

The People's Republic of Cape Breton?

by Kent Bruyneel
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Note: "This past weekend" in copy refers to January 29-30.

SYDNEY, NS (CUP)- Decreasing financial support, and an increasing feeling of isolation, have left many on the island of Cape Breton feeling that a separation from Nova Scotia is in their best interest.

"We're living in an area where our coal mines are closing, our heavy water plant is gone, our steel mills are going and nothing is being put in to replace those jobs," said Regional Municipal Councilor Ron Burrows. "A lot more could and would happen if we had self-determination."

The transfer of money to the province of Nova Scotia from the federal government is affected by the increasing unemployment on the island of Cape Breton. Ottawa's provincial transfer payment formula is tied to the level of unemployment in a province.

But Burrows, among others, believes Cape Breton is not seeing its equitable share of the money.

"Our problems, our unemployment, is driving [Nova Scotia's] transfer payments," said Burrows. "And we [Cape Breton] are not seeing it... We have no say in the financial affairs of the

Provincial government."

Both students and faculty members at the University College of Cape Breton (UCCB) echo Burrows' thoughts. Jamie MacLean, a second-year Science student said: "The mainland gets most of the money, we see nothing in terms of more money, more jobs, or more opportunities and you would think we should."

Dr. Bob Morgan, director of the Beaton Institute at UCCB, an organization dedicated to archiving and preserving the history of Cape Breton, concurs with both MacLean and Burrows. Morgan feels the absence of a strong sense of Nova Scotian pride and a complete lack of interaction with the provincial government has led to a situation where the island feels much closer to the federal government.

"The feeling is that the money being sent from Ottawa is being laundered in Halifax, and we are effectively getting the crumbs that are left over," said Dr. Morgan.

Morgan also explained the historical perspective, which has led Cape Bretoners to feel a sense of individual identity, overrides their commitment to the province. Cape Breton was not a part of Nova Scotia

until it was annexed in 1820. Since then - especially in the 1830s, 1880s, 1920s and throughout the 1970's - Cape Breton has seen the occasional rise of separatist fervour. The current movement is buttressed by the fact that any future Quebec distinct society clause could be used in defining Cape Breton as its own distinct society.

"Psychologically we are our own province," said Dr. Morgan. "We have our own culture and our own manners. There

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is, here, an overwhelming feeling of being different."

Dr. Richard MacKinnon, a folklorist and professor at UCCB, explains how the level of complexity inside Cape Breton's population makes for a society that has its own diversity, and its own mixed history which supercedes any idea of a provincial identity.

"I call it our vernacular and it is very distinct. Even though we have several different nationalities and races - including a large Micmac population, a strong Gaelic culture and dozens of

European communities - we, together, in Cape Breton, have our own dialect, our own pattern of life and our own way of thinking," Dr. MacKinnon said.

The province's declining financial welfare, witnessed by the closing of the DEVCO mines in Sydney, has further pushed many in the community to believe that a solution which includes the help of the provincial government in Halifax is no solution at all.

"It does not matter who is in power, for that power will always be in Halifax, and we will always be treated like a poor ninth cousin," MacKinnon added.

The legalities of separation are complex, but not impossible, explains Constitutional lawyer and University of Ottawa Law Professor Joseph Magent.

"Founding a new province is covered under Part 5 of the Constitution Act of 1982," Magent said. "It requires the participation of the Senate, the House of Commons and all of the provinces, including Nova Scotia."

Magent further explains that the problem in creating a new province in Cape Breton is that of all the provinces will still want to keep their balance of power. In the case of Nova Scotia, he adds, it is hard to imagine them handing over some of their national authority to Cape Breton.

The student population in Cape Breton feels the weight of the

supposed mistreatment from Halifax in that they are often unable to find work in their home city.

"I suppose you call it the 'brain drain', [however], I know many UCCB students, students of mine, who would have loved to stay here but were unable due to the lack of existing, or potential opportunities. It is sad because UCCB is one of the bright lights in what is a very frustrated region. When we lose some of those students we lose some of the brightness," said Dr. MacKinnon.

Morgan, MacKinnon and others will discuss the issue at a conference that includes Iceland, Malta and the Faroe Islands, a region just now gaining its independence from Denmark. These and other parties meet in Cape Breton to discuss self-determination and the role of local government in determining the fate of the local economy.

"It has been shown," said Dr. Morgan, "that many micro-states do as well as or, in fact, better separate than they did as past members of a larger state. These are the issues we are going to explore with our guests from Iceland and the Faroes."

This issue is headed to its most public platform on the 18th of February when local political leaders and members of the community will meet in Baddeck, Nova Scotia, to decide on how to pursue a more prosperous future for the troubled region.

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