

# Regional rationale 📄

The Packet

It's probably inevitable.

As smaller outports around the province lose populations, and larger towns continue to expand, a regional governance structure may be the only solution.

The words 'regionalization' and 'amalgamation' used to be uttered through clenched jaws and gritted teeth in the days of the Clyde Wells regime.

In hindsight, however, the Liberal government of the late 1980s was on to a good thing.

Demographic projections were offering a glimpse into the future - a future with rural outports devoid of young people, with stagnant population growth or suffering from negative growth, and with limited tax bases to pay for the water pipes in the ground or garbage trucks to pick up the trash.

Under the Wells regime, several incorporated towns in this province joined forces to reduce costs, streamline regulations and, over time, create financially stable towns.

It's not perfection - show us a municipal government that is - but it's better than what might have been if amalgamation had not happened.

Despite some of the kicking and screaming on their way to the altar, the towns that joined up have realized it wasn't such a bad deal.

Those who didn't pursue union during the time of Eric (Gullage) the Amalgamator - the moniker pinned on the municipal affairs minister at the time - came to the realization several years later that it was a sensible solution.

The Town of Trinity Bay North - born of the merger of Catalina, Port Union and Melrose - is one example.

On the weekend Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador (MNL) released its report on regionalization - a paper that offers ideas and options for regional government.

It drew criticism from some quarters over the fact that there was no consultation with municipalities.

Hopefully, though, we won't get bogged down so much in the debate over how it was done. More importantly is to focus discussion on the ideas and options it proposes.

It is time for towns and communities in particular regions to take a good hard look around them and ask themselves whether the status quo - a hodgepodge of incorporated towns, local services districts and communities with no form of governance - is serving us well.

Using this area as an example, we are already seeing the need for more rules and regulations in the future, beyond the boundaries of Clarenville.

As that town fills to bursting at the seams with new developments, we are already seeing ad hoc development taking place in the nearby communities of Milton and George's Brook, and on the Western end of Random Island - areas where there are no rules (outside of the Crown Lands and Environment Acts) on where houses and such can, or should, be permitted.

Meanwhile, in communities less than an hour's drive from Clarenville, the challenge is becoming greater to find volunteers to sit on local service boards, or staff the volunteer fire department.

As with any idea, there are pros and cons.

But public opinion is not what it was 20 years ago. The diehards who resisted the idea in the past, who railed against loss of identity, who predict loss of rural freedom, have already lost their argument in the face of common sense.

Even their prediction - that regional government will mean higher costs - is a little lackluster, considering that higher fees are, likely, inevitable as populations dwindle, leaving less people to pay the cost of upkeep of community

services.

Regionalization may not work for all; it may not be the be-all, end-all solution for all communities in the province.

But it's certainly worth consideration.

Our challenge to local communities, then, is to look around at your neighbours, consider how, by working together you may be able to accomplish more and then convene a meeting to at least talk about it.

Barbara Dean-Simmons

editor@thepacket.ca

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