

Outing the academics

(Warning: satiric content)

Our resident post-secondary smarty-pants can't be as brilliant as we purport them to be. Either that, or the tenured snoots have been holding out on us.

Think about it: there are more than 16,000 faculty and staff at 17 universities across Atlantic Canada, plus a comparably impressive number of administrative and teaching professionals at a host of private and public colleges. Collectively, they're supposedly enlightening more than double their number in eager young minds and spending billions of taxpayer dollars shamelessly indulging in myriad obscure research activities that we hardly ever hear about. And for what? Excepting rare pockets of prosperity, such as the petroleum-powered boom on Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula, the Atlantic economy is in perpetual turmoil.

Consider, for a moment, the decades of intense mental acuity that have been focused on expanding an increasingly creative class of socially conscious, environmentally aware, continuously innovative community contributors, and you have to ask: where the heck are the results? Rural populations are still in decline. Health care is in an incessant bind. It's hard to find a continuous mile of pavement that isn't in repair. There are never enough jobs to go around. And yet, some of the region's greatest minds have devoted their academic lives to investigating ways and means to sustainable prosperity.

Which leads me to two possible conclusions: either they aren't as clever as their multiple degrees would lead us to believe, or the dirty blighters have been keeping the secret formula for themselves. Having met more than a few of them, I'm more inclined to believe in the latter, and personally speaking, I think it's about time they coughed it up.

Hence, the impetus for my recent incursion to the Harris Centre at Memorial University. There, sequestered in the Centre's windowed boardroom overlooking the quasi-rural idyll of Long Pond, I interrogated ubiquitous university pitch man, Dr. Rob Greenwood. The following is a transcript of our conversation, paraphrased for editorial convenience.

Editor Extraordinary (leaning menacingly across the table): Why haven't you brainiacs made us all rich?!

RB (surprised at the attack): But, that isn't our job.

Me (turning up the heat): What is your job? What secrets have you been hiding in your 'ivory towers'?

RB: (flushing under his turtleneck collar): We haven't been hiding. We've been reading and researching, teaching and serving on committees. The traditional scholarship

model doesn't leave much room for outreach. And academics aren't gregarious extroverts by nature. It's not like the community has done such a good job of listening to us when we do speak, either. They're always accusing us of 'not being practical enough'. As for policy makers, we're just getting to know one batch of them when there's another election and we have to start educating them all over again.

Me (in snarky response): You're supposed to be the smart ones. If you have such great ideas, it's up to you to figure out a way to make them listen.

RB (warming to topic): That's why we have the Harris Centre. It's a bridge between education and scholarship, government and classroom. I'm not a professor and I don't belong to a particular faculty, but I meet regularly with our varied departments. That way, I know what's going on and I work with the other staff here at the Harris Centre to identify ways and means to spread the word.


Me (jeering): Yes, you're a regular prophet, you are. So, what have you done for the university lately?

RB (with increasing enthusiasm and vocal speed): You may have heard about some research we did into the federal presence here in Newfoundland and Labrador. Our researcher found that the federal investment in this province was lacking on a per capacity basis, compared to other jurisdictions. We believe that report played a role in reversing the decision to close the weather station in Gander. And we organize regional workshops around the province so that MUN staff can speak to people in the community about current and potential future research activities. Did you know that we sometimes have 20 or 30 university

researchers doing work in the same geographic area but on different topics? We're making those connections. And we set up an online searchable database of university research and expertise. That site, yaffle.ca, has been recognized as a world leading initiative as far away as Australia...

Me (cutting him off): Yaffle, baffle. Sounds wonderful, but you still haven't answered my fundamental question: why haven't these so-called brilliant minds found the solution to what ails the Atlantic economy?

RB (determined to have the last word): We never pretended to have all the answers. Perhaps, rather than questioning why the post-secondary sector hasn't solved all your woes, you should instead give some thought to where you'd be without us.

Me (deep in thought): Yes, where indeed? 



Dawn Chafe

The dirty blighters have been keeping the secret formula for themselves.

Michael's Big Fat Fib

Beware the glib-tongued Economides; Like the Greek gods of old, he's more interested in establishing dominion over the Earth than saving it.

And so it was that on the third Wednesday in the sixth month, in the shadow of an adolescent moon, Annus Domine 2009, naturalized Greco-American titan Michael Economides did board his petroleum-powered chariot and embark on an oil-sponsored descent from Mount Houston. His purpose? To deliver a message of power and salvation to the masses attending the annual conference of the Newfoundland and Labrador Oil and Gas Industries Association.

His divine memo was this: fear not, for the sun will shine on the Age of Petroleum for at least another hundred years and its ascendancy as the global currency of power, both politically and economically, will likewise remain unhindered.

Wind and solar power proponents? Ignore 'em, they're just balding hippies camouflaged in power suits. Ethanol enthusiasts? Flim-flam artists perpetuating the biggest scam since Charles Ponzi. Biodiesel? Willy Nelson notwithstanding, it'll never fly.

As for the biggest "myth" of all, that of carbon-induced climate change, the oracle of oil is not convinced that there's really any damage being done by climate change, or that carbon-based fuel consumption causes global warming. He especially doubts whether anything can be done about it anyway, so there's really no use trying.

From whence, then, do these false truths arise? (In his best Vardoulis accent): *It's all those journalists and ignorant politicians. They know noth-ing. They think electricity comes from a socket in the wall. Find me one scientific report, just one, that proves energy consumption is causing global warming, and I send you \$100 – no questions asked.*

The bombast, though entertaining, was also distracting: his hyperbolic shilling detracted from the legitimacy of his arguments. Wind and solar power, as currently harvested, are too cumbersome, costly and unreliable to replace conventional fuels. Corn ethanol by itself *doesn't* make economic sense. Not only is American corn a subsidized crop, but turning all U.S. corn into ethanol wouldn't supply more than six per cent of that country's total annual oil needs. The transformation of soybeans into biodiesel *isn't* prolific or cost-effective enough to satisfy energy demand.

Total energy independence *is* a pipedream for many nations at the moment (the U.S. among them) and hydrocarbon wealth *may* redefine superpower status in the next decade (at the very least, conflict over energy supply *will* contribute to global instability). Oil, natural gas and coal *will* continue to be the world's primary fuel for some as-yet unidentified time to come. The price of hydrocarbons *will* rise in the near future as the world pulls out of the recession and developing economies ramp up to full speed once again (though whether we'll see \$100 oil before the end of the year is pure speculation).

While his axioms are fundamentally sound, his conclusion is hideously flawed. The online version of Economides' vision, though considerably less entertaining than his physical performance, is exponentially more horrific: "The world's policymakers appear to be in agreement that man-made carbon dioxide is bad and that efforts like the Kyoto Protocol are the solution. Maybe they are. But then what? It's the 'then what?' that's getting ignored. Mandating drastic cuts in energy use and/or large-scale carbon capture and sequestration efforts will cost billions, perhaps trillions, of dollars. It may also mean huge job losses. And no matter what anybody says, renewable energy simply cannot replace fossil fuels in the modern economy. The point is this: the global warming debate is too important to be left to 'group-think' while accepting the spurious claim that 'the debate is settled.' We aim to keep the debate going."

By continuing the debate over whether or not humans are significant contributors to climate change and global warming, by belittling efforts to counteract decades of pollution and environmental degradation, and by blithely advocating a Nero-like

philosophy of continuing the status quo, Michael Economides would have us stall the necessary investment in alternative fuel research and development. In absolving humanity of any blame for global malfesance, he is likewise denying our responsibility to make amends.

Thankfully, the NOIA conference coordinators had the foresight to offset Economides' determined radicalism with the preceding day's keynote speaker, one of the world's foremost humanitarians, Stephen Lewis. In *his* closing remarks, he said that humanity has the collective capacity to make a profound difference in this world. "If we are principled and uncompromising in our goals, we can and we will improve the human (and global) condition."

If you think about it, that's really the only truth we can live with. ■



Dawn Chafe

He's more interested in establishing dominion over the Earth than saving it.

Childish Thoughts

With the slicing simplicity typical of children, my son recently asked a question that was cutting in its clarity. His query, in turn, made me wonder if my prejudices against money-losing, publicly-subsidized entertainment venues aren't just plain wrong.

His question was spurred by an advertisement for a wrestling event coming to Moncton, Halifax and... St. John's! So commenced the dancing, twitching, hugging that always precedes his parental pleadings.

After giving him enough time to put on a good show, I agreed, and went online to buy the tickets. Except that there weren't any. Another online search, this time for the event's tour schedule, revealed the horrible truth: John Cena isn't coming to St. John's, Newfoundland – he's going to Saint John, New Brunswick.

Don't panic, I told my boy, if the WWE is coming this far, there's a good chance they'll add St. John's to their itinerary. Especially since, at that time, there wasn't one single event booked at Mile One stadium for the entire month that WWE will be in the region. I contacted Mile One to check into the possibility of wrestlers coming to St. John's. No, they said, the wrestlers hadn't booked yet.

Not wanting to kill hope completely, I saw an opportunity for junior to learn about civic engagement: why not start a campaign among his friends to lobby WWE to add Canada's easternmost city to their itinerary? That idea, too, stopped before it started: the Mile One representative I had been speaking with didn't know who the promoter was. The promoter hadn't contacted them, and Mile One wasn't interested in trying (attendance at a previous event five years ago had been disappointing).

It was here that the child's insight revealed itself. "That doesn't make sense," he said. "What's the good of it (Mile One), if it's empty?"

Granted, there's much my son doesn't understand about event bookings. Venues don't usually take the risk of booking entertainment and footing bills. Rather, it's the promoters who book the venue. Nor does he recognize the politics behind venue operations, the public sensitivity that is the price of government (often municipal) operating subsidies. He's equally ignorant of the fact that 95 per cent of all such venues operate at a loss.

Still, he has a point. What good is a 6,000-seat multi-purpose sports and entertainment facility if it's

going to be empty a substantial part of the year?

As of press time, I counted five events booked for Mile One Stadium this fall. Five events over four months. By contrast, there are 27 events scheduled for Saint John's Harbour Station, 29 for Moncton Coliseum and nine for Halifax's Metro Centre (hockey games weren't yet listed on their 2009 calendar). Granted, those three venues are home to Quebec Major Junior hockey teams, and Mile One has none – the Fog Devils being a wispy memory – but there is no way, by anyone's accounting, that 1.25 events a month can be

profitable. Extended over the full year, the entire 2009 calendar shows only 47 events taking place at Mile One – an average of less than four a month.


Why is Mile One consistently vacant? It's a fairly new, nicely equipped facility of comparable size to both Harbour Station and the Moncton Coliseum, and not outrageously dwarfed by the 10,000-seat Metro Centre. And it has a prime downtown location in the heart of a bustling, increasingly affluent, economy.

I've heard, over the years, that the cost of travelling the Gulf is so prohibitive as to deter all but the most guaranteed (or desperate) box office draws from making the crossing. But what if \$10 from the price of each ticket was used to cover the additional travel expenses? I'm not saying this is a definitive solution, but it's obvious that something needs to be done.

It's equally obvious that Mile One and its management organization, St. John's Sports and Entertainment, are in a bind. The City of St. John's 2009 budget shows Mile One and its adjacent Convention Center receiving an annual operating grant

of \$1.75-million. With its sizable subsidy and year-over-year losses, SJSE has sustained many a City Hall debate.

That may, after all, be the crux of the problem. With most such venues estimating that every dollar spent on ticket sales is worth four times its weight to the local tourism and hospitality industry, it may well be that Dawn Q. Voting Public doesn't appreciate the real value of having this type of facility in her midst. Perhaps she needs to recognize that, while fiscal prudence is imperative, it shouldn't be at the expense of box office attraction and the inherent economic spin-offs.

Regardless of how you look at it, one thing is certain: empty seats will never close Mile One's fiscal divide. 



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