

REMARKS TO BORDERLINES CONFERENCE, 22 November, 2002

The Border and Its Impact on Atlantic Canadian Society (with Reg Stuart and Tim Woodcock)

One of the great and selfish pleasures of participating in a conference like this is the licence it affords to panel participants to expound on their biases and hobby-horses – a licence I certainly intend to use!

We've had a most interesting discussion to date today, and there is a large convergence of opinion on many points. Since many of my remarks are going to be targeted to the Atlantica region, I will part company a bit with some previous speakers who have emphasized the need to persuade various levels of government to shift ground to move the region forward on both sides of the border. The annual Governors' and Premiers' conference may be a good thing, as are occasional bunfests among bureaucrats, but I offer an axiom for your consideration: while the agreement of governments may ultimately be necessary, it is not necessary to have the agreement of governments to give these desired changes a tidal force they cannot resist. Indeed, without operational institutional changes and movements outside of governments, these changes will **never, ever** happen.

For my own part, as an American who has now spent 35 years as a Canadian citizen in four provinces, I am inclined to see our respective commonalities as much as our clear differences. In the case of Atlantic Canada, our commonalities across the border are quite striking:

1. Large parts of both the U.S. and Canadian sections of what we might call Atlantica – that is, New England and Eastern Canada – have one or two moderately sized cities and large areas of “devil-take-the-hindmost” hinterland. It could be said that in both our national jurisdictions, a great part of our regions sits at the national table below the salt – economically disadvantaged, geographically remote, sparsely populated.

2. Most of both national sub-regions have an aging population that is more culturally and ethnically homogeneous than many other parts of our respective countries. Both Aboriginal and European populations on both sides of the border come mostly from the same respective Eastern Woodlands and Celtic fringe gene pools. *(Note: I take some disagreement with my good friend, Michael MacDonald's, comment earlier implying that such cousin-hood is no longer economically important. I know of no Cape Bretoner who doesn't have at least one relative in Boston [the only reason Cape Bretoners got that far south in New England is that the Irish had become respectable, and Bostonians needed a new servant underclass 😊], and no francophone from Maine who doesn't have kin in Québec or New Brunswick.)*

3. The Atlantic Ocean – or rivers running toward it – and forests, mountains and rock give us a common topographical aspect. As well, our geopolitical boundaries on either side of the border (i.e., state and provincial boundaries) don't necessarily make sense, except in the case of Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island. And, on both sides of the border, there are likely too many state and provincial jurisdictions where local and geographically contiguous sub-region governance makes more sense. *{Note: By the way, I think the graphic developed for this conference – an aerial topographical map of the U.S. and Canada, with the national boundary and some city locations – is brilliant. While one might wish for the addition of a few more citistates, it's a map that eliminates the geopolitical lines of the most useless, least value-added jurisdictions in both our countries, the provinces and states.}*

4. The people of both New England and Eastern Canada have always viewed the border between them as porous – certainly nothing that justifies paying duties! Smuggling has been a longtime shared birthright, and parts of families have crossed and re-crossed the Saint John River for more than two centuries in search of personal economic sustainability.

Based on these simple reflections, I come to two conclusions:

1. In Atlantica, the border between us (and the borders within each of our sub-regions) have been mostly a nuisance, and a job creation program for federal and state or provincial regulatory bureaucrats.
2. In the greater scheme of global and hemispheric economic realities, New England and Eastern Canada have more to gain by cooperating and collaborating at the community and sub-regional level, than we have to lose – since neither of us is “winning” or positioned for optimal change within our current polities.

At this point, I can hear many of your thoughtwaves emanating this way:

Hmmm...interesting, Jacke, maybe even slightly amusing, but hardly relevant. History is history, and borders are borders, and no politicians or bureaucrats are prepared to give up their current tiny base of power and authority for something as ephemeral as the common good. Cynical, perhaps, but true – but then I'm not suggesting that we wait for Ottawa or Washington – or even Fredericton, St. John's, Portland or Montpelier -- to give us a few crumbs of authority at the level at which real people live. *(As an aside for our American visitors, I note that Canada has the international distinction of being the only major parliamentary democracy that has escaped serious parliamentary and public service reform in the past 50 years. As a result, we are superbly equipped to govern in the world of the 1880s.)* In both countries, we need new perspectives on governance and relationship, but they are unlikely to come from those who benefit most from the *status quo* at the federal and state or provincial levels.

In my few remaining minutes I'd like to share with you a few concepts that may start us on a different path. These are hardly original (*see reference note at end of paper*), but I don't believe we have reflected on them specifically in the Atlantica context:

- In the early 1990s, an American political scientist by the name of Benjamin Barber wrote a treatise titled *Jihad vs. McWorld* (you may remember it). His hypothesis was

that the two axial principles of our age – tribalism and globalism – clash at every point except one: they may both be threatening to democracy. This theme was revisited in Thomas L. Friedman's highly readable book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. Barber argued persuasively that neither tribalism nor globalism needs democracy to work – indeed, democracy can be a messy impediment to achieving the goals of both. He concluded that maybe the most attractive democratic ideal in the face of these two tidal forces will be confederal unions of semi-autonomous communities smaller than nation-states, tied together into regional economic associations and markets larger than nation-states.

Hmmm....let me say that again: confederal unions of semi-autonomous communities smaller than nation-states, tied together into regional economic associations and markets larger than nation-states. These new configurations – which don't necessarily require the approval of higher regulatory authorities but may be new mediating institutions outside, or at the margins, of existing constitutional structures – would be participatory and self-determining in local matters at the bottom, and representative and accountable at the top.

Hold that thought, and let me add a few more concepts to stimulate our breakout discussions later this afternoon....

I have long been an admirer of the work of Daniel Kemmis. Kemmis is an academic, and Director of the Center for the Rocky Mountain West, but his feet rest solidly on practical *terra firma*. He was a two-term mayor of Missoula, Montana, and is a former Speaker and Minority Leader of the Montana House of Representatives -- and a self-described conservative Democrat, for those who wish to place him in the ideological firmament. He's written three books, and their titles are both self-explanatory and illuminating: *Community and the Politics of Place*, *The Good City and the Good Life*, and *This Sovereign Land: A New Vision for Governing the West*. Kemmis' work has a few defining analytical ideas:

- 1) You know a democracy is in trouble when people call themselves “taxpayers” instead of “citizens” – or when they always preface the word “citizen” with the modifier “concerned”. A taxpayer is somebody who pays the bills and expects the goods in return. There is nothing fundamentally democratic about the relationship between a taxpayer and the state whatsoever. Anyone in totalitarian regimes pays taxes and expects services in return, too. The use of the phrase “concerned citizen” implies citizenship is essentially a form of anxiety – and you only get drawn into public life when you have a grievance.

- 2) Kemmis ascribes this state of affairs to the victory of Madisonian over Jeffersonian federalism. We’ve long known that Madisonian “court” ideals won in Canada’s founding philosophy. But, in the U.S. context, the system of “checks and balances” in federalism, among the civic estates and between federal and state powers, is Madisonian, too. This federalism argues that it is possible--in fact, preferable-- to carry on the most important public tasks without any consensual willing of a common world. Individuals pursue their private ends and the structure of government balances those pursuits so cleverly that the highest good emerges without anyone having bothered to will its existence – or at least, that’s the theory. This is the politics of disengagement, says Kemmis, and it leads to dysfunctional regulatory bureaucracy.

It’s dysfunctional for at least two reasons. First, there is a disincentive to citizen participation in the public process. Our political systems lead to alienation of more and more people from the public process. Secondly, there is no incentive or mandate for local people to work together to solve local problems.

Kemmis illustrates this by citing the problems of the American (and Canadian) West. The politics of the West is a battle between individualism and regulatory bureaucracy. Cooperation is a third, largely ignored, alternative. The result? In all the examples he cites in his works, the community ends up with a less satisfactory solution than any of the residents would have chosen because everyone is fighting the initiatives of everyone else. As residents learn by experience that any major initiative will create negative

results, their willingness to try anything new is steadily diminished. He was speaking of the West, but it sounds a whole lot like Atlantic Canada, too!

He describes public hearings – this would be true on both sides of the border – as another example of dysfunctionality. A public hearing provides an opportunity to be heard. But by whom? By those with responsibility for making the decision; i.e. the public decision-maker. Unfortunately, the duty to hear does not extend beyond the decision-maker; those who testify are not encumbered by any such responsibility. Their role, in our respective systems, is to make the strongest possible case for their particular interests. The decision-maker will then sort out, balance, or broker those interests and dispose of the case accordingly. Whichever side the decision-makers opt for, the losing parties will either appeal to a higher decision maker or begin building political coalitions to reverse the decision....and so on. As some former U.S. Governor whose name I can't remember once said, "Anybody can wreck anything in America" – and the same holds true in Canada.

But let's move beyond Kemmis' analysis to his prescriptions – and, here, I do his work a great disservice in this truncated summary. He is well worth a more detailed reading, but let me mention three or four of his broad themes

- First, he strongly believes in the importance of place in defining a collective community of interest. No real public life is possible, he says, except among people who are engaged in the project of inhabiting a place. Solving problems and strategizing for the future are functions of how we choose to relate to each other, to the place we inhabit, and to the issues which that inhabiting raises for us. Think, for example, about the defining commonality of place of the Saint John River Valley, or of Newfoundland – and, collectively, of Atlantica.
- This leads to thinking about the economics of inhabitation or re-inhabitation of a place. Kemmis talks about both regional and local economic development efforts that are locally controlled. To build strong, indigenous communities, he concludes, regions and localities must have the capacity and the will to keep some locally

generated capital from leaving the region and to invest that capital creatively and effectively in the regional economy. He also notes that development of place-focused economies requires groups and individuals to develop new and stable patterns of cooperation. We're back to mediating institutions and structures.... Some of these we already have in place (e.g., universities, policy thinktanks, disease charities, and so on). Others we need to build – cross-border sectoral associations in the private and nonprofit sectors, for example.

- It then follows, Kemmis says, that we must consider the politics of inhabitation or re-inhabitation. This requires re-thinking what we mean by citizenship, and at the community level implies a renewed understanding of the concept of public good. Citizenship implies responsibility – ownership of the problem, and responsibility for the development of a solution by all the people involved in an issue. If people know they cannot turn it over to the third party (i.e., Ottawa or Washington, Halifax or Portland) to be the decision-maker; if they find themselves responsible for the ultimate decision, for each other, and even for their own ideologies, they are very likely to begin to think and behave differently.
- Let me close – again, highly selectively from his work – with Kemmis' assertion (in common with Jane Jacobs and others) that the economic and political viability of cities and their surrounding regions is increasingly a function of how they develop self-conscious and self-reliant regional economies. Government policies that segment urban and rural interests are wrong-headed, he argues, and have created the illusion that the economic health of suburban merchants and rural farmers can be pursued independently of the economic health of urban:

“Throughout history, the role of cities has been precisely to focus, organize, and multiply the resources of the surrounding regions to which they are organically connected. In the era of the nation-state, we had not only lost sight of this role, but what is worse, national policy has misled both cities and their rural surroundings into believing that they could prosper independently of one

another, especially if each could open a wide enough pipeline to Washington...¹

Just substitute “Ottawa” for “Washington” in that last sentence and you have our dual political reality!

I leave you with two questions to weave into your discussions later today:

- 1) Within Atlantica, on both sides of the border, is the status quo of governance and public decision-making models good enough for our grandchildren?
- 2) What might new , place-based, confederal, mediating institutions of semi-autonomous communities smaller than nation-states – tied together into regional economic associations and markets larger than nation-states -- look like?

Thank you for your attention and patience.

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NOTE: These are informal remarks and not formatted as an academic paper. In preparing them, I have drawn heavily on the thoughts and writings of Kemmis and Barber, and on various reviews and interpretations of their work, especially those by Susan Giannettino, Wasatch-Cache NF (R04F19A), published on-line in Eco-Watch, 1/23/93.

Detail on Daniel Kemmis' publications:

***Community and the Politics of Place.* University of Oklahoma Press, 1992**

***The Good City and the Good Life: Renewing the Sense of Community.* New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1995.**

***This Sovereign Land: A New Vision for Governing the West.* Island Press, 2001.**

At date of checking (24/11/02), the first two books were available from <http://www.indigochapters.ca> and all three were available in new or used format at <http://www.alibris.com>

¹ Kemmis, Daniel. (1995). *The Good City and the Good Life: Renewing the Sense of Community.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, pp. 119-120.