were more pragmatic concerns at stake. Quebec, he said, was a deft and strategic player in the energy business. It knew how to get what it wanted, as his own province's painful history on the Upper Churchill showed. Permitting Hydro-Quebec priority access to New Brunswick's transmission lines into the United States, he insisted, would utterly compromise the future of any Atlantic energy grid, rendering the entire region untenably uncompetitive.

In fact, as matters stand, the subject of competitiveness has never been more urgent. New Brunswick retains its aging and, in some instances, crumbling generating capacity. The Point Lepreau nuclear power plant and the Mactaquac dam on the Saint John River face refurbishment or decommissioning, requiring billions of dollars the provincial government, frankly, does not have. NB Power's accumulated debt is tipping the scales at more than \$4-billion. Meanwhile, its fossil fuel-based stations are positioned only to pass along the rising cost of making electricity with these non-renewable sources to all classes of ratepayers. Apart, perhaps, from Newfoundland and Labrador, the other Atlantic provinces face similar challenges.

Under the circumstances, then, it is hard to imagine how Quebec might have made us any less competitive than we are today. Still, the argument is moot. The only task now is building an energy future in this region which serves and satisfies all provinces equally well – to, in effect, restore our joint competitive edge as a place to work productively and live happily. And this will require an enormous degree of inter-provincial cooperation, something we've not always convincingly demonstrated.

The Council of Atlantic Premiers has made a blustery show of collaboration over the years. It convenes once every 12 months to eat steak and talk turkey: Four men in a room, yakking about their differences while their sherpas select the next's day's menu. At the end of these sessions routinely emerges a one-page statement committing each provincial leader to another round of "exploring opportunities for shared economic development." Meanwhile, throughout, Ottawa consistently threatens to cut social and health transfers to the region.

Unless this august Council actually plans to get down to business, it should be disbanded, if only to save taxpayers the money it wastes. But if it is serious about establishing an Atlantic energy grid, as Danny Williams proposes, it should dump the dummy-spin and make itself broadly useful to 3-million Atlantic Canadians, and at once. How often does this region grasp an opportunity to wise-up to reality? If one province on the East Coast can't go it alone, then all provinces here must move together.

Premiers and people, think about wind, hydro and tidal. Think about joint jurisdiction over generation, transmission and distribution. Think about

invention, innovation and the price paid for parsimony. Think about the rewards earned from risk, faith and action.

Think about the alternative: A region of Canada that rapidly declines into a home for senior citizens; an incubator of welfare, lassitude and dissolution; a place where the young finally go to care for their antecedents and witness their own souls slowly dying as they scour the corporate landscape, fruitlessly, for opportunity.

A power deal with Quebec is dead. Let's make damn sure we can answer the question: "What now?" | **ABM**



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WHAT WELL OF DESPAIR URGED US TO SEEK A FAUSTIAN DEAL WITH QUEBEC, TO BECOME THRALLS OF ANOTHER JURISDICTION?