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THE VIEW FROM Senator's Corner

BY David Frank

TWO YEARS AGO I WAS SITTING AT SENATOR'S CORNER IN GLACE BAY, AT THE MAIN INTERSECTION OF WHAT WAS ONCE THE BIGGEST TOWN IN CANADA. IT IS CALLED SENATOR'S CORNER BECAUSE OF THE TWO-STOREY WOODEN OFFICE BUILDING WITH A ROUND END THAT PRESIDED OVER THE LOCATION AND BELONGED TO BILLY "SENATOR" MACDONALD. HE HAD THAT NICKNAME BECAUSE PRIME MINISTER SIR JOHN. A. MACDONALD HAD PUT HIS FATHER IN THE SENATE FOR SUPPORTING CONFEDERATION. THAT WAS BACK IN THE DAYS OF THE NATIONAL POLICY, WHEN CAPE BRETON COAL WAS CONSIDERED ESSENTIAL TO THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CANADIAN ECONOMY. THAT LANDMARK BUILDING HAS DISAPPEARED, BUT LIKE SO MUCH ELSE IN GLACE BAY, IT LIVES ON IN THE LOCAL CULTURE.

There was always lots of activity at Senator's Corner. This is where the streetcars emptied their passengers from the outlying neighbourhoods into the shops, offices, cafés, hotels, pool halls and blind pigs of the downtown. At the centre of a district with a population of some 50,000 people, Glace Bay considered itself the "biggest town in Canada". With a dozen operating coal mines in Glace Bay alone, and many more in the surrounding coal towns, Glace Bay was the capital of the coal country in eastern Canada. For generations this compact industrial community was the source of much of the power that fuelled the industrial revolution in Canada.

One of the local residents who ran a shop at Senator's Corner was a man by the name of Dawn Fraser, one of the many rural residents drawn to the industrial district by the expansion of the coal industry. Among other things, he wrote tall tales and local history in the style of Robert Service which he often posted in the shop window for the edification of passersby. One of his most popular verses began with echoes of Longfellow:

Listen, my children, and you shall know
Of a crime that happened long ago
In the dark and dismal days of old
When the world and all was ruled by Gold . . .

In his verses Fraser wrote a kind of contemporary local history which identified Glace Bay as one of the sites of the social conflict between labour and capital that has done much to shape the history of resource-based industrial communities across the country. The quoted lines introduced a long narrative verse Fraser wrote in 1924, under the title "The Case of Jim McLachlan". It was the first published account of the life and times of the union leader who embodied the local spirit of resistance to the outside companies and distant governments that shaped the history of the coal industry.

The biography of James Bryson McLachlan was a book that needed to be written. At least that is how it seemed to me, living in Nova Scotia as an apprentice historian back in the 1970s, when I started digging into the history of the coal miners. The late Senator Eugene Forsey, who had visited McLachlan in the 1920s, when Forsey himself was a student at McGill University, recognized the man as an extraordinary personality. McLachlan, he told me, was "a delightful old bird", and his biography was "one of the epics of Canadian Trade Unionism". McLachlan's followers repeatedly returned him to union office and supported his election to the House of Commons, where it was hoped he would join J.S. Woodsworth as a spokesman for Canadian workers in Parliament. Although he was denounced, demonized and persecuted, even when he was in Dorchester Penitentiary following his conviction for sedition, McLachlan never lost the affection and respect of his followers.

In the broadest terms, McLachlan can be credited with helping to bring the coal miners out of the dependency of the 19th century and educating them to a sense of their own power in the 20th century. He saw his mission as both moral and economic, and he pronounced himself out to "redeem the world from the chaos of capitalism". In the end, his achievements were less revolutionary than he intended, but like Keir Hardie in Britain or John L. Lewis in the United States, McLachlan was one of the generation of union leaders who helped achieve a measure of social reform, including a recognition of the rights of labour under the law and a moderate redistribution of wealth through the creation of a body of social legislation.



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As I sat there that afternoon at Senator's Corner, introducing the new biography of McLachlan to a local audience in the front lobby of the Savoy Theatre, it seemed an appropriate location, as this was one of the old moviehouses where McLachlan often held forth at public meetings. One by one they came forward, out of the past as well as the present. There was Nelson Beaton, a retired coal miner well into his 80s, but once a boy who sold papers in the streets of Glace Bay and counted himself a follower of McLachlan. There was a father thinking about his son, who like so many other Cape Bretoners has gone away into the labour markets of North America and needs to know more about the struggles that took place in his own home town. There was a young woman who works as a nurse at Glace Bay's one remaining local hospital; the story of McLachlan is important to her too, for he was her great grandfather. And then too there was the current president of District 26, United Mine Workers of America, Stephen Drake, and he asks the difficult question he and others have been asking for several years – what would J.B.McLachlan say to us today?

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It has been impossible to give a full reply, but the question has stayed with me throughout the past two years, as Cape Breton has continued to pass through the slow dance of economic discouragement. The latest scene in this story was the announcement in May 2001 by federal Natural Resources Minister Ralph Goodale of the impending shutdown of the last surviving coal mine. Efforts to sell the Prince mine, he stated, were being discontinued, and the last 300 men employed there would be out of work by the end of the year.

For a few days afterwards the newspapers were filled with reports on the final demise of the Cape Breton coal industry. In these words one listened to a diagnosis of inevitability, as in the headline on a Canadian Press despatch, "Time Runs Out for Coal", and one heard the solemn tones of obituary tributes, as in the headline on the front page in the Halifax Chronicle-Herald, "King Coal, 1710 2001". Certainly there were words of praise for the men and women who had given their lives to the industry over the years, but one had the sense that the media almost welcomed the story as one that was long overdue. At last, the coal miners with all their problems would be departing the contemporary scene and getting back into the past where they could be honoured – and ignored. In a few days, the stories stopped.

The coal miners do not loom large in the Canadian cultural imagination, perhaps because this is an industry located far from the heartlands of population and industry in this country. It has been natural for the national media

to portray the people of the coal country as the unfortunate but inevitable victims of an old style industry whose time has passed. Relatively little has been said in the media about the long history of achievement among the Cape Breton coal miners. The most obvious is their pioneering role in the country's labour history, which established the right of workers to unions of their own choice. One thinks also of their early experiments in local medicare and adult education and cooperatives. But at a time like this it is also important to think in more general terms of the solidarity and resilience of a local community that valued the potential of its people and resources more than any outside governments or corporations had ever done.

Out of this vigorous local tradition of community activism have come successive demands for more responsible forms of economic development. Ever since the coal miners won union recognition early in the 20th century, they have been making the argument that the coal industry should be treated as a public enterprise. This argument can be traced back to the miners' reconstruction programme of 1918, and it was repeated decade after decade for the next half century. It was the coal miners' answer to the rivers of coal that left by rail and ship for the energy markets of Central Canada, an export trade that depleted local resources to provide cheap power to industrial Canada, that paid out dividends to shareholders in Montreal and Toronto and that produced the tax royalties that for many years provided the largest single source of provincial revenue in Halifax. Given the wasteful exploitation of resources promoted by corporations and governments, the coal miners supported public enterprise as a strategy for ensuring that returns from the coal mines were reinvested in local economic activity. And they wanted it to be a form of public enterprise that involved full participation for the coal miners in managing industrial affairs. In their view, this was the only way to repair the ravages of the social and human landscape in the coal country and escape from the cycles of dependency and depletion associated with resource-based development.

The news this year is especially sad, because for a short time in the 1960s and 1970s, it seemed as if the coal miners were finally beginning to win the argument about the destructive impact of private enterprise in running such an important resource industry. It was not exactly what the earlier generations of coal miners had in mind, but the Cape Breton Development Corporation, often referred to as Devco, was established in 1967 to take over from the Dominion Steel and Coal Company, the last of the private sector corporations to exploit the Cape Breton mines. When Dosco abandoned the coal industry, the era of private enterprise seemed to be coming to an end in the Cape Breton coal industry. The change was long overdue, and it presented an historic opportunity for new initiatives in local development.

Devco's mandate for local development was to use the power of public ownership and state support to reduce the area's chronic dependency on coal and help diversify the Cape Breton economy. It was true that the crown corporation represented a bureaucratic form of public ownership, far from the ideals of workers' control proposed by the unions or of economic democracy advocated by the cooperative movement. For some politicians, it was probably considered a form of social welfare rather than a plan for economic development. But it also represented a recognition that sooner or later a community dependent on a disappearing and difficult resource must develop an alternative economic base for the future.



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The most surprising turn in the history of Devco was its rapid conversion in the 1970s from economic diversification to renewal of the coal industry. The explanation for this change was the international energy crisis that drove up oil prices and gave the coal industry in North America a new lease on life. In Cape Breton this meant that old mines were closed down as planned – but they were replaced with new ones that represented a major new investment in technology and in people. In the 1970s, a new generation of coal miners in their 20s were recruited into the industry. Steve Drake, the last president of the now suspended District 26 of the United Mine Workers of America, likes to tell the story of how he had already bought his ticket to fly out west and find work as

an electrician when he was offered a job at home in a new coal mine.

By the 1990s the familiar cycle of boom and bust in the resource sector had revolved yet again. Just as Dominion Steel and Coal had before them, Devco faced contracting markets and rising development costs in the 1990s. And even though principles of redressing regional disparity through regional development had been written into the Constitution Act of 1982, this did not seem to count for much anymore. By this time the federal government was undergoing a rapid conversion to old economic ideas that placed priority on neo-liberal market principles and reduced intervention in the economy. Privatization was part of the package, and one by one the coal mines were shut down or put up for sale. For a Canadian public which had recently witnessed the tragic story of Westray – a case study in the disastrous consequences of unregulated private exploitation – it was simply more confirmation that the coal industry deserved to disappear.

Until the announcement this spring, the coal mines were officially on the market, and there were negotiations with potential buyers interested in operating one or more of the mines on a reduced scale. But the federal government's announcement in May put an end to these efforts. There has even been an enthusiastic offer from a group of local investors, inspired by cooperative principles and organized as the Cape Breton Miners' Cooperative, but the federal government has refused to consider their proposal to purchase the assets of one of the abandoned mines. Although hundreds of millions of tons of coal remain in place under the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the conventional wisdom is that large scale utilization of the resource remains uneconomic for the forseeable future. Most Canadian coal production is now concentrated in the surface strip-mines of western Canada. In Cape Breton "orderly closure" remains the order of the day. There will be various kinds of compensation available to the unemployed, much of it grudgingly offered by Ottawa as a result of a round of protests led by miners' wives over the past two years. But the larger issues of local economic development have largely disappeared from view, and Devco is being allowed to wind down its affairs with its mandate for diversification unfulfilled.

In any industrial country, the story of coal is central to the history of economic development. It has given rise to the emergence of compact single industry communities, especially in areas such as Cape Breton where the extension of the coal seams under the ocean floor has given the coal towns a greater permanence than in areas where settlements are more readily abandoned in favour of new locations. Like all coal communities, the Cape Breton towns have had to face the logic of dependence on a resource that is not only vulnerable to changing markets but is also by its nature non-renewable. These are challenges faced by resource-based communities throughout the modern world and should be of interest well beyond Cape Breton. In this age of restructuring, Cape Bretoners are reluctant to embrace the disappearance of a local identity that represents a social and human investment of considerable magnitude and worth. More than anything else, they want the right to make a constructive contribution to the Canadian economy without being forced to abandon the community that has sustained them.

History does not provide a lot in the way of direct answers or instructions for the purposes of the present, but we can imagine that old-time radicals such as McLachlan would recognize the current events as the latest round in a struggle against dispossession and disinheritance.

Did it have to be this way? In his time J.B. McLachlan championed a strategy of public ownership and workers' control that we can recognize today as a form of community-based economic development. It was something the governments and corporations and much of the public rejected as much too revolutionary, and the proposition became increasingly unlikely as the energy markets shifted to new sources of power after the peak of the industry in the 1940s. History does not provide a lot in the way of direct answers or instructions for the purposes of the present, but we can imagine that old-time radicals such as McLachlan would recognize the current events as the latest round in a struggle against dispossession and disinheritance. The coal miners have not given up their habit of demanding attention to issues of justice and dignity, and it has been argued that this communitarian social ethic is one of the gifts of the hinterland regions to the public discourse in this country.

There has been much well-deserved praise lately for Alistair MacLeod's novel *No Great Mischief*, which is to a large extent a lament for the fortunes and sorrows of one family of Cape Bretoners over several generations. It is not so often noticed that the book is also about other workers pushed and pulled by the demands of the North American labour market. Nor have the literary critics paid enough attention to the title, which is a reference to the observation of General James Wolfe on his Highland soldiers, ancestors of a large part of the Cape Breton populace. It is the comment of a general looking down on his mercenaries with a good deal of cynicism: "No great mischief if they fall".

But at a time like this it also needs to be said that the indications of Cape Breton history are to the contrary. In the words of MacLeod's lament, these are a people who out of their experiences have acquired the virtue "to care too much and to try too hard". In the context of the coal industry, they remind us of the idea of economic development as if people mattered. The news of the past few years has shown that the coal miners no longer have the power they once had, but the questions they are asking belong to all of us and will not go away.

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