

Citizen Participation and Social Values

Notes for the P.E.I. Delegates
to the Man and Resources Conference

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Prince Edward Island has been undergoing a process of social and political "underdevelopment" or de-development which is at least as if not in fact much more comprehensive, much more meaningful and therefore much broader and greater in its importance than simply the "standard of living", in purely economic terms. So even if the "standard of living", the average personal income of Islanders with respect to other areas of Canada, were "going up", that alone would evidently be a poor and completely inadequate measurement of Island "development". Unfortunately, even that is not the case. Only on some absolute purely quantitative basis of the amount of money which the Islander today can spend on "goods and services" in comparison to the amount he or his father had years ago, can one establish any positive correlation. And even this applies only to Islanders "on the average", while there are clearly a number who have gained more and many who have lost ground in relation to their fathers and forefathers.

On the social and political levels, the losses are very evident and very serious. I need not reiterate these in detail but simply point to some of the symptoms and examples: participation in municipal

politics; the lack of citizen participation at the grass-roots level referred to by so many individuals and organizations including the R.D.C., the Brothers and Sisters of Cornelius Howatt, and several recent speeches by our Provincial Premier; cf. particularly Community Partnership, March 15, 1973; and Between Two Cultures, May 28, 1973 the "revised budgeting" in the first amendment to the P.E.I. Development Plan which cut the "Public Participation and Involvement" budget roughly in half; the "passive spectator" attitude during political speeches at local meetings compared to the active questioning of years ago; the "we-they" dichotomy between people and their government which is appropriate to authoritarian but not liberal-democratic systems. On the broad cultural, ethical and human level, the losses are enormous, devastating and critical. (It may soon be appropriate to declare a "provincial emergency"!) Under-development and "de-development" perhaps do their worst not in the economic, but in the cultural destruction of the hinterland. On the Metropolis - Hinterland thesis and its impact on the economy and society of the Maritimes in particular, see respectively Peter Usher, Metropolis and Hinterland (mimeographed) and Bruce Archibald, "Atlantic Regional Under-development and Socialism" in L. Lapierre et al, Essays on the Left, Toronto

1971.

Cultural disintegration and the decay of values are insidious and treacherous processes which manifest themselves in both social and personal terms in relation to a way of life, a set of values, and a code of ethics. Again, I can refer only to some symptoms and examples: Foremost, perhaps, is the fact that becomes a mere commodity to be sold to the highest bidder; the land dunes and beaches become money-makers in the tourist industry; educational programmes are calculated in terms of economic "efficiency"; and work is only something you do to make money or to gain economic advantage over someone else. By the same token, human beings who are not capable of making their own way or of keeping up with the race for the dollar are classified as "dysfunctional" (sic!) people; the individual who contributes of his time and talent for any other reason than solely that of "making money" is probably considered stupid, at best "naive", and certainly suspect; (there must be something wrong with you if you're willing to "work for nothing": and "nothing" here clearly means "no money"). Values such as dignity, respect, integrity and trust - insofar as they bring no monetary return - become strictly - speaking "worthless". Agriculture is only one way of making money, not a way of life. Identical box houses in sterile "sub-divisions" or expanding in monotonous ribbons from town deep into countryside are the least-expensive containers for people, with little or no consideration for the aesthetics of architecture and the landscape, for social and community planning, or for the psychological dimensions of human space. The terms of what these are worth to the tourist industry in terms of dollar income; in their own right the values inherent in the work that creates that pattern of land, the sense of sharing and common purpose that form communities, and the feeling of responsibility and pride that Islanders feel for their own province, become "discounted" and discarded as outmoded remnants of a "backward" past. Under such conditions, Islanders react in different ways: some adapt themselves to the economic competition and become "functional"; some others "go under" and become "dysfunctional".



"CIVILIZATION... THANK GOD!"

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