

Editorial

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Anyone notice those little white flakes that have been drifting around here and there every once in a while? For those of you who are in the denial stage, that's snow, and the inescapable truth is that everyone's favourite season, winter, is coming to P.E.I. Now's the time of year that a lot of Islanders get the worst case of cabin fever since the Mad Trapper, and a lot of the natives start scrambling to the sea like lemmings in an effort to blow this popsicle stand before we're frozen in. Some seek out any haven south of the Maritimes, others would simply like to explore the mainland and do some early Christmas shopping; but wherever they're going, they've got to slip past the Northumberland Strait first, and the idea of a bridge making that passage more convenient is probably looking even better at this time of year. Who wouldn't want a fixed link that would let us zoom on and off the Island whenever we felt like it, especially during an economic recession when a whopping construction project like the bridge holds the promise of jobs and dollars for a small province like ours? Before we rush blindly into this, though, it would be wise for us to check and double-check the economic, environmental, and social consequences of the project, or we may find that our economic saviour turns out to be the developmental Anti-Christ.

Perhaps the most unsettling thing is how the whole bridge business seems to be a done deal, even though the latest project proposal hasn't been given the go-ahead. Strait Crossing Incorporated has not yet gotten official federal acceptance of their project, but they've already set up offices on the Island and gone about the costly and environmentally disruptive business of drilling test holes in the floor of the Strait. S.C.I. seems to think they've got the contract in their pocket, and they may well be right. An unpopular federal government and a leaderless provincial government will soon be facing elections, and the survival-conscious politicians probably might see the fixed link as just what the doctor ordered for making voters see how gosh-darn great their governments are. That's scary, albeit sadly predictable reasoning in politics, dangling short-term gains in front of the voters without stopping to consider the long term effects and costs.

One obvious potential cost is damage to the environment. Fisheries industries are vital to P.E.I., and the construction of a bridge poses a number of possible difficulties, such as an obstacle to the break-up of ice in the Strait. No study has conclusively shown that there will be no significant environmental disruption in the Strait, and we might want to think twice about disturbing the environment there at a time when dwindling fish stocks are already threatening the future of much of the Atlantic fishery.

One major argument for the bridge is the presumed economic prosperity it will bring, but that's a dubious short-term prospect at best. One analyst said the bridge construction would create 750 new jobs, but only about fifty-percent of those (375 or so) would go to P.E.I. specifically. The prospect is even less impressive when you consider that about 600 jobs will be lost if the ferries shut down. Communities that depend on the ferry traffic will be economically crippled, and Borden and its ilk may become ghost towns virtually overnight, while the finished bridge will require fewer employees for its maintenance than did the ferry system. In short, there really won't be much, if any, gain for the P.E.I. workforce. Moreover, while the bridge would make travel more convenient, there's no guarantee that increased traffic to the Island would be economically beneficial. It might, in fact, lessen the perception of the Island as a unique travel destination outside the rest of Canada. P.E.I. could become a commonplace, tourist-trap suburb of mainland New

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Brunswick, a convenient drive away and nothing to write home about. There's no guarantee that a bridge will bring us a bonanza of out-of-province investors and consumers, and people should keep in mind that a link would also make it easier to drive off the Island. Merchants here are already sobbing about the waves of Island shoppers doing business in Moncton, a situation that led the P.E.I. provincial government to recently partially legalize Sunday shopping here in a pathetic and cynical about-face from their earlier policy. With a fixed-link, dollars could just as easily flow out of the Island as they could flow in, and there may not be any pot of gold at the end of our bridge.

What Islanders should do now is pressure their local politicians into addressing and examining the issue. Up until this point, the provincial government has been pretty noncommittal and content to let the federal government and its appraisal of the proposed bridge decide the matter. Before this whole business goes any further, Islanders should voice their concerns to their leaders and make certain this project is not a harmful one; better that option than to realize, years later, that we've created a monster.

Sean McQuaid
Editor-in-Chief

P.S. "Prince Edward Peninsula"? Nah. Good old Lucy Maud must be whirling in her grave.