

AN ISLAND FUTURE: Towards Sustainability and Self-Reliance

by George McRobie

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No one with any experience of economic development could fail to be struck by the potential of Prince Edward Island. Economically, the rich resources of land and sea (and pure air and water) offer many opportunities for adding value to primary production, thus adding both to local and provincial incomes, and to productive employment. The growing consciousness of a distinctive Island culture could be reinforced by fostering the cultural diversity within the Island and knitting the whole together through policies rooted in the concepts of self-reliance (adaptability, skill, flexibility, entrepreneurship) and Sustainability (the opening up of new opportunities for people, individually and collectively, and the sustainable-yield approach to resource development).

The makings of a self-reliant, sustainable economy are already here. There is an excellent conservation policy (A Conservation Strategy for Prince Edward Island, 1987); a growing awareness of the need to maximize the processing of primary products; and a very good start made, with the first-class Small Farms Programme, to strengthen and diversify this sector of agriculture. The Food Technology Centre promises well for the future of resource utilization and added value. As well, the forestry, industry and social programmes of government are directed towards the objectives of self-reliance and Sustainability broadly considered.

There are, of course, existing and imminent threats to the cultural and economic integrity of the Island, forces working against self-reliance and the sensible, far-sighted use of resources. Monoculture and chemical farming threaten the land, people's health and their environment; seasonal employment and dependence on welfare payments are potent in sapping local initiatives; and the apparently continuous pressure for large-scale, externally-orchestrated projects threaten the very basis of self-reliance and sustainable development.

The following notes are aimed at strengthening existing movements within the Island—some already developed, others tentative—towards sustainability through cultural and economic self-reliance.

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Education and Training

A stronger support system for local economic development would include a substantial new

input of relevant education and training. In the formal education sector, environmental education is an obvious need. (Understanding of the environment and how to conserve it is no less an essential preparation for life than the three Rs.) The kind of "school cooperative" run by the pupils at Evangeline might also be encouraged, as an effective way of learning by doing. Informal education at the community level should be aimed at exposing the options open to communities in economic and social matters; for example, on analysing and understanding the local economy, on the different forms of ownership available, on alternatives in health and nutrition, and understanding and safeguarding their own environment and their cultural heritage. For community leaders, and for those aspiring to run local businesses of whatever kind, special courses should be available on such matters as marketing, business organization and finance, and the setting up and operation of small cooperatives of different kinds.

Because education and training specifically designed to motivate and equip people for self-reliance have been largely neglected for several generations, it should be regarded as an investment in people and as such assigned a very high priority.

Agriculture

While marine products are now receiving increasing attention in terms of processing and marketing, this seems less true of agricultural production (and of manufacturing not related to primary products). In agriculture the emphasis should be on exposing the options available to farmers through conversion to non-chemical farming and product diversification. The growing emphasis on creating a sustainable (i.e., non-chemical) agriculture should be fortified by providing support to farmers wishing to convert to non-chemical methods, and giving them the status and resources to be demonstration farms operating on a commercial basis. The existing small number of farmers and horticulturalists practising sustainable farming should be increased to, say, 20 around the Island so that one such farm is within easy reach of all.

Supporting services for a policy of sustainable agriculture would include assistance with technical knowledge, and with transition costs; ensuring that farmers undertaking experiments do not do so at a loss; promotion of standards for organic farming; exploration of new products and of markets for diversified farming; undertaking experiments in forest farming (see Sholto, Douglas and Hart, *Forest Farming*, IT Publications, London); the setting up of processing units for existing and new farm products; and the cooperative purchase or manufacture of farm inputs and processing and manufacturing of outputs {i.e., backward and forward linkages which lower costs and/or add value to the benefit of the farmer). The environmental and health benefits of a policy of sustainable agriculture are less easily quantifiable but no less important.

Many if not all of these suggestions could be implemented by expanding and strengthening the Small Farms Programme and enabling its staff to add to their knowledge of sustainable farming systems and methods. (There is a growing spectrum of work in this field on both sides of the Atlantic.)

A special effort should be made to develop markets for organic farm produce, introduce standards for non-chemical farming and horticulture, and make known to consumers the health, nutrition and environmental benefits of organic produce and methods. Experience elsewhere suggests that consumer demand, along with the certainty on the farmers' part that they can farm

as profitably (if not more profitably) by moving to non-chemical farming, will create its own momentum, given some initial impetus.

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A Local Economic Development Service

In all the communities and production units I visited, people raised questions which needed practical answers. Where some form of local activity was already underway, there were questions about next feasible steps, about marketing, about ways of running the business, and about organization, technology and training. Where little or nothing had been started, the focus was on turning aspirations into business ventures: how to discover what was feasible, what it would cost, how to finance and operate different kinds of enterprises, comparable experience elsewhere, and so on.

To address such needs, in the variety of detail and of the kind of expertise required, to promote experiments and take risks, to be selective where need be, and to offer continuity of attention—such requirements are largely beyond the practical scope of any government service, even one as active and dedicated as I found the Department of Industry's staff to be. Their current work of mobilizing community organizations, implementing a new cooperative policy, and ensuring the local delivery of government services already stretches their resources, and their responsibilities will expand as the policy of working increasingly through local organizations continues to take shape.

Accordingly, there is a need for a new kind of local support service or facility on the lines of a Local Economic Development Service (LEDS): a team of professionals comprising a range of expertise, capable of providing practical assistance to local communities by way of helping them to identify potential new economic activity; drawing up feasibility studies and business plans; helping to negotiate financing; exploring markets; advising on appropriate technologies, and on forms of organization {e.g., small private firms, community businesses, worker or community cooperatives): in short, making options available to communities and helping them to carry ideas through to implementation.

This support team could be organized to run as a workers' cooperative of professionals (on lines similar to the Centre for Employment Initiatives in Britain), with expertise in marketing, business development, production, finance, training. It would be an independent worker-owned business, operating under contracts to government, the cooperative movement and private or community organizations. Its guiding principle would be to assist any activity that is small and locally-owned and controlled, and which reflects community needs by creating productive employment.

This kind of independent, not-for-profit status would give the LEDS team wide flexibility and credibility. It could, as needed, draw upon other expertise from within or outside the Island, and it would ensure the continuity and attention to detail that is a precondition of local economic development. The LEDS team should be recruited from within the Island, and make space for U.P.E.I. graduates willing to make a career in this field of work. The task of setting up

this service on an operational basis should be assigned (as a contract) to the Institute of Island Studies.

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Some Reflections on Other Possible Ways of Underpinning a Sustainable Future for the Island

Energy

A decisive policy of making the transition to non-chemical farming would, of course, greatly advance sustainable agriculture by lessening dependence upon oil-based food production. The current movement towards wood-chip fuelling of public buildings, on a sustainable-yield basis, further reinforces energy security. But in view of the reasonable certainty that oil prices will rise faster than other prices, and of the uncertainty of the oil supply situation, would it not be prudent to encourage some development work on both energy conservation and renewable sources of energy in anticipation of immediate market prices? This would imply careful mobilization of data and the conducting of pilot experiments specifically tailored to meet Islanders' resources and needs; for example, fuel from biomass including trees (gas and liquid), and small-scale water power. The economics of energy conservation should be reviewed and kept updated. Pilot projects capable of fairly rapid reproduction would be no more than an insurance.

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Finance for Local Enterprises

Something of this kind may already be in place, but it may be worth exploring further. A risk capital fund might be set up (possibly on a community basis) specifically for starting up local enterprises, on the lines pioneered by the Vancouver City Credit Union. Alternatively or in addition, community business and cooperatives could have access to low-interest funds, on the grounds that there are activities which are economically but not commercially viable. People investing in such a fund would have to be prepared to forego some interest on their capital because of the beneficial effect of the enterprise in providing work, incomes and needed services locally. This could be tested in one or two pilot projects. Likewise, the LETS (Local Exchange Trading System) system could be encouraged in a few areas (depending on community response) as a means of facilitating the exchange of work between individuals and families in the local economy.

Finally, my grateful thanks to the Institute of Island Studies, the departments and their staff's who made my visit possible, interesting, and enjoyable.

George McRobie
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Appendix A

Some Readings

As If People Mattered: A Prospect for Britain, David, J. and Bollard, A., 1986, IT Publications, 9 King St., London W.C.2E 8HW.

Communities in Business, 1986, Centre for Employment Initiatives, 104A Gloucester Mansions, London, W.C.2H SPA.

From the Roots Up, Ross, D. and Usher, P., Bootstrap Press, P.O. Box 337, Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y., 10520, U.S.A.

Just for Starters, Bollard, A., IT Publications.

The Living Economy, ed. by Paul Etkins, 1986, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

Local Enterprise Agencies, 1986, Centre for Employment Initiatives (address above).

The Sane Alternative: A Choice of Futures, Robertson, J., IT Publications (address above).

Workers' Cooperatives: A Handbook, 1986(?). Industrial Common Ownership Movement, London. (Frank Driscoll, Department of Industry, has the full reference, and his Minister has a copy of the book.)

It is worth getting publication lists from IT Publications, 9 King St., London, W.C.2E 8HW, and the Cooperative Development Agency, Broadmead House, 21 Panton St., London, S.W.1Y 4DR.

1 Sustainability applies not only to agriculture, of course. It means sustainable in human terms; that is, it provides useful work and incomes, and develops local skills. In environmental terms, it minimizes the pollution of land, air and water. And in resource terms, it ensures the continuity of the renewable resource base and minimizes dependence on non-renewable resources in danger of rapid depletion or degradation.

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