

# Prince Edward Peninsula

*The Bridge to Hell is paved with good intentions*

Leave it to Islanders to be different. While the rest of the country is on the horns of a federal election dilemma, we're staring down the tusks of a provincial white elephant. I refer, of course, to the fabled Fixed Link. 'Twas only a week ago that the final agreement to build this bridge to the mainland was signed, after years of steamrolling over any and all objections, from environmental concerns to proponents of the "Island Way of Life". It would seem that despite Islanders' economic, social, or environmental concerns, the Link is bound for completion come hell or high water. With many (if not most) Islanders mesmerized by the siren call of jobs, monied interests salivating at the financial possibilities, and politicians who are only too eager to please during an election year, the dream of a Link seems bound to become a reality. On seeing the carefree exultation surrounding the Link signing, though, one wishes desperately that someone would wake the dreamers up. The Link will have a massive impact on our province, and too many politicians and Link-boosters seem blissfully ignorant of the potentially negative side-effects.

The blind enthusiasm surrounding the Link is perhaps the most frightening aspect of the project. The Guardian's recent Fixed Link supplement was nothing more than unabashed cheerleading, a one-sided journalistic farce. Shamelessly pandering politicians, from our M.L.A.'s to the Prime Minister, have been racing to cash in on what Kim Campbell called an "overwhelming consensus" by falling over each other in their attempts to give the Link a thumbs-up while giving dissenters the proverbial finger, as in the case of protesting fishermen brushed off by Kim Campbell. The deplorable political opportunism at the heart of this is made evident by comparison to the other major Link boosters in the media: commercial advertisers, everyone from Irving Oil to Maritime Electric. Everyone likes to back a winner, and right or wrong, that's what the Link seems to be in terms of popular support.

The project's popularity in these recession-plagued times has led to the government's support in clearing away any of the nasty little legal details wherever possible, as was the case with the recent exemption of S.C.I. (the Link

contractors) from the land purchase reviews to which all corporate land-owners are supposedly subject. The Link has, not surprisingly, survived more courtroom battles than the Kennedy family. Megaprojects with far less potential for ecological and sociological upheaval (not to mention far smaller price tags) have been vetoed by Canadian courts in recent years, but the Link's popular support and influential backing have ensured its momentum. Social and environmental concerns apparently take a back seat to the economic brass ring.

Regarding the supposed economic prosperity the Link will bring, one thing that all link-boosters conveniently overlook is the fact that it is a short term economic boost. While the link is under construction there will be many new jobs in the area, but they will last only so long as the construction does, while about 600 permanent jobs linked to the ferry will vanish. The bridge's maintenance will not require the same base of regular employment; moreover, it will be privately owned and run (by S.C.I. for at least 35 years according to their contract), and travellers eager to see the demise of costly ferry rides may be rudely awakened by perhaps even more costly bridge tolls. S.C.I. is a profit-making venture, not a public service. While some argue the bridge will initiate a flow of consumers and businesses into P.E.I., few consider the painfully obvious fact that the bridge makes it just as easy to leave the Island; local businesses have complained for years that Islanders too often seek greener shopping pastures in places like Moncton, and if the Link makes this even more convenient then it may be Island merchants who get fleeced. The bridge makes possible the outward flow of spending and resources as much as it does the inward flow thereof. Despite the short-term boom it has no long-term guarantees for prosperity, and 840 million dollars is a lot of public money to gamble on a project that is not really necessary, is of unproven profitability, and may actually be harmful in the long run.

Construction booms always provide an economic boost, but there are only so many things you can build or develop if that's what you rely on for economic growth. It would be far wiser to concentrate on sustainable economic development of local resources such as agriculture, rather than try to artificially "kickstart" the

economy with massive projects every now and again. As for claims such as those of Charlottetown mayor Ian "Tex" MacDonald that the Link will help "fast-track development", one should keep in mind that one of our province's key industries, tourism, is rooted in the Island being a relatively undeveloped region retaining much of its rural and agrarian aspects. Even if construction and development do grow steadily in the wake of the Link, that may be at odds with what draws people to P.E.I. in the first place. Nice shooting, Tex.

Most importantly, beyond the question of the Link's profitability, there is a very real potential threat to the things that we already have. "The Island Way of Life" is a matter of personal interpretation, but those who recognize and care for the lifestyle and culture of this region are correct in fearing that increased contact with the mainland would, at the very least, significantly alter communities here, whether for better or for worse. A more concrete and far more urgent concern is the potential damage to the environment. Despite countless reviews (not all of which were in the Link's favour) it has never been conclusively proven that the Link will not significantly damage the surrounding ecosystem, and taking a chance on that is sheer madness in light of the already dwindling fish stocks throughout the Maritimes. The government may be willing to play environmental Russian Roulette for the sake of a short-term economic boom, but do we really want to gamble our futures on a quick fix?

No one denies that the Link will create an employment boom while it is under construction, nor can we deny that the Link will revolutionize interprovincial travel and trade between P.E.I. and New Brunswick. The employment boom will be temporary, though, and the finished bridge may well create at least as many problems as it does solutions, if not more. That being said, politicians and the media should take responsibility by leading Islanders in careful examination of all factors before leaping in. Otherwise, we may eventually find that the bridge to hell was paved with good intentions.

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