EMERGING COMMUNITIES, Fading Memories

BY Leonard J. Evenden

SOME FIVE OR SIX GENERATIONS HAVE PASSED SINCE CONFEDERATION. DURING THIS TIME, IN TERMS OF SHEER TERRITORY, CANADA GREW TO BE ONE OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST NATIONS. THIS FACT UNDERLIES THE COMMON RHETORIC THAT THIS IS A COUNTRY RICH IN NATURAL RESOURCES. BUT WHAT OCCURS IN NATURE BECOMES A RESOURCE ONLY WHEN A USE CAN BE FOUND FOR IT. PHYSICAL SIZE MAY WELL BE RELATED TO MATERIAL ABUNDANCE, BUT IT MAY ALSO BE AN IMPEDIMENT TO DEVELOPMENT. IF ABUNDANT RESOURCES REPRESENT DEVELOPMENTAL ADVANTAGES, THE DIFFICULTIES OF CONNECTING POINTS OF EXTRACTION, OF PROCESSING, MARKETING AND DISTRIBUTION, MUST BE WEIGHED AS THE DISADVANTAGES OF SIZE. ANALOGOUSLY, GROWTH WILL BE COMPLEMENTED BY DECLINE, AND BOTH WILL HAVE CONTINUALLY SHIFTING PATTERNS OF CONCENTRATION AND ACTIVITY.

As we strive to improve the productive base and quality of life, we must attempt to accommodate the shifts that are necessary in the forms of economic and social activity, their locations and organization. Industries of primary extraction, such as mining, fishing and lumbering, upon which we have depended greatly, have given rise to distinctive forms of community. These are scattered widely across the land and along the coastlines. Agriculture has provided the basis for a way of life and economy in which, historically, individual households have had a major stake in capitalization, planning for investment, physical labour and marketing. If these principal sectors together underlie a Canadian way of thinking about survival and prosperity in this middle and high latitude land, they must be accorded the necessary attention for their further development. But new problems and approaches, from issues of the addition of value to raw products of the first stage of extraction, or of habitat destruction and conservation, must now be taken into account in a way that may not have been so fully appreciated before. And these in turn must be complemented by new abilities to connect Canada with other parts of the world in complementary relationships of trade, the movement of peoples and political association.

Unlike territory, Canada's population is modest in size. It is more and more concentrated in and around a few major centres, and it will have to develop itself increasingly around education, training and skills. New belief systems will have to be understood and accommodated. But in so doing there is a real danger that individuals, and hence the population as a whole, will lose sight of the vastness of the country, with all that implies as to its physical nature. Newcomers once experienced the difficulties of travel by river, rail and trek, and the trials and impressions of such journeys stayed with families and communities as narratives of experience. Out of such experience was the character of the country created. This is mostly behind us now, and memories are fading. Today, in contrast, people know certain places well, but live largely indoors with little obligation to engage in hard physical toil. Newcomers may spend a few hours in an aircraft, descend from the skies to a paved and settled landscape, and be whisked by automobile or bus to a prepared location, perhaps without even going out of doors. The settling-in process is locally based, and the memory of the journey to the new home connects a location overseas with one here. A quite different narrative of the Canadian experience is thus being imagined, based upon a mental map of a few major clusters of population here, linked with points overseas, whether as points of origin or simply as points of business or recreational contact.

Such a view presents questions as to how the community is becoming transformed, and it also suggests many opportunities. If knowledge of Canada, as it has been experienced and interpreted to date, has emphasized its scale and the physical basis of prosperity, a new image is emerging that will sketch the outlines of an alternative vision. Who knows what shapes and colours this image will take, but it is bound to differ from the old one. It will be metropolitan in focus, tone and nuance, and less concerned with outlying national territories except as places to visit for recreation or long-distance exploitation. Experiential resources will rise in importance as compared with the extraction of naturally occurring materials, and may, in an educational way, support the growing awareness of the needs of the natural environment. A different calculus will inform how the physical base is to be appraised and thus transformed into a resource base, or preserved for its own survival. Let us urge that due attention be given to the concerns that new patterns of consumption of the nation's spatial resources are bound to produce, including the impact that such exploitation may have upon the lives of those who already inhabit these lands.

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