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## Demography does not have to be our destiny

By H. JOHN HARKER

Demography is not destiny. These words were heard in Halifax recently as an official from the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada presented startling, but exciting, statistics on job-creation and post-secondary education in our province and across the country.

The picture he drew was an effective dismissal of the gloom-and-doom projections bandied about by those who would have us believe that all we can aspire to in Nova Scotia, or Atlantic Canada as a whole, is that we learn how to manage decline with civility as our population grows less.

Our ancestors never indulged in pessimism, and nor should we. The first poem written in the English language, the Maldon poem, was hacked and hewn out of a dangerous time, when Vikings were ravaging the British Isles and Western Europe. It has left us with these lines: "Thought must be the braver, heart more valiant, courage the greater, as our strength grows less."

Our strength is NOT growing less, and our population need not do so either; but if demography is not to be our destiny, what is?

The pages of this newspaper offer strong clues. Just look, as examples, at stories about hugely significant developments in commercialization and health care — and note that I do not say commercialization OF health care.

From The Chronicle Herald, we learn that a Halifax bioscience company has landed a key contract in China for the sale of its rapid HIV tests; Halifax Biomedical, from Mabou, has won a breakthrough contract for its stereo diagnostic imaging; and Health Outcomes Worldwide of New Waterford, winner of an innovation prize from Innovacorp, was recently in Philadelphia promoting its web-based system for patient care management.

Nova Scotia must build its future around first-class developments in a cluster of inter-related sectors, and health care, where costs are threatening to overwhelm public spending, is very clearly one of them.

Another is cleaner energy and while we must welcome and operationalize the Lower Churchill deal, we cannot do that alone. First, the arrival of hydro-electricity from Labrador must be viewed both as a reality in its own light, and exploited as an enabler for a drive towards sustainability for a range of energy projects, especially in wind, tidal and solar.

And second, we must go forward to new frontier developments in energy security. The primary one must be to turn the billions of tons of coal under the seas from Nova Scotia to

Newfoundland into clean diesel, which can be done, and should be. North Americans are not going to walk away from their automobiles, but they would be won over by clean diesel originating in their backyard.

A third sector is food, particularly high-end enrichment rather than mass agri-production. The world is hungry, but optimists think it quite possible that by 2050, we will be able to feed nine billion people. However, recent studies have shown that in many countries, the answer has to lie in not just providing more food, but also in adding to food intake the right nutrients, the vitamins and healthy supplements which are so often dangerously lacking. This is where Nova Scotia has clear capacity.

Think of Ocean Nutrition and its growing sales to China, its dominance in North America for Omega 3, and its recent deal to put this wonder supplement in popcorn, or the Oxford blueberry empire established by John Bragg. Nova Scotia is home to world leaders, and we need a strategy to build on their successes.

In each of these sectors, there is a vital need not just for strategic support, but also for more research and development, which can be fostered by our universities, particularly in partnership with industry and government. Already our universities, from one end of Nova Scotia to another, are making a significant contribution. They could and should do more, but this cannot happen if government cuts and does not create.

Demography is not our destiny, but decline may be unless we build on our strengths — now.

H. John Harker is president and vice-chancellor, Cape Breton University.

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