



Unlocking the Atlantic Gateway

You'd think that in the 'have not' world of Atlantic Canada, a plan to heal our collective anemic economies would be eagerly welcomed. That certainly was the mindset of researchers with the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) when they proposed the Atlantica export corridor. The concept is to create a free trade zone encompassing the Atlantic provinces, parts of Ontario and Quebec, and the New England area stretching as far west as Buffalo.

Essentially, Atlantic Canada, with the Port of Halifax as the "Gateway", would invest in a massive infrastructure upgrade to accommodate the lucrative shipping trade with Asia through the Suez Canal.

Not only would the Port of Halifax be revamped but a major network of new highways would be developed between Halifax and southern New Brunswick and from that point to Eastern Canada and the U.S. border to facilitate the flow

of goods throughout the projected new trading sphere. Proponents of the initiative point out that Atlantic businesses would thrive under such conditions as local importers and exporters would have more cost-effective access to their markets.

And yet, even with the Atlantic Chambers of Commerce, ACOA and industry giant J.D. Irving on board, the proposal is running into powerful opposition, particularly from the Canadian

Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA). Senior CCPA researcher Scott Sinclair points out that, "Atlantica is ...about convincing Atlantic Canadians that the road to prosperity lies in becoming a conduit for Asian goods headed to the American 'heartland' and in accelerating energy exports to the U.S." Sinclair finds that "the Atlantica agenda pays little attention to Atlantic Canada's future energy security, to the negative environmental effects of accelerated fossil fuel exploitation, or to whether the Canadian public is getting a fair share of revenues from these publicly-owned, non-renewable resources."

AIMS president Charles Cirtwell, responding to what he calls the "heavy-truck" fallacy, insists that the plan is to use a system which is heavily dependent upon rail links. And, with regards to claims by organized labour that his group is actively pursuing sweeping de-regulation which could mean the end of such social safety nets as minimum wage, he is firm in his contention that the new initiative is about creating wealth, jobs, and economic stability. He further states,



Cirtwell hints at the removal of inter-provincial trade barriers and de-regulation among the Atlantic provinces but details remain sketchy.

"The simple fact is (that) policy directions of Atlantica have been set in stone by no one. It's not our fault that labour and environmental groups are coming late to the table but, by God, we're glad to see them and we're looking forward to the discussion."

There's a lot to discuss, according to the degree of pushback from business and political leaders in areas not reasonably close to the Atlantica strip. The proposed system may improve the lot of businesses close to the upgraded highways but it remains a challenge to envi-

sion how industry on the geographic periphery will grow. Cirtwell hints at the removal of inter-provincial trade barriers and de-regulation among the Atlantic provinces but details remain sketchy.

Despite the unanswered questions, the clock is ticking according to AIMS consultant Stephen Blank. "The time frame is shrinking for Atlantic Canada to establish itself as a major conduit for international trade," he says. "You have to start somewhere. It's a tremendous opportunity in this great moment of uncertainty." – *Fred Desjardins*



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