

THE FIXED CROSSING AND THE ISLAND: Bonanza or Boondoggle?

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Introduction

By Harry Baglole

Transportation is a perennial issue on Prince Edward Island. Ever since the Island joined Confederation in 1873, and was premised "continuous communication with the Intercolonial Railway and the Railway system of the Dominion," the debate has centered around the most efficacious method of crossing the Northumberland Strait. That vague premise itself was - and continues to be - open to a bewildering multitude of interpretations. Does "continuous" mean regular, weekly, daily, constant?

It was not long after Confederation that Islanders began to push "continuous" to mean a fixed crossing of sane kind. Almost precisely 100 years ago, in 1886, the Northumberland Straits Tunnel Company was incorporated. The idea of a fixed crossing, whether tunnel, subway, causeway, or bridge, has experienced periodic revivals ever since. ' Thus the present debate is very much part of an ongoing Island tradition.

Yet the nature of the debate has changed substantially over the years. At first, the question was simply one of engineering and construction: it was not a matter of if it should be done, but if it could be done. More recently, a substantial segment of public opinion has begun to question the merit of the very project.

There can be no doubt but that the construction of a fixed crossing will have a dramatic impact on the character of Prince Edward Island. Until now, the focus of the present debate has tended to be on which of the three proposals put forward by the contending companies merits most support. The institute of Island Studies thought it an appropriate time for a pause - a time to think about the Island, the land and the people, and the potential social and economic impact of a fixed crossing.

Approximately 200 people attended the Public Forum: the debate was lively and informed. In addition to the presentations of the three principal speakers, reproduced in this document, some sixteen individuals made comments from the floor. Opinion at the Forum was about equally

divided between those who favoured a fixed crossing (particularly a bridge) and those who had serious concerns.

In the end, virtually all who spoke agreed on two points: 1) the fixed crossing should be built only if it can be shown to be environmentally benign; 2) the whole project should be investigated thoroughly and debated at length before-the Island people are asked to give their opinion about whether it should proceed.

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The Fixed Crossing and the Island: A Socio-Economic Perspective

By Frank Schwartz

Objective: The purpose of my presentation is to identify and explore briefly, in a non-judgmental fashion, some of the potentially most significant longer-term socio-economic impacts of a fixed crossing. My focus is on the long-term impacts. While constructing the crossing would have immediate impacts -- both positive and negative -- the debate really revolves around whether the crossing will ultimately be beneficial.

I will not be concluding whether the impacts are good or bad for two reasons:

1. that is not my role, and
2. positive impacts for some people are often negative impacts for others (for example, some people would view greater numbers of tourists positively, because of the employment and income benefits, while others would be much more negative, because of the crowding and traffic impacts).

Socio-Economic Impact Assessment: A Definition

Socio-economic impact assessment is the component of environmental impact assessment which deals with the

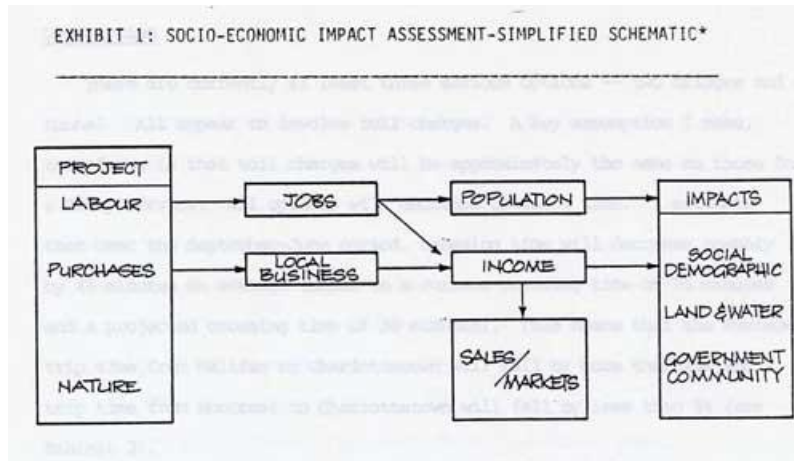
- economic;
- social and demographic;
- land and water use;
- government, and, community

impacts of constructing and operating a "Project." I define socio-economic impact assessment (only slightly in jest) as "a scientific process where one forecasts the socio-economic environment -- first without the project and then with it." Therefore, the key question that we have to ask our-selves when looking at any potential impact is: "Would it happen anyway?"

Obviously doing this is very difficult, somewhat speculative, and dependent on the assumptions made (too often implicitly). However, by using techniques refined over a number of assessments (forecasting tools, direct project impact estimating) and identifying comparable projects, we can usually make reasonable conclusions and we can influence the attitudes and actions of proponents, communities, the general public, and government bodies.

The most common method currently used is to attempt to assess the unique contributions of a project on a region (see Exhibit 1) by assessing the amount of regional labourers hired and project purchases made from regional firms. These labourers and firms generate income and locate close to their markets so that population movements may occur and settlement patterns may change. Consequently, communities may have more (or less) residents and more (or less) need for such services as schools, roads, or policing.

EXHIBIT 1: SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT ASSESSMENT-SIMPLIFIED SCHEMATIC¹



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The Fixed Crossing Project

Under the terms of union with Canada, P.E.I, was guaranteed "continuous" and "efficient" communications with the mainland. From 1873 through the 1970s, the people and governments of P.E.I, considered the crossing service woefully inadequate and made numerous representations to Ottawa for improved service (usually requesting a fixed crossing). Serious tunnel and causeway proposals have been made since 1885. (2)

Description

There are currently at least three serious options -- two bridges and a tunnel. All appear to involve toll charges. A key assumption I make, therefore, is that toll charges will be approximately the same as those for a ferry service. All options will decrease crossing time. I estimate that over the September-June period, crossing time will decrease roughly by 45 minutes on average (based on a current crossing time of 75 minutes and a projected crossing time of 30 minutes). This means that the average trip time from Halifax to Charlottetown will fall by more than 15 and trip time from Montreal to Charlottetown will fall by less than 5 (see Exhibit 2).

EXHIBIT 2: Time Saving Estimates (September - July)*

	Currently	Projected	% Time Saved
Halifax to Charlottetown			
Halifax-Tormentine	2 3/4 hrs	2 3/4 hrs	
Crossing	1 1/4 hrs	1/2 hr	
Borden-Ch'town	3/4 hr	3/4 hr	---
TOTAL	4 3/4 hrs	4 hrs	15.8%

Montreal to Charlottetown			
Montreal-Tormentine	14 hrs.	14 hrs.	
Crossing	1 1/4 hr	1/2 hr.	
Borden-Ch'town	3/4 hr	1/4 hr.	---
TOTAL	16 hrs.	15 1/4 hrs.	4.7%

** I have no numeric estimate, but can only conclude that the average time saving would be greater in June and July.*

Direct Impacts

The crossing:

- will lower transportation costs to and from P.E.I.; and,
- will probably eliminate a lot of the inconvenience associated with
- the current crossing.

Its impacts will vary:

(1) by the type of crossing (whether it would be a bridge or tunnel) ;

(2) by season (in the summer or at other times) ;

(3) by levels of tolls charged (whether they would be more, the same, or less than ferry crossing tolls); and,

(4) in accordance with travel time sensitivity (perishable goods would be relatively more impacted).

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Observations

Before considering the specific impacts, a number of factors must be considered:

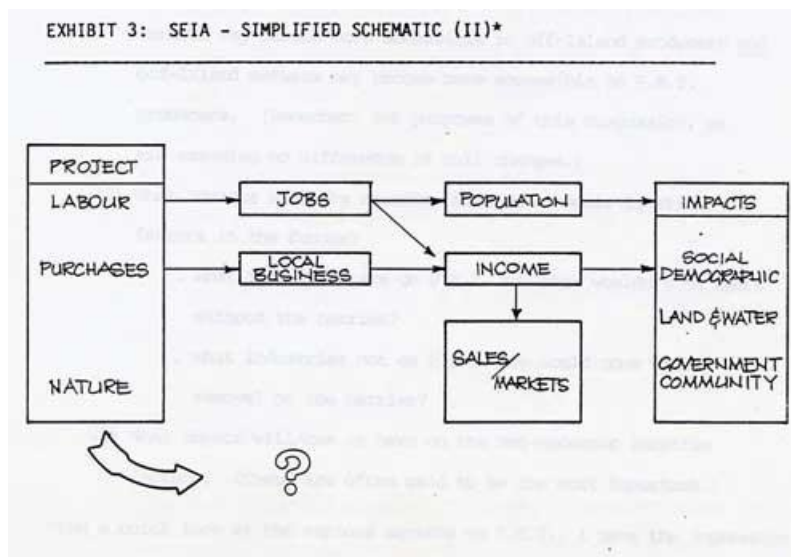
1. A fixed crossing will have much less dramatic impacts than it would have had earlier. With modern communications (for the transport of people, products, and ideas), P.E.I., like other parts of rural Canada, is much less "isolated" than it was 20, 40 or 60 years ago, due to:
 - instantaneous information flows -- e.g., the Globe and Mail can now be bought in Charlottetown at about the same time that it can be bought in Winnipeg, Toronto, or Halifax; and

- road and air travel -- e.g., the TransCanada Highway and the Island road system have had far greater impact on travel times, patterns,

Potential Socio-Economic Impacts

In order to explore the extent of possible fixed crossing impacts in each of the five impact categories, we need to make a small but important change to Exhibit 1 (the Simplified schematic). Exhibit 3 (Simplified Schematic (II)) reproduces Exhibit 1 with the addition of an arrow emanating from the "Nature" of the project and ending with a "?". The Exhibit represents the degree of uncertainty inherent in assessing the indirect impacts of a fixed crossing resulting from its very nature (i.e., with respect to time saving, and improved access and. egress).

EXHIBIT 3: SEIA - SIMPLIFIED SCHEMATIC (II)*



**This is a greatly simplified diagram showing only the major categories. It omits many relationships and all feedback loops.*

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Economic Impacts

The three key economic impact categories are:

- Jobs and income on P.E.I, (primarily through increased or decreased exports and imports) ;
- sectors and industries affected; and,
- price trends.

To assess these impacts, we really should do an industry-by-industry analysis. That analysis revolves around addressing three questions:

(1) What impact will the time saving (meaning lower transport costs from and to P.E.I., and quicker access to markets in P.E.I, and elsewhere) have on industries in P.E.I.? P.E.I. markets may become more accessible to off-Island producers and off-Island markets may become more accessible to P.E.I. producers. (Remember: for purposes of this discussion, we are assuming no difference in toll charges.)

(2) What impacts will the crossing have on economic location factors in the future?

- what industries are on P.E.I, now that wouldn't be there without the barrier?
- what industries not on P.E.I, now would come with removal of the barrier?

(3) What impact will/can it have on the non-economic location factors? (These are often said to be the most important.)

From a quick look at the various sectors on P.E.I., I have the impression that the potentially most affected industries -would be warehousing/storage, tourism, retail sales, and transportation, while the potentially least affected would be service industries, such as insurance, real estate, and computer sales. Exhibit 4 contains a list of key questions, by sector, which can help us explore the possible extent of impacts.

Social and Demographic Impacts

The key impacts here are in population numbers and their distribution, and on the resulting derived repasts on housing and such human services as education, health, and protection. Typical issues will include:

- whether there will be more or fewer people living on the Island.

- whether the human settlement patterns will change. Will some towns/settlements flourish or wither? Will business people locate in places other than according to current patterns? (A fixed crossing at Borden would likely mean decreased traffic at Wood Islands and therefore less traffic, commerce, and (perhaps) settlement along the Wood Island-Charlottetown route, and more traffic, commerce, and (perhaps) settlement along the Summerside-Charlottetown route.)

- what will be the resulting health care, education, and policing requirements ?

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Land and Water Use Impacts

This is a particularly interesting impact category in P.E.I., both for historical reasons and for the strength of Islanders' feelings on private property. The land use repasts really hinge on the extent to which settlement patterns (demand for housing, schools, and services) and tourism visitation patterns (both visitors and cottage buyers) change. There could be pressure for increasing village and city limits, taking agricultural land out of production, and having less shoreline available for

public use. These land issues are not new to P.E.I., and are very much part of the long-standing ownership and control debate.

Water use impacts would not be limited to direct impacts at or near crossing facilities (which would be very.. different depending on the type of crossing). They would involve impacts of changes in boating activity in P.E.I, harbours and recreational fishing in P.E.I, streams and rivers, and more or less disruption of fishing activity.

EXHIBIT 4: POTENTIAL EXTENT OF ECONOMIC IMPACTS BY SECTOR

Primary Sector (Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry)

- Will PEI products get to market quicker and at less expense?
- Could PEI producers get their raw product to processors off Island?
- Will out of province producers have better access to PEI processors and markets?

Secondary (Manufacturing and Processing)

- Will PEI manufacturers and processors get their product more quickly and cheaply to market?
- Will they be able to get raw materials off-Island more cheaply?
- Could they locate more easily off-Island to take advantage of reduced input costs (e.g., lower power rates)?

Tertiary (Services and Communications)

- Will people shop more/less often in Moncton/Halifax?
- Will crossing convenience be a positive or negative influence on tourism visitation (in terms of numbers and length of stay)?
- Will the crossing itself be an attraction? Do people visit because PEI is an Island?
- Given that the majority of tourists are now from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, will PEI become more cottage country and if so, what are the land use, servicing and community impacts?
- Will the various modes of communication be affected, i.e., surface transport (goods and people), air transport (goods and people) and information transport?

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Government Services

Generally these refer to the provision and cost of "local" government services, such as sewer and water, roads, snow clearing, garbage collection, and education. Given the system of government on P.E.I., such services are handled by the provincial government, by Charlottetown and Summerside, by some village commissions, and by regional school boards. The service enacts will be derivative of the other impacts -- the most likely area being those related to increases in

traffic and the resulting impact of road maintenance and snow clearing and the provision of settlement-related human services, such as education and policing.

Community Impacts

This is the area of most controversy, most emotion, and perhaps of most impact. It appears that everyone "knows" whether the crossing will be good or bad for P.E.I. I don't feel confident saying much about what the impacts will be, but I do want to express a strongly-held opinion about the role of public information and discussion beforehand.

First, the project is so big, so important, and so evocative that people tend to formulate strong opinions quickly -- opinions which resist being changed as more information becomes available. I believe therefore that a program of public consultation (interviews, information, public debate, and feedback sessions) is necessary for a rational consideration of this matter. I have been involved in processes where unfounded misapprehensions about a project created extreme public anxiety and negativism (my best example is with respect to the safety of Natural Gas Transmission lines) and where overly optimistic impressions of local job possibilities created strong public support.

Second, a public consultation process will inform the proponent (s), potentially affected communities, and government, of those issues of greatest concern and generate many ideas for changes and improvement. Public input is monitored closely and listened to carefully. In my experience, public input has resulted in project changes ranging from re-routing power lines and roads to making bid packages more accessible to local suppliers to cancelling a project (i.e., the proposed East Point National Park).

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The Fixed Crossing and the Island: An Argument in Favour

By Graham Miner

The issue we address tonight is: "The Fixed Crossing and the Island: Bonanza or Boondoggle?" The main thrust of the debate, however, has been directed toward the socio-economic implications of a fixed crossing. May I first comment on the time-saving diagram produced by Mr. Schwartz. This diagram gives the impression that a fixed crossing would save the travelling public only 45 minutes in travel time, and in that case would be insignificant in terms of destination arrival time. However, this assumes that we arrive at the ferry and drive right on board. Calculations of waiting time, or missed crossings, have not been considered. With a fixed crossing the people have the ability to travel at their own convenience, whether at two o'clock in the morning or any other time of the day, without having to arrange their schedules around Marine Atlantic's timetable.

I sometimes wonder, when entering a debate on socio-economic factors involved in a fixed crossing, if we will drag ourselves into the subject of the "Island Way of Life." This is an intangible ingredient, which no one can really put a finger on. Many times we view the "Island Way of Life" from a romantic or sentimental perspective, which bears little relation to reality. I know if someone asked me to write a paragraph about rural living in Nova Scotia, I could do that. If I was asked to write about rural living in P.E.I., I would probably submit the same paragraph.

Therefore, if we are worried that a fixed crossing to the mainland will make us more like Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, perhaps we should ask ourselves if we are now that much different?

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So what is this thing we call the "Island Way of Life?" Perhaps I could do a survey of all the people I went to school with. The only problem is that the majority of them have left the Island to pursue job opportunities elsewhere. Maybe that is the "Island Way of Life;" a sort of "going down the road" syndrome, or a system of education developed for export. Certainly as parents we want the best education for our children, and yet we can't provide opportunities for them here. The simple fact of it all is that we are a microcosm of everything that goes on in the rest of the Maritimes, and one's way of life is primarily dictated by the economic activity, or lack thereof, in any particular region.

May I take this a step further, because I am reminded of a drawing. In the centre of the drawing is a log house, and on the right side of the building is a beautiful stand of oak trees. On the left-hand side is a satellite dish. Across the top of the drawing are the words: "Island Way of Life."

Let us also consider the economic factors involved in a fixed crossing. From the point of view of the trucking industry, a fixed crossing- would be of tremendous benefit. Such an option would allow for quick and easy access to and from the marketplace. In this day and age of rapid transportation systems, markets supplied by the trucking industry demand that products arrive on schedule -- always on schedule. The individual trucker does not need the added burden of the

ferry service. From his point of view, the ferry service imposes an incalculable loss of income due to down time or lost back hauls associated with late delivery.

The potato industry would also benefit from a fixed crossing, because of its need to be market-oriented. A more efficient transportation system would allow the Island's main product to hit the marketplace in a reliable and consistent way. Consider also that many producers and shippers encounter hardships. They must schedule warehouse time to accommodate both truckers and Marine Atlantic. This is not a cost-effective arrangement. The fishing industry suffers similar problems. The marketplace demands a fresh product, and there is an inability to properly service that sector. This also is a factor in transporting products other than fish and potatoes.

The tourist industry would increase with easier access to the Island. We may feel the ferries are an attraction, but has anyone ever done a survey to discover how many visitors do not come to the Island because of the ferries? Certainly the first time one crosses on the boat it may be exciting, but at the end of a vacation the excitement is probably replaced with frustration and annoyance. There may even be an increase in tourism because a fixed crossing would be an attraction in itself.

Another sector that would see improvement is the forestry industry. The Island's forests experience poor growth and are in a state of decline. The golden years of shipbuilding depleted most of the good timber. If a fixed crossing could create easy access to pulp markets, the forests would be regenerated through increased thinning activities and removal of poor species.

One issue dear to my heart is that of continuous high fuel prices on the Island. With a fixed crossing, the oil companies could no longer use isolation and transportation costs to justify shafting us. At the very least, their excuses would have to become more creative.

In terms of costs, small business and secondary industry could see positive results with a fixed crossing. --However, if we concentrate on the imaginary concept of people going to the mainland to shop, we are deceiving ourselves. If this is the prevalent attitude, perhaps we should oppose paved highways so people from Tignish will not often travel to Summerside.

All of this aside, there are actually two legitimate issues here. One is a question of economics. Can we afford the ferry service with its never-ending debt? The second item is a matter of environmental impact. From the point of view of the Truckers' Association, the project "flies" if studies prove it to be environmentally benign. If it is not, the fixed crossing ends there.

I would like to close by saying that those who are satisfied with the ferry service are probably those who don't often use it. One can only "appreciate" it with consistent use, and then curse it like the truckers who travel on it every day.

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The Fixed Crossing and the Island: An Argument Against

By Sharon Fraser

Just before I left Halifax to come to this Forum, Gordon Cummings, president of National Sea Products, and Peter Nicholson, vice-president of the Bank of Nova Scotia, were being widely quoted as having said that all federal development money should be poured into Halifax and its immediate area. We should have another Toronto or Boston, they said, right here in Atlantic Canada. How much easier we could make it for people who think that way, I said to myself, if we make sure that all roads lead quickly and conveniently to Halifax. I believe firmly that the "separatedness" of the Island can work to its advantage, but only if there is a drastic change in the way our economic system is put to work.

One of my personal rules as a journalist has always been: Never take the unattributed word of anyone who has a vested interest. It's not a bad rule to follow, even if you're not a journalist, but simply trying to reach a real understanding of any issue that involves politics and a great deal of money.

We knew there's a great deal of money involved in the construction and eventual sale of a fixed crossing, because of the intensity with which three companies are lobbying to get the contract. We know politics is involved, because the decision as to which company wins out will be made by politicians. The fixed crossing is not so much an issue of transportation and convenience as it is an issue of business and governments.

So let's first look at the role politics and business play in our daily lives, in the most general terms. When we elect someone and send him to Ottawa, we sometimes make the mistake of assuming that he owes his first loyalty to us. In fact, he owes his first loyalty to the political party he represents. For its part, the political party owes first loyalty to the financial sources that help it either maintain power or regain power -- usually businesses of varying sizes. Business interests, of course, have no constituency and usually have no motives beyond making a lot of money, which enables them to exert influence, through political contributions, over those in power.

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To whose advantage is it really to build a fixed crossing linking the Island to the mainland? Although politicians and business representatives claim that its existence would improve the quality of Island life by improving the economy, I suggest it would improve the economy of a very few people, many of them located somewhere other than the island.

I would like to take a short look at P.E.I. 's economy. With or without a fixed crossing, the economy isn't working for a large number of Islanders. The unemployment rate is high; the number of available jobs is low; and too many people -- against their will -- are working at temporary jobs, created mainly to provide weeks of U.I. benefits.

By my definition, an equitable socio-economic system comes about through political planning that takes into consideration much more than the fact that someone with money to invest is able

to move in and use his money to reap further profits. Rather, long-term planning should involve local development that maximizes employment opportunities and minimizes the need for migration -- either to larger centres or to other provinces.

The advantage of local investment -- whether by individuals as employers, or employees in a workers' co-op -- is that the people involved have a vested interest in an economically healthy community. After all, they live there; they raise their children there; do their shopping there. Such businesses consider quality of life--to a much greater extent than do businesses which are owned far away -- in some other province or in some other country.

I think that the presence of a fixed crossing of the Strait will make this type of development even more remote than it seems to be right now. With a fixed crossing, I envision the economy becoming even more centralized, and the rural and coastal communities drying up for lack of enterprise.

Consider the fishing industry. The demand for fish is voracious and markets are still expanding. Supply is eventually going to be a problem. But I can see, sometime in the future, the larger processing companies, which have the greatest vested interest in fish marketing, trucking vast amounts of fish away from P.E.I, to be processed and shipped from more central areas. In fact, with a fixed crossing, I see the fish plant in Shediac becoming a much larger operation because, as everyone knows, the overhead of one large plant is much less than that of several small plants. I have also taken into consideration the fact that many of the plants which sustain P.E.I.'s coastal communities are not owned by large companies, but it wouldn't be the first time that small companies have been squeezed out of business because, eventually, they're unable to offer competitive prices. Without going into detail, I think a parallel case could be made as well about the agricultural communities and their resources.

Many Islanders who haven't thought at length about the fixed crossing presume that tourism will be the industry most affected. Many people feel -- quite rightly, I'm sure -- that the ferry trip is part of the attraction for tourists. On the other hand, lately I've been hearing that there is some concern that with a fixed crossing, the Island will become a weekend madhouse and an attraction for a type of visitor that the tourist industry discourages.

When I first began preparing for this presentation, I was inclined to sit on the fence about tourism. But on second thought, it seems there may be two very different and separate theories about how a fixed crossing would affect tourism.

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Another area that has been raised as a matter of concern is the issue of shopping in Moncton. For many businesses, the Christmas trade is the only factor which allows them to operate the rest of the year. I know many people who now go to Moncton for Christmas shopping, and I doubt if I have to look far for many more who would follow the traffic if a fixed crossing were in place. It would seem to me to be a logical extension for those merchants -- and others -- who oppose the freewheeling development of malls and superstores to consider carefully how a fixed crossing would affect Island business.

I know it's possible to come up with dollar figures which will prove that a fixed crossing will be beneficial to the Island economy. This use of statistics always reminds me of the old American expression: "What's good for General Motors is good for the country." It wasn't true for their country anymore than it's true that what is good for National Sea Products is necessarily good for a fishing family in Miminegash.

In the business-worshipping '80s, the rallying cry has been to open up, and let the free market determine the direction of the economy. But I don't trust business to act in the best interests of the greatest number of people. And I don't trust politicians to act in the best interests of the greatest number of people unless, of course, they believe that votes are at stake. That's why I'm unwilling to trust much of the information that has so far been disseminated on this subject. That's why I also believe that individuals, organizations that attempt to bring about social change, and institutions, should be adding to this incomplete information which has been circulated.

Finally, I want to ask you to consider this. If it is better -- socially, politically, economically -- to be attached to the mainland, then what ever happened to Cape Breton, which was seduced with all the same arguments in its pre-causeway days? Or what about New Brunswick -- which is well and truly connected to the mainland and presumably, therefore, within easy reach of all these markets we keep hearing about? Why does New Brunswick suffer the same economic depression as P.E.I.?

I suggest that being attached to the mainland has not worked to their advantage because government after government has used the same old tired methods to try to stimulate the economy -- tax incentives for big companies, mega-projects creating 2000 jobs at one time and in one place. Just once, I'd like to hear a politician say: "Let's create 20 jobs in 100 places -- using our own resources to our own advantage." This possibility will be threatened with a fixed crossing in place.

I say that a fixed crossing will benefit those who already have economic power, and not those who don't. I know that some of you will think of me as idealistic for still promoting a view of rural and small community development. And you're right. I am idealistic -- because someone has to be.

Endnotes:

1. This is a greatly simplified diagram showing only the major categories, It omits many relationships and all feedback loops.

2. For an excellent discussion of this matter, see M.R. Cullen, "The Transportation Issue, 1873-1973," in F.W.P. Bolger, *Canada's Smallest Province: A History of P.E.I.* (John Deyell Company, 1973), p. 232-261

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