

Is Atlantic Canada Guilty of Promoting Ethnic Purity?

By Laura FANNING

According to John Ibbitson, a journalist for the *Globe and Mail*, "Atlantic Canada's biggest problem is that it is far too white."

Recently, in an article entitled "Atlantic Canadian Whiteness," Ibbitson attacks the Maritimes as being a region plagued with poverty, an insecure job market, limited private sector capital, and a declining population. He blames the prevalence of a Eurocentric attitude for the lack of cultural diversity and states that being a visible minority in Atlantic Canada can be a "lonely" experience. He accuses the native-born of being lazy and states that immigrant's relentless determination would refresh the economy.

It is obvious in Ibbitson's statements that he believes that visible minorities should remain visible and argues that the importance of this maintains what he calls "civilized cities."

To substantiate his argument that Atlantic Canada suffers from an attachment to "illusory values" (and as a consequence nobody wants to live here) he

includes a barrage of statistics and estimations, and even provides a statement by Sylvia Paris, the president of the Multicultural Association of Nova Scotia. Yet, her statement appears to be manipulated to suit his argument and she is left looking as if she is saying something that she is not.

Paris states that in order "for an individual to speak for himself or herself, you have to have a cultural voice. And one important component of a cultural voice is a critical mass." What exactly constitutes a "critical mass" is left unclear, yet Ibbitson is quick to assume that this statement means that none exist within the Maritimes.

Initially, it appears as if Ibbitson actually knows what he is talking about and has sincerely researched the toils of Atlantic Canada. Yet the statistics he draws from are limited and he is careful to only include those that support his argument.

While it may be true that Newfoundland and New Brunswick may have seen a decline in population over the past five years, according to stats Canada, PEI and Nova Scotia have seen a steady incline in their population every year during that same time period: PEI's population grew from 123,790 people in 1996 to 133,385 people in 2001, and Nova Scotia's

population grew from 843,750 people in 1996 to 897,570 in 2001.

The apparently insecure job market does not stem from laziness but rather from the dependence on an ever-changing market, unpredictable resources (such as fishing and farming), and limited government support for those who depend on these resources (which are unique to the region) for their livelihood. I wonder if he thinks about the realities of the life of a fisherman or farmer as he sits down to enjoy his meat and imported PEI potatoes, or his lobster from Nova Scotia. Contrary to popular belief, these things do not grow in the supermarket.

As for Ibbitson's statement about the economic dependency and decline of Atlantic Canada based on its refusal to welcome immigrants, he fails to acknowledge (or maybe he just doesn't know) that among other things, Halifax was rated one of the fastest growing cities in the country in 2001 and maintains one of the largest and oldest black communities in Canada. This group of people represents more than half of those who identified themselves as visible minorities in the 1996 census: 18,105 of the 31,320 people polled to be exact.

Also evident in the 1996 census is the recognition of a significant Arab/West

Asian population in PEI. Newfoundland boasts one of the largest and diverse universities in Atlantic Canada, and New Brunswick maintains a dominant French culture (more than half its population: 236,665 out of 465,170 people) that is as impressive and influential as Quebec's, and yes we do have Chinese restaurants.

Differences are not absolute, and basing cultural diversity on the colour of one's skin is not only insulting, but it's potentially dangerous.

The Maritimes is a region rich with heritage and cultural diversity and I suggest that Mr. Ibbitson get his facts straight. Not only are cultural differences recognized, but they are openly celebrated in Atlantic Canada. Although the Maritimes may appear on the surface as a predominantly white population this does not mean that diverse cultures, languages, and religions do not exist. In fact, there are many culturally diverse groups who maintain and celebrate their heritage alongside their neighbours, and they have done this congenially for centuries. Atlantic Canada is also one of the few places left

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