ASPECTS OF MARITIME REGIONALISM, 1867-1927

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Ernest Forbes was born in New Brunswick in 1940. The son of a Protestant clergyman, he spent his youth in various communities in the Maritimes and the Gaspé, graduating from high school in Caledonia, Queens County, Nova Scotia in 1958. After undergraduate degrees from Mount Allison and a short stint of high school teaching, he completed an M.A. at Dalhousie and a Ph.D. at Queen's. He began university teaching at the University of Victoria in 1966 and moved back across the continent to accept a position in Canadian history at the University of New Brunswick in 1974. He is married and has two children. Besides the book, The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927: A Study in Canadian Regionalism (McGill-Queen's, 1979), his publications have included studies on other regional themes, prohibition, and Canadian historiography.
Regionalism is a subjective concept. When people of a more or less definite locality believe that they share distinctive economic, cultural, or political interests, they form a human region. Some residents of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island have regularly asserted this belief, often through statements and actions and occasionally in conspicuous outbursts of regional protest. In 1863 the Halifax Chronicle, when urging Maritime union, described the three provinces as “homogeneous in all respects.” Three years later, the anti-Confederate, William Annand, contrasted the “great diversity” in interests between Canada and the Maritime provinces and noted that the latter had “many interests in common.” In 1885 separatist James A. Fraser claimed that the union with “the upper provinces” had “proven suicidal to their [the Maritime provinces’] united interests.” In 1907 New Brunswick Conservative premier J.D. Hazen called for a “United Acadia” fighting to defend its position in Confederation. Eleven years later, Hance J. Logan, a Liberal politician in the border constituency of Cumberland, in urging joint action by the three provinces for political defence and economic development, declared that “Nature intended that we should be united and geography so decreed. We are all Maritime people with distinctly Maritime interests.” In 1919 Sydney journalist R.V. Sharp wrote that “Now is the time for Maritimers to realize they are different from the west, that they are as great in their own way as any on the continent, that their people are distinctive.” Perception of this distinctiveness, however, was not as clear as these statements might indicate. Loyalties to nation, local community, province, ethnic group, or class offered other, sometimes competing identities, among which that of the region frequently became blurred.

Conflicting pressures towards unity and division have been constant themes in the history of the Maritime provinces. Common economic and social interests tended to encourage unity. The area’s separation from other centres of population, orientation towards the sea, and dependence on industries of primary production helped foster a regional consciousness. Although Acadians, Pre-Loyalists, Loyalists, Scots, Irish, Blacks, and Indians have clung with varying degrees of tenacity to their separate cultural traditions, they often encompassed the Maritime region in their organizations.* A primary source of division has been political. While membership in the British Empire provided a common bond, the division of the region after 1784 into separate political units posed a barrier to the effective expression of regional sentiment. The compartmentalization of

* See W.S. MacNutt, The Making of the Maritime Provinces, 1713-1784, CHA Pamphlet, No. 4

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politics into provincial theatres turned common problems into provincial issues. The three leaders' differing political circumstances, personalities, and concepts of interest and strategy often prevented regional responses to essentially regional problems. Thus, though a popular regional sentiment has persisted in the three provinces, seldom has it resulted in united political action.

*Regionalism and Confederation*

Shortly before Confederation in 1867, regional sentiment in the Maritimes culminated in a vigorous discussion of political union. Supporters of the scheme, including Premiers Charles Tupper of Nova Scotia and Samuel Leonard Tilley of New Brunswick, advocated Maritime union as a means of improving credit ratings, reducing trade barriers, facilitating railway construction, creating a strong university, and, not incidentally, providing politicians such as themselves with a larger stage. Although the old economy of shipbuilding, primary production, and overseas trade still dominated the three Maritime provinces, they were not immune to the North American hunger for railways both as an avenue for profits and a means of lessening isolation. When an unstable central Canadian administration withdrew from an “arrangement” with the Lower Provinces (as the Maritime colonies were called) to construct a railway connecting the four colonies, expressions of Maritime resentment were mingled with assertions that the three Atlantic provinces could, through their own political union, achieve railway and other goals without dependence on the perfidious Canadians. Encouraged by enthusiastic colonial governors and a favourable press, the three legislatures agreed to a conference at Charlottetown to discuss a legislative union of the Maritime colonies.

Ironically, the conference might not have been held without the request by the Canadians for an invitation. Early in 1864, the Canadians defused Maritime anger by launching at their own expense a survey of the route for the promised railway. Meanwhile, the opposition of Prince Edward Islanders to Maritime union became more apparent. Legislative union to many Islanders meant annexation, a fate suffered by their sister colony of Cape Breton in 1820. Annexation meant loss of their legislature and an inability to protect their interests in a distant government to which during the winter months they would have access only by means of “ice boats” (boats equipped with iron runners which were alternately pushed and rowed through the treacherous ice flows of the Northumberland Strait). The perfunctory discussion of Maritime union at the Charlottetown Conference showed the inability of the smaller regional proposal to compete with the more grandiose Canadian scheme for a federal union of all the British North American colonies. As such Canadian leaders as John
A. Macdonald, Georges Etienne Cartier, A.T. Galt, and George Brown outlined their proposals, it was apparent that political ambitions, railway aspirations, and expectations of trade would be more fully served in a larger than a smaller union. The federal nature of their proposal too would permit the Islanders to retain their legislature.

The Confederation scheme, which thus undermined several of the traditional motives for a regional focus, also created new ones. The Canadian proposals, hammered into specific resolutions at the Quebec Conference before the end of 1864, threatened the "wood, wind, and sail" economy of the Maritimes with increased costs of production in the form of higher tariffs and other taxes. The Canadians were, after the Galt-Cayley tariffs of 1858-59, infamous for their protection of local manufacturing industries with tariffs substantially higher or more extensive than those in the Maritimes. For the shipbuilder who sold his vessels overseas or the merchant who operated them in international trade routes and for the lumberman, fisherman, or farmer who relied on markets in Great Britain, the United States, or the West Indies, protective tariffs meant an increased cost of production which rendered him less competitive in international markets. As the shoe, textile, and iron manufacturers took advantage of the tax on imports to raise prices, the labourer had to have a higher wage to clothe and feed his family and the primary producer had to pay more for labour and essential tools and materials. While the Confederation resolutions passed at the Quebec Conference later in 1864 did not specify higher tariffs, they did leave control of the tariff to the new federal House of Commons in which the Canadians would have an overwhelming majority. Resulting Maritime opposition to Confederation led by the spokesman for traditional commercial interests in all three provinces was frequently expressed in regional terms. It focused on the probability of new taxes and a siphoning of resources into westward development, and the dangers of leaving the commercial policies of maritime communities to be dictated by "those who live above the tide."

Divided as the three provinces were politically, they could not decide the question of Confederation on a regional basis. While the anti-Confederate leaders, Joseph Howe of Nova Scotia, a provincial and imperial patriot, and A.J. Smith of New Brunswick, a cautious opponent of railway

** See P.B. Waite, The Charlottetown Conference, 1864, CHA Pamphlet No. 15.

*** See W.M. Whitelaw, The Quebec Conference, CHA Pamphlet No. 20

extravagance, might consult and encourage each other in their opposition, talk about Maritime union as an alternative, and even call one organization the “League of Maritime Provinces,” the real battles had to be fought in provincial legislatures. New Brunswick won a respite for the anti-Confederates by declaring against Confederation in the election of February-March 1865. Nova Scotians were so hostile that the Tupper government dared to discuss the issue only in a resolution advocating Maritime union. Prince Edward Island passed a resolution affirming that there never could be a scheme for union which would serve the Island interests. Yet in relative isolation from each other, the three provinces succumbed to Colonial Office pressure, as the British government sought to ultimately reduce defence responsibilities in North America; to fears of American expansionism, as the bluster and threats of Irish-American Fenians highlighted tensions exacerbated by the American Civil War (1861-65); to Canadian blandishments; and to the political ambitions of their own leaders.

In an election of May-June 1866, New Brunswickers endorsed the idea of a new scheme for union more favourable to their region. In the Nova Scotia legislature, several anti-Confederates defected to support a resolution proposing new negotiations for union. At a meeting in London, representatives of these two Maritime governments accepted the Quebec Resolutions, with little substantive change, as the basis for an Act of the British Parliament, which formally united Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. Prince Edward Island held out until 1873, joining Confederation only when alternatives were eliminated by the extravagant railway building policies of largely pro-Confederate politicians.

The Confederation agreements and related discussion suggested several issues which encouraged a common perspective and unity of effort in succeeding decades. All three provinces suffered chronic shortages in revenue attributable to the new agreement. The proposed Intercolonial Railroad would be of common concern to the people of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Prince Edward Island was drawn into the regional transportation network through a federal commitment to take over Island railways, which were simply placed under the Intercolonial management at Moncton, and also by a pledge to maintain “continuous communication” between the Island and the mainland. Halifax and Saint John also shared a common interest in the declared intention of the Fathers of Confederation to make their ports the winter outlets for Canadian trade.

The Confederation agreement envisioned the federal Senate, in which Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes received equal representation, as the guardian of regional interests. In practice, however, the Senate proved to be the creature of the federal government which appointed as its members
aging and compliant politicians. Regional interests could only be effectively protected in the House of Commons and, more specifically, in the caucus of the ruling party. In 1875, after the Liberal government of Alexander MacKenzie had raised the tariff from 15 to 17.5 per cent, Maritime Liberals united in the caucus to block a further increase. Ten years later, Maritime Conservatives, who had been unsuccessful in persuading the Macdonald government to balance investment in the West with investment in their region, made the extension of the Canadian Pacific Railroad to the Maritimes a requirement for their support in helping to bail out that financially-troubled line.

Better Terms and Secession

While federal representatives enjoyed a moderate success in co-operation on regional issues, provincial governments wrestled individually with popular outbursts of regional discontent. The underlying problem was the economic dislocation caused by the collapse of the shipbuilding and timber industries and the consequent decline of Maritime ports. The problem was a complex one. By raising the cost of production, the so-called "National Policy" of protective tariffs had hastened the decline of the old "wood, wind, and sail" economy. Yet, at the same time, the tariff on coal and iron encouraged the development of manufacturing in the region as the only area of Eastern Canada possessing native coal resources. While ship carpenters and forest workers were leaving the region by the thousands and outports such as Pictou, Chatham, Hillsborough, and Murray Harbour were in sharp decline, manufacturing towns along the railways including Amherst, Moncton, New Glasgow, and Sydney were on the rise. Saint John typified the transition. In the 1880s, Saint John outstripped even Hamilton, Ontario, in growth in manufacturing. Yet its overall population declined as workers in the traditional lumbering and shipbuilding industries emigrated by the thousands, usually to find employment as carpenters in Boston or as lumberjacks in the forests of New England and the American Mid-West. By 1884 a general economic recession had turned into depression for large areas of the Maritimes. Hurt by the collapse of local firms, banks in the Maritimes tightened their lending practices, raised interest rates, and began to transfer capital to the American and Canadian West, where returns were higher and investments more secure. It was not surprising that many anti-Confederates of the previous generation, declaring "We told you so!", found popular support for a resurgent separatist movement in their declining communities.

Provincial governments, like many of their constituents, felt the pinch of economic adversity. For them the problem could be traced not only to current hard times, but also to the Confederation agreement. Under the
leadership of the Canadians' financial genius, A.T. Galt, participants at the Charlottetown Conference agreed to the principle of federal *per capita* subsidies to replace the customs tariff as the main source of provincial revenue. Since the Maritimes had depended on the tariff for up to 90 per cent of their revenue and the Canadians for only 60 per cent, the impossibility of an equitable settlement based on a *per capita* formula became obvious. To maintain the services left to the provinces, Nova Scotia required a subsidy of $1.70 per resident compared with only 38 cents for Ontario. At the Quebec Conference, Charles Tupper, in an act of great statesmanship, or considerable *naïveté*, depending on one's perspective, broke a serious deadlock in the negotiations by agreeing to a compromise figure of 80 cents per head. This concession left Maritime governments "strapped" for revenue, with their only apparent escape a politically suicidal resort to direct taxation.

Because of its small size and the continuing problem of land ownership, which dated from 1767 when the British government granted the Island to members of the British gentry, Prince Edward Island had the least room to manoeuvre. Island governments maintained their services after Confederation with a disguised form of borrowing. The agreement by which Prince Edward Island entered Confederation included annual interest payments on a $800,000 loan to buy out the absentee proprietors. The local government borrowed the money and then transferred the debt to the farmers by allowing them to obtain freehold title in return for government mortgages. Payments of principal and interest, however, were not used to retire the provincial debt, but were included in operating revenues of the province. Continued borrowing and shrinking revenues led a Liberal premier, L.H. Davies, to resort in 1877 to the introduction of poll and property taxes. These provoked public meetings by exasperated farmers protesting that they could not retire the government mortgages and pay direct taxes at the same time.

Learning from the fate of his predecessor, Conservative Premier W.W. Sullivan, a wily politician who emerged unscathed from the religious conflict in Island politics, abandoned the new taxes for the dual approach of reducing services in health, education, and road maintenance, and of pressing financial claims upon the federal government. These included demands for a share of the fisheries award ($5.5 million awarded Canada for American access to the Canadian Atlantic fishery under the Washington Treaty of 1871) and compensation for provincial expenditures on penitentiaries, harbours, and other responsibilities, which the federal government had been slow in assuming after Confederation. The most persistent claim involved communication with the mainland, which had been far from "continuous," especially in the winter months. If Islanders
were to reap potential benefit from an integrated national trade, they had to have more regular means of transportation. Sullivan hoped to prod the federal government into both improving the ferry service and paying compensation for past neglect. As part of a strategy for winning re-election, he argued that concessions could best be obtained by a member of the same party as held power in Ottawa.

The Conservative administrations of S.H. Holmes (1878-1882) and John Thompson (1882) followed a similar strategy in Nova Scotia in their appeal to the federal government for better financial terms. When this approach failed and the Nova Scotia government too was forced to "retrench," the Liberals rode a wave of discontent to power in the election of 1882. As popular unrest continued to mount amid local depression and the federal government's inflexibility, the Nova Scotian tactics changed to confrontation. In 1884, James A. Fraser, an "old-time" anti-Confederate from Guysborough, whose home county like many of the outports had experienced almost continuous economic decline after Confederation, proposed the separation of the three Maritime provinces from Canada and the creation of a new united colony within the British Empire. Fraser was flatly opposed by a faction led by William Pipes, a former premier from Amherst who tended to reflect the interests of the coal and manufacturing communities which were unwilling to leave the federal economic structure which was helping their industries. Premier W.S. Fielding, a Halifax journalist and former anti-Confederate, worked to maintain a united party by pleaing with the radicals for patience while playing upon the frustrations of Pipes's group at the failure to obtain an equitable financial settlement. When Sir John A. Macdonald's government in Ottawa rejected all demands and the federal Liberal leader, Edward Blake, showed himself to be no more sympathetic, Liberal members of the Legislative Assembly gradually fell into line behind the Fraser proposals. Thus Fielding was able to lead a united party into the election of June 1886 and won an increased majority on the issues of separation and Maritime union.

Winning agreement from the other Maritime governments proved more difficult. J.V. Ellis, spokesman for the old "wood, wind, and sail" interests in Saint John, was enthusiastic. So, too, was the initial response of New Brunswick Liberal journals such as the Fredericton Gleaner and the Saint John Globe. But for Premier A.G. Blair, an astute Fredericton lawyer, the timing could hardly have been worse. He had just won an election in April with a motley following of Liberals and quasi-Conservatives. Rather than serving to unite a party seeking victory as in Nova Scotia, a secession movement in New Brunswick promised to divide a party which had just achieved victory. Nor with the construction of the CPR short line to Saint John just beginning was it an auspicious time for New Brunswick to
declare for separation. When New Brunswick separatists put forward a resolution endorsing Fielding’s secession victory at a Liberal convention of June 1886, the chairman ruled it out of order without a division.

Fielding fared no better with Prince Edward Island. Sullivan had earlier failed to answer his letters and telegrams calling for regional co-operation on the issue of better terms. After two visits to the Island, Fielding was unable to obtain the support of even the Liberal opposition. Much as Opposition House Leader John Yeo and other Liberals might criticize the negotiating tactics of the Sullivan administration, they were not about to defend Maritime union and the loss of their legislature to a “distant” mainland. Sullivan and the Conservatives kept the initiative in the Island’s campaign for better terms with a delegation to London to appeal to the British government Ottawa’s rejection of Island claims. While embarrassing to both senior governments, this exercise did not close the door to concessions by one Conservative administration to another, which was Sullivan’s ultimate objective. Thus the separate political strategies pursued by Fielding, Blair, and Sullivan ensured that they could not co-operate even in meeting their common problems of provincial finance.

With Fielding unable to achieve regional co-operation, much less union, the federal government seized the opportunity before the election of 1887 to undercut Maritime anger at previous neglect. Careful not to make financial concessions which would appear to reward the separatists, the Sir John A. Macdonald government nevertheless promised increased financial aid for Prince Edward Island, discussed the construction of a railway tunnel to the mainland, and gave Sir John Thompson, by now the senior cabinet minister from Nova Scotia, virtually a free hand in authorizing railway extensions, lowering freight rates, and building new post offices and breakwaters. These concessions and close attention to party organization enabled the Conservatives to win fourteen of twenty-one seats in Nova Scotia, a victory which effectively ended the secession threat from that province. Although Fielding and Blair co-operated at the interprovincial conference at Quebec in 1887, Sullivan, unwilling to jeopardize expected financial assistance and the proposed railway tunnel, was conspicuously absent. The conference had been organized by the Quebec and Ontario premiers to demand a greater role for the provinces in Confederation. The gap in provincial ranks left by the Island’s absence strengthened the moral position of the federal government in dismissing the conference’s proposals, including financial demands, as merely the partisan propaganda of disgruntled Liberals. Ultimately, New Brunswick found some relief from its financial straitjacket in increased stumpage fees on its extensive timber holdings, as did Nova Scotia in royalties from a burgeoning coal industry. Despite increased subsidies in 1888 and 1912, Prince Edward Island
continued to suffer from constricted revenues, which retarded or impaired provincial services far into the twentieth century.

The Maturation of Regionalism

The emergence of a new regional consciousness at the turn of the century was reflected in and encouraged by social developments of the period. The Baptists and Presbyterians, who together composed more than one-third of the population of the region, overcame long-standing schisms and organized on a regional basis, with regional conventions or synods and regional journals, the Maritime Baptist and the Presbyterian Witness. Methodists, accounting for another 10 per cent, sought to develop Mount Allison University as a regional institution. The Acadians, growing in numbers, influence, and self-confidence, established “national” conventions, societies (for example, la Société Nationale de l’Assomption), and newspapers (for example, L’Evangeline and Le Moniteur Acadien) which were partly regional in perspective. Local businessmen formed a Maritime branch of the Canadian Manufacturers’ Association, local doctors a Maritime Medical Association, and farmers subscribed to the Maritime Farmer and Co-operative Dairyman. Other links were established through athletic organizations including a Maritime professional hockey league and a Maritime branch of the Canadian Amateur Athletic Union.

The rise of a North American movement for “progressive” reform further stimulated a regional focus. The reform ideology was characterized by a concern for efficiency, an optimism that social change was possible, a focus on government as the agency for bringing it about, and a belief in unity, organization, and agitation as the means to force governments to play the role desired. One aspect of the reform movement in the Maritimes was the renewed call for Maritime union. In 1906 two articles in a semi-scholarly regional journal, Acadiensis, set out a rationale for union primarily in terms of the greater services which it would enable governments to provide — services which included hydro-electric development and social welfare. Maritime union was endorsed repeatedly by the Maritime Board of Trade and The Busy East of Canada, a magazine of regional promotion established in New Brunswick in 1910, which continued to espouse the scheme throughout the remainder of the decade. The greatest public interest in Maritime union appeared to come from around the Bay of Fundy, an area whose sense of community seemed least impeded by provincial boundaries. Opposition persisted, however, in Prince Edward Island and many Acadians were suspicious of changes which would diminish gains in influence within the New Brunswick political theatre, unless, as the editor of L’Acadien suggested in 1919, their language and educational rights were entrenched in a new Maritime constitution.
The literature of the three provinces also encouraged a regional perception. The pastoral novel which tended to romanticize rural settings lent itself to an idealized portrayal of local communities and individual "types" which were in some measure characteristic of this region. One finds, for example, this subtle expression of regionality in L.M. Montgomery's depiction of a Prince Edward Island community in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and H.A. Cody's description of a Lower Saint John River community in *The Fourth Watch* (1911). More than a dozen novels and countless histories, tales, and poems in both French and English idealized the society and landscape of an "old Acadia" undisturbed by provincial boundaries. Typical of this genre was Charles G.D. Roberts' *The Forge in the Forest* (1896), one of six novels on the Acadian theme by that author. The emphasis on the sea and ships provided a common denominator for many writers of the region. As the Maritimes' economic fortunes waned, local authors such as Archibald MacMechan in *Sagas of the Sea* (1923) and F.W. Wallace in *Wooden Ships and Iron Men* (1924) offered escape in heroic tales of ships and sailing. They constructed the myth of a golden age of commercial prosperity and moral hardiness supposedly enjoyed by the region during the mid-nineteenth century. An anthology of 128 poems, *Songs of the Maritimes* (1931), by fifty poets of local origin, written in the period from 1890 to 1930, included three addressed to the region as a whole, nineteen on the sea, ten celebrating local communities, and twenty-eight dealing with features of landscape, climate, or custom common to the region. Four directly invoked either the myth of pastoral Acadia or that of the golden age of sail. As the editor, Eliza Ritchie, observed in the introduction, it was "not surprising" that the Maritimes, given its history, location, and scenery, "should be conscious of possessing a character and individuality of its own" and that this should find expression in a strong literary tradition.

A more concrete factor in the growth of Maritime regionalism was the realization that, with the rise of the West and the growing power of cities in central Canada, the Maritimes' influence on Confederation was rapidly declining. This fact was driven home by the losses in representation in the House of Commons which followed each census after 1881. In redistributions of seats from 1892 to 1924, the three eastern provinces lost sixteen and their percentage declined from 20.4 to 11.8. In 1896 the businessmen of the three provinces organized the Maritime Board of Trade as a regional pressure group. Soon after its formation, they endorsed a resolution favouring Maritime union. But their own unity was disrupted in a fight over the spoils accruing, ironically enough, from a regional victory at the federal level. Maritime Members of Parliament had demanded the transfer of the federally-subsidized European mail service from Portland, Maine, to the Maritimes as part of a national policy that would help secure Halifax
and Saint John in their role as Canada's winter ports. Their victory ignited a bitter struggle between the two Canadian ports for trade supremacy, a quarrel which carried over to their representatives in Parliament and in the Maritime Board of Trade. In 1909, defeated on a resolution relating to port traffic, Saint John withdrew from the regional organization.

Loss of representation and internal division left the Maritimes unable to protect important economic interests at the national level. Already undercut by inflation, the 50 cent tariff on bituminous coal, which had initially encouraged manufacturers to locate in the Maritimes, was in 1907 refunded if used in "the smelting of metals." Thus the Maritimes' regional advantage from the "National Policy" virtually disappeared. In the period 1917-23, with the integration of the Intercolonial Railroad with the bankrupt Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk in what became the Canadian National Railways, the federal government drastically increased freight rates, thus cutting off Maritime producers from the markets which they had developed in Western Canada. The long-standing commitment that Halifax and Saint John would become Canada's winter ports seemed irrevocably lost as the federal government "inherited," with the Grand Trunk Railway, extensive harbour facilities at Portland.

Federal members from the Maritimes, their efforts supported in 1906 and after by provincial governments in the new theatre of Dominion-provincial conferences, fared no better in protecting regional interests. In 1905 the federal government created two new provinces, Alberta and Saskatchewan, each endowed with per capita subsidies much higher than those of existing provinces. Ontario and Quebec also won major subsidy increments in 1906 and in 1912 Manitoba secured financial parity through a large retroactive increase. In the same year, Manitoba extended its boundaries northward, Ontario expanded north and west, and Quebec engulfed the territories of Patricia and Ungava. But the Maritimes, in no position to claim new territory, were unsuccessful in their combined attempts to establish in Canada the American precedent for financial compensation in lieu of grants of public land.

In a period of rapid constitutional change, the region recorded its only minor victory in the matter of representation. In 1903 the New Brunswick government began litigation to maintain the province's representation in the House of Commons. The three provincial governments co-operated in an appeal to courts, cabinet, and interprovincial conferences without success. Finally, in 1914, they secured an agreement to make Senatorial representation a basic minimum for the House of Commons in return for their consent to an increase in Western senators. This concession saved the region from a loss of one seat at the time and a second in the 1930s.
The full thrust of Maritime anger did not materialize until after World War I. In 1919 and 1920, the three provincial governments passed resolutions demanding the settlement of the region’s financial claims. The Halifax Herald called for the organization of “a Maritime popular league” to agitate in support of their demands. Church newspapers, and spokesmen for universities, farmer organizations, and labour unions protested a neglect of Maritime financial claims, which left the three provincial governments unable to pay salaries sufficient to retain trained teachers or to implement such social welfare reforms as “mothers’ allowances,” which had already been adopted by some provinces. A reorganized Maritime Board of Trade made urgent representations to Parliament regarding the inordinate increase in freight rates and loss of flexibility in transportation policy on the Intercolonial which, they argued, had been the Maritimes’ major quid pro quo in Confederation. At a subsequent meeting late in 1919, the Board reviewed the region’s grievances and affirmed the need of Maritime unity, if not union, in seeking their redress. The regional alliance was further cemented as the Halifax and Saint John boards appointed a joint committee to bury past differences and to develop a common front on the ports issue.

Prince Edward Island businessmen and politicians associated not only their financial and freight rate grievances with the general protest, but received regional backing for their particular claims regarding the maintenance of “continuous communication” with the mainland. Before the war, the federal government announced a policy of widening Island railways to North American standards. In place of the tunnel, which had failed to materialize, a railway car ferry was added in 1917 to integrate the Island more closely with the national railway system. Increased trade followed. But the widening of Island railroads made barely perceptible progress and the growing dependence of Island trade upon the ferry rendered all the more aggravating the transferring of goods from narrow to standard-gauge railcars and the interrupting of service when the ferry was withdrawn for refit or sent off on missions of mercy. A second car ferry and the widening of Island railways were added to the list of demands which Maritimers began to state in emphatic terms as their “rights.”

As in the Prairie West, regional agitation in the Maritimes coincided with the development of farmer and labour reform protest based on occupational interest. In the West, both were involved in the development of the Progressive political movement. In the Maritimes, it appeared that the same pattern would emerge as labour journals such as the Halifax Citizen and the New Glasgow Eastern Federationist simultaneously endorsed independent labour political movements while denouncing the loss of seniority by Intercolonial Railroad workers in the Maritimes and
the pressures for metropolitan consolidation, which saw the transfer of the Intercolombial headquarters to Toronto and the takeover and closure by central Canadian companies of manufacturing establishments in the Maritimes. Maritime farmers not only shared common occupational goals with their Western counterparts, but initially joined them in the Progressive political movement. In the period 1918-20, Maritimers copied Western farm organizations. Taking as their official organ the United Farmers' Guide, a newly created subsidiary of the Winnipeg Grain Growers' Guide, they elected T.A. Caldwell (Carleton-Victoria) as one of the first Progressive candidates to sit in the House of Commons. But the Westerners showed little sympathy for the Maritimers' position on provincial subsidies and transportation policy and were critical of their stance on the tariff. Thus conflicting regionalisms tended to undermine rather than consolidate the farmer-labour movement in the Maritimes. The movement peaked in winning eleven of forty-three seats in the Nova Scotia provincial election of 1920. Divided over federal issues, it won a scant six of forty-eight seats in New Brunswick four months later. By the following year, the Progressive party in the Maritimes was largely a hollow shell, its journal kept alive by injections of funds from Winnipeg.
Resentment of the patronizing responses of other regions to Maritime complaints gave an added stimulation to regional consciousness, particularly as the region became the butt of metropolitan humour. Montreal lawyer R.L. Calder characterized the Maritimer as unwilling to help himself, preferring "to sit on the country store steps, chew apples and talk politics." Harold Cunningham, in an article in *Maclean's Magazine*, compared the Maritimes to a woman "who having married for money which failed to materialize, neglected her house work, went down to the seashore, watched the ships go by and pouted." Saskatchewan Premier Charles Dunning, later federal Minister of Railways, was quoted as saying that "I believe it correct to say that in the Maritimes there are a number of matters of importance. The first is being born, the second is a free ride on the Intercolonial, the third is marriage and the last is death." Carl Russell, a young New Brunswick farmer, reported that his awareness that Maritimers
were considered to be “different” originated on a harvest excursion at High River, Alberta. There an Ontario member of the crew greeted him with the comment: “The Maritimes! Ain’t nobody down there but herring chokers, bluenosers and dock whollopers!” Another New Brunswicker reported being rendered speechless on joining his military unit at Montreal by this public greeting: “Maritimer, eh! You’re the first Maritime man I ever met. I had begun to think they were all women. The city is full of them. Almost every whore in Montreal claims to be from New Brunswick!” Maritimers, particularly those who had left the region and later returned, not only developed a sense of region, but came to share a common attitude towards the source of most such disparaging comments. Many would agree with teacher-journalist H.S. Congdon that central Canadians were “insufferably egotistical.”

“Maritime Rights”

Regional issues featured prominently in the federal election of 1921 as the Liberals capitalized on the government’s lack of response to regional complaints to win twenty-five of the Maritimes’ thirty-one seats. In provinces where a 2 or 3 per cent shift in popular vote usually meant defeat or victory, they opened up margins of from 8 to 20 per cent over their chief opponents. The arrival of the Maritime block in Ottawa coincided with that of a group of sixty-five Progressives, mainly from the West. Preoccupied with wooing the West as a key to maintaining power, Prime Minister W.L. Mackenzie King had little time or sympathy for the Maritimers whom he complained confronted him “in an ugly and belligerent spirit.” Repeated delegations to Ottawa by politicians, businessmen, and farm and labour leaders, brought little response. As the regional movement expressed its anger in critical by-elections in Halifax and Kent late in 1923, King merely increased his efforts to conciliate the West, apparently believing that with appropriate attention to such local issues as dredging, breakwaters, wharfs, and other federal give-aways, he could always maintain a reasonable share of seats in the Maritimes.

Unable to gain redress from the government in power, Maritime Rights leaders resolved to appeal over the head of Parliament to the people of Canada. The Halifax Herald sponsored H.S. Congdon, former journalist of Dartmouth and Dawson City, on a tour of newspaper offices to seek a more favourable hearing for the Maritime case. The Saint John Telegraph-Journal sent its manager, J.D. MacKenna, and editor, A.M. Belding, on speaking tours of central and western Canada respectively. The boards of trade and Maritime clubs, which had sprung up in Moncton, Truro, Halifax, and Sydney, churned out propaganda pamphlets which
they mailed, often along with private appeals, to virtually every individual they considered of influence across the nation. In February 1925, a so-called "great" Martimes Rights delegation of over three hundred, sponsored by the cities of Halifax and Saint John and supposed to include a representative from every board of trade and municipality, staged a noisy demonstration in a presentation to the federal cabinet. While King denounced all concerned in his diary — a "Tory" delegation he called it despite its conspicuously Liberal leadership — the press and politicians elsewhere in Canada were impressed, at least with the Maritimers' sincerity, and urged the federal government to alleviate the problems of the region.

Maritime leaders by this time were spurred to near desperation by the virtual collapse of their economy. Although the regional protest had originated in a period of relative prosperity, the early 1920s saw a widespread recession turn into lingering depression in the Maritimes. Cut off from traditional markets by freight rates, with tariff protection undercut by inflation, rebates, and actual reductions, Maritime manufacturers were in a poor position to compete in a national economy. Already integrated into a branch-plant system controlled from central Canada, Maritime factories such as the Canada Car Company of Amherst or the Maritime Nail Company of Saint John were shut down, and the market served directly from central Canada. The British Empire Steel Corporation, which included a coal mining section with an output of five to seven million tons per year, was thrown into disarray. The corporation tried to pass losses on to its workers who, in turn, resisted with strikes every year from 1922 to 1925. By 1926 the large iron and steel section of the corporation was bankrupt and in the hands of a receiver. Forty-two per cent of the jobs in manufacturing disappeared in the region in the five years from 1920 to 1926. An estimated 15 to 20 per cent of the population left the region during the decade.

F.B. McCurdy, a wealthy financier and former minister in Tory leader Arthur Meighen's cabinet, favoured a strategy not unlike that of Fielding's four decades earlier. Operating in the provincial theatres, he hoped to forge a coalition of Liberals and Conservatives and, from a position of local strength, demand constitutional revisions which would give Nova Scotia (or those provinces co-operating with it) control over its (their) own tariff and trade policy. Strongly opposing McCurdy's strategy was a faction led by W.H. Dennis, managing publisher of the Halifax Herald, who sought instead to bargain from a more traditional regional block in the Conservative party. This too was the course advocated by J.B.M. Baxter, Maritime Rights advocate and Premier of New Brunswick. Through skilful political manoeuvering, the Dennis faction forestalled a possible bid
for the provincial leadership by McCurdy, while the Conservatives federally ran as Maritime Rights candidates pledged to vote independently on regional issues where necessary.

In the election of 1925, regional issues again predominated and the Conservatives, the new champions of Maritime Rights, increased their share of the popular vote by 24.1 per cent in Nova Scotia, 20.3 per cent in New Brunswick, and 10.8 per cent in Prince Edward Island. Reduced to a minority status, the King government appointed a royal commission led by Sir Andrew Rae Duncan, a British lawyer with industrial experience who had already enjoyed success in defusing labour unrest in the Nova Scotian coal mines, to investigate Maritime problems. With the election of 1926 approaching, King promised to implement whatever the commission recommended.

*The Duncan Commission*

In a brief but thorough study of the region’s difficulties, Duncan sought to produce recommendations which had some chance of implementation, that is to say, recommendations which would not antagonise more influential regions. His report gave strong arguments in favour of federal subsidies based on need and the use of transportation as an instrument for regional development. Specific recommendations included immediate subsidy increases to bring the Maritimes to a rough equality with other regions and a share in any subsequent adjustments; a 20 per cent reduction in freight rates throughout and from the region; the channelling of federal funds into port development through national harbours boards at Halifax and Saint John; a second car ferry for Prince Edward Island; and compensation in the form of direct subsidies to the Maritime steel producers for tariff rebates given central Canadian competitors on coal imported for the smelting and melting of metals. Duncan’s failure to provide a clear general statement for or against the tariff came not from any lack of consideration of the problem, but from the realization that the region itself was divided on the issue and that he could make no recommendation which would not be offensive to other, more influential sections of the country.

Comment on the report from across the nation appeared favourable, thanks in part to earlier educational efforts, and King reaffirmed his intent to implement the recommendations as the basis for rebuilding his shattered party in the Maritimes. To this end he appointed two staunch regional statesmen to the cabinet, the talented J.L. Ralston of Nova Scotia and Acadian leader and former New Brunswick premier, P.J. Veniot.
The Maritime ministers' zeal and abilities were quickly tested. J.A. Robb, Minister of Finance from a riding near Montreal, claiming that adoption of the report's recommendations would interfere with possible tax reductions, "leaked" to the press greatly inflated cost estimates for implementing the report. Additional opposition came from Prairie representatives seeking to use the report as a lever with which to wrest further concessions for their own region. With Maritime Rights leaders threatening a renewed agitation in 1927 and the Parliamentary session's Easter break approaching, the cabinet finally reached a compromise agreement on the more prominent of the report's recommendations. In dramatic fashion, Mackenzie King announced legislation granting a subsidy increase (although on a temporary basis which was conditional on Maritime acceptance of further concessions to the Prairies), a 20 per cent reduction in freight rates, national harbour boards for Halifax and Saint John, and bounties for coking plants to provide a market for Maritime coal. Any of the report's recommendations not mentioned were, according to King, not rejected, but merely delayed for further study.

Although far from implementing the Duncan report "virtually in its entirety" as King claimed, the acceptance of prominent features of the report gave Maritime leaders an opportunity to project a more optimistic image of their region when seeking to attract investment then being made available by the buoyant economic conditions of the period. By proclaiming their problems solved, Maritime leaders hoped to reverse an image of regional stagnation, which they had inadvertently encouraged by their agitation. In this they were reasonably successful and new investment flowed into the region in the form of pulp and paper mills, tourist hotels, and harbour development. But in announcing their satisfaction and impending prosperity, Maritime leaders also undercut the effectiveness of later agitation in support of federal commitments which were still unfulfilled.

Prince Edward Island was particularly unfortunate. Duncan's urgent recommendation for a second car ferry remained unimplemented until it was tacked on a budget supplement just before the 1930 election. Nor did the subsidy increase solve the Island's desperate need for additional revenue to meet essential services. In 1928 J.A. Robb used vague promises of attending to Island claims to persuade a newly-elected premier, S.A. Saunders, to break off co-operation with the Maritime Board of Trade and the other Maritime premiers in pressing financial claims. Ultimately, Prince Edward Island gained nothing while its defection left a gap in the regional front built up by the three provinces over the previous quarter century.
Although Maritimers lost confidence in the efficacy of regional protest, especially during the general depression of the 1930s when every section was preoccupied with its own problems, the immediate and long range impact of the regional agitation and sentiment should not be underestimated. As small provinces in a continually evolving federal system, the Maritimes had to run faster just to stand still. Through their agitation and the royal commission which it elicited, Maritime leaders were able to halt for a brief period the erosion of their region's position and even to register a few modest gains. The Maritime Provinces Freight Rate Commission, which they established as a permanent watchdog of regional transportation interests, marked the beginning of a later extensive but little-publicized interprovincial bureaucracy directed towards regional goals. Of long term significance, too, were such principles enunciated and fought for as financial need in determining federal-provincial subsidies and the concern for regional development in national transportation policy. Although given scant consideration by governments at the time, both of these principles remained in the public consciousness to be partially implemented in a more enlightened age. Other reform efforts in the Maritimes in the 1920s included an active co-operative movement and successful ventures in marketing eggs, poultry, and livestock on a regional basis. A failing attempt in the same period to create a regional university suggested both the depth of regional and reform sentiment and the persistence of even stronger local and cultural loyalties which, as in the question of legislative union, clearly took precedence.

Conclusion

Maritime regionalism was a state of mind, a matter of perception and belief. Encouraged by location and a common relationship to the sea, residents of the three provinces in the mid-nineteenth century developed a perspective of common interest, particularly in railway development, and even briefly considered political union as useful in the pursuit of their goals. Confederation both defused this early expression of regionalism and created pressures for a new one as Maritimers first resisted the larger union and then responded to common problems arising from it. A new regional alignment appeared first among members of Parliament for whom the benefits of co-operation in attempting to influence national policies were most apparent. The need for provincial co-operation was less evident and more difficult to achieve. Fielding's pioneer efforts to secure joint action in seeking better terms and possibly creating a separate Maritime colony revealed the difficulty of effective political expression of regional sentiment in an area divided by provincial boundaries. While all three provincial governments might seek such common goals as better financial terms, the
strategy by which these were to be obtained had to meet the political as well as the provincial needs of each. Secessionist strategy which served both the interests of party and province for Fielding was politically embarrassing to Blair and in conflict with Sullivan’s carefully cultivated tactics for winning both better terms and provincial elections.

The turn of the century saw the development of a regionalism more deeply rooted in the public mind. Encouraged by developing social integration, the rise of “progressive” ideology, a growing articulation in literature, interregional rivalries, and the Maritimes’ economic and political decline, regionalism became a force which politicians could not ignore. The three provincial governments began joint efforts to seek financial claims in lieu of territorial expansion and eventually co-operated in the full range of causes which came to be known as Maritime Rights. The Maritime Rights movement represented the climax of regional sentiment in this period, as large elements of the population, businessmen, teachers, farmers, and labourers saw their personal interests linked to the economic success of the region. Their consistent support of regional issues in elections, combined with the political insecurity of the King government, resulted in the Duncan royal commission and the concessions obtained. When the expectations aroused by the commission failed to materialize, Maritimers became disillusioned. Although regional consciousness did not disappear, it was not again characterized by the optimism and sense of purpose which had enabled it for a time to surmount even the formidable barriers to unity represented by the political, economic, and social divisions of the region.
Suggestions for Further Reading


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