

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE STRATEGIC SOCIAL PLAN FOR
NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR**

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Through many generations and changes in status (responsible government, commission of government, Canadian province), the political rule of Newfoundland and Labrador has been consistent: a highly centralized and hierarchical administration with no long-standing tradition of local or regional authority. Not until the 1940's were there any incorporated municipalities outside the capital city of St. John's.¹ It was only after the Whalen Report of 1974 that most communities in Newfoundland and Labrador organized municipal governments. Thus, formalized democracy at the local level was unknown in the rural areas of the province until very recently. Also in the 1970's, 56 regional development associations were formed around the province to support local economic development, but not until the 1980's did concepts like community, decentralized, bottom-up and integrated approaches to economic and social development become part of the policy discourse. *Building on Our Strengths*, the final report of the Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment released in 1986, touted this approach as a viable and sustainable alternative to industrialization and urbanization.²

Further, in the province's rural areas the dominant political culture, at base, a people's understanding of what is fair and feasible,³ tended to be clientele-istic and emphasize reliance on that central authority in St. John's. This is best seen in the traditional election day greeting in Newfoundland and Labrador: I hope you win your vote. "Winning your vote" means that your district has returned a member of the governing party and so will receive lots of patronage jobs and public works projects. Community well-being, then, depends more on having a patron, an MHA, at the centre of power than on local initiatives.

The province's population is small (little more than a half million people), and the geography correspondingly enormous, with today more than 600 outports and small towns scattered along 27,000 km of coastline within 400,000+ km² of land area. (In the not-too-distant past there were as many as 800-900 communities.) As with many economies built (or jerry-rigged) on raw materials and semi-finished products, with little or no local ownership or control over those resources and affiliated industry, Newfoundland and Labrador has seldom known steady, long-term prosperity. The seemingly permanent moratorium on the cod fishery, dating from 1992, brought gale force economic and social problems that buffeted the hundreds of communities that had lived off cod for centuries. Demographic trends (low birth rate, aging population, high out-migration) created additional pressures. As families abandoned their homes in search of a living, a sense of crisis yet again came to prevail.

¹ By the time we joined Canada in 1949 there were only 20. Today there are nearly 300, still not half the total number of communities in the province.

² House, J. Douglas. *The Sustainable Outport: A model for community development?* In Hanrahan, Maura, ed. *Through a Mirror Dimly: Essays on Newfoundland Society and Culture*, Breakwater Books, St. John's, 1993.

³ Cruz, Consuelo. *Political Culture and Institutional Development in Costa Rica and Nicaragua*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 2.

Coincidentally, also in 1992, three years into the work of the Economic Recovery Commission and after a public consultation to inform its development, the Province released *Change and Challenge: A Strategic Economic Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador*, which reiterated the mid-80's recommendation for "an integrated approach to rural and regional development, having the various agencies and departments of government working together to achieve common objectives".⁴ In 1994 a federal-provincial Task Force on Community Economic Development released *Community Matters: The New Regional Economic Development*, which suggested that local people play the lead role in development, with the private sector as the main driver, and a strong supportive and facilitative function for government.⁵ The province was subsequently divided into twenty zones, each with a Regional Economic Development Board (REDB) charged with the development of a strategic economic plan for the region. Minister Judy Foote said at the time, "Individuals, communities and groups with an interest in regional economic development have come together - in many areas for the first time - to organize themselves better to coordinate and integrate development efforts... individuals and groups at the local level must take ownership and responsibility for the development process. But if their efforts are to succeed, they need the support of government. This cannot, and will not, take the form of top-down direction, but of a partnership approach."⁶ She called it revolutionary.

Interestingly, she went on to say, "These are challenging times for government as well, as we must learn new ways of doing business. Innovation, efficiency and partnership take on real meaning as government departments and agencies strive to maintain or enhance service with fewer resources. Partnerships with the voluntary sector are a key aspect of this."⁷

Meanwhile, the Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador (CSC), a non-profit social development organization established in 1976, had quickly become a significant force for social policy change, and over time it came to realize that piecemeal policy changes were not addressing the structural and procedural problems inherent in policy development and implementation. This shift in thinking was encouraged by ties to national community development organizations and the growing influence of concepts like community capacity building.⁸ Economic planning having achieved a privileged status within the political arena was cause for concern among voluntary organizations like the CSC whose representatives believed that economic development on its own would do little to ameliorate, and could in fact aggravate, existing social problems. CSC briefs and presentations to the Social Policy Committee of Cabinet noted that social issues were interrelated and articulated the need for a more integrative, collaborative, and preventative approach to public policy formulation. As early as 1985, the CSC called for more social planning, social research and priority setting in Newfoundland and Labrador, urging government to set up a "Social Planning / Social Policy Advisory Council ... to

⁴ Blake, Raymond B. *Regional and Rural Development Strategies in Canada: The Search for Solutions*, Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening our Place in Canada, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, March 2003, p. 206.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Keynote address by Judy Foote, Minister of Development and Rural Renewal, delivered to "Your Challenge, Your Future: The Strategic Planning Conference of the New Regional Economic Development", Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1996.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ In 1980, the CSC raised local awareness of development issues when it hosted the Biennial Social Welfare Policy Conference, managed by the Canadian Council on Social Development, in St. John's.

develop a long-term strategic plan within the social policy sector”,⁹ to work in tandem with economic development initiatives.

A Strategic Social Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador

And so, integrated and community approaches to development became embedded within at least the rhetoric of Government. In his 1993 Speech From The Throne, then Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Honourable Clyde Wells, announced his government’s intention to create a strategic social plan (SSP) for the province, as a complement to the Strategic Economic Plan. A Strategic Social Planning Committee was set up, comprised of senior officials from the social departments of government, Dr. Doug House from the Economic Recovery Commission, and Penelope Rowe, CEO of the Community Services Council, representing the voluntary sector. An SSP consultation paper was drafted and although it called for horizontality across departments, it still addressed issues from the traditional viewpoint of silos.¹⁰

In 1996 a Social Policy Advisory Committee (SPAC) was formed, representing various non-government organizations and academia, to coordinate public consultation, write a report and make recommendations. SPAC’s vision, as delineated in *Volume II: Investing in People and Communities*,

“advocated a move away from the government’s traditional way of conducting business. Rather than assigning individual departments with the responsibility of identifying solutions to particular social issues, a more collaborative approach was envisioned. The vertical structure of government in which each department operated as a “silo”, disconnected and often unaware not only of the activities of other departments, but also of the activities of non-governmental actors, was seen as inefficient and inadequate. The lack of communication and coordination - both inter-departmentally and inter-sectorally - contributed to a lack of knowledge regarding overlaps in programming, the existence of unmet needs and gaps, potential complications arising from the interaction of different departmental policies and programs, as well as potential synergies that could arise from greater collaboration. SPAC advocated a more horizontal approach to policy and program development, as well as service delivery, both within government and between government and non-governmental actors.”¹¹

After many drafts under the coordination of an inter-departmental committee, *People, Partners and Prosperity: A Strategic Social Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador* (SSP) was approved by both Cabinet and senior bureaucrats and released to the public in 1998. The SSP proposed a process to strengthen social policy planning and improve service delivery, not an array of concrete social policies designed to work in coordination. Focusing on communities was a natural and logical step. Community organizations and volunteers could be the analysts of what needed to be done and the catalysts to make it happen. The Plan would turn to the voluntary, community-based sector (VCBS), especially in rural areas, to deliver services under contract from government and engage in developing social programs that centred on community needs.

⁹ CSC Presentation to the Social Policy Committee of Cabinet, 1985 and 29 January 1986; *Notes and Impressions on the Brief to the Social Policy Committee of Cabinet*, ca. 29 January 1986; Minutes of meeting to discuss CSC’s brief to the Social Policy Committee of Cabinet, 27 March 1987; and *Second Annual CSC Brief to the Social Policy Committee of Cabinet*, 30 March 1987.

¹⁰ Catmur, A. Unfinished draft of master’s thesis.

¹¹ Ibid.