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Research That Matters Column (June 2021)

'Knowing history – before it repeats on you' by Jim Meek

The Sydney area was in free fall when Lachlan MacKinnon was a teenager.

By 2006, when MacKinnon graduated from high school, the old provincially owned steel mill and the last federally operated (Devco) mine had been shut down for half a decade.

MacKinnon, now 33 and a professor of history at Cape Breton University, witnessed the aftermath of those closures up close and personal.

“Things were in chaos when I was a teenager,” he said in an interview. Today, he sadly recalls former teammates from hockey and other sports – just boys, who were lost to suicide or opioids.

The Sydney area, for decades defined by its coal and steel industries, was stuck in the doldrums of a post-industrial economy.

In his 2020 book, *Closing Sysco: Industrial Decline in Atlantic Canada's Steel City*, MacKinnon – the grandson of a coal miner - takes a deep dive into the history he lived through.

In doing so, his goal is to define what works and what doesn't to rebuild post-industrial economies, across Atlantic Canada and beyond.

His work has taught him this much for certain. When a mine closes in Nova Scotia, or a pulp mill is shuttered in New Brunswick or Newfoundland and Labrador, or a potato plant stops operating on PEI, a little of the local area's soul and identity is lost.

MacKinnon says government responses to deindustrialization help determine the fate of affected areas. In Europe and North America, those responses varied widely. Thatcherism in the UK involved the dismantling of traditional industries by government fiat. In the US, a *laissez faire* (“let the market decide”) approach to industrial decline rocked rust belt cities like Detroit.

“State responses to deindustrialization are significant,” he said. “In the 1980s, (former British Prime Minister Margaret) Thatcher actively intervened to transform an industrial economy to a finance economy based in London. In the U.S., the leave-it-to-the markets approach devastated cities like Detroit and Youngstown.”

Canada took a more interventionist approach, with governments subsidizing traditional industries, while mandating agencies like the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) to promote growth in new economic sectors.

MacKinnon concedes some boondoggles emerged as part of those policy initiatives. “But let’s not throw out the baby with the bathwater,” he said. In general, regional economic development policies have helped build strength in certain sectors in Atlantic Canada, notably tourism, a success story across the region in that long-ago and far-away time before COVID. “In this region, we fared better than places where governments allowed the chips to fall where they may.”

MacKinnon’s work combines traditional archival research – rooting through archives, reading old newspapers, consulting the work of other academics – and talking to the people who lived through the history he describes. In his research for *Closing Sysco*, MacKinnon interviewed everyone from community activists to steelworkers to corporate bigwigs.

Combine Studs Terkel and Edward Gibbon – or at least their methodologies – and you’ll get some idea of how MacKinnon works. He stresses that oral histories are central to his work. By interviewing people directly involved, for instance, he knows the closure of the Devco mines has an ongoing impact on people’s lives.

As an historian, MacKinnon is wary of trends in intellectual thought, which can often have an unhelpful impact on policy and public attitudes. For instance, Stephen Harper was merely reflecting the predominant neo-liberal values of his era when he suggested in 2002 that Atlantic Canadians suffered from a “culture of defeat.” (Twelve years after the Iron Lady was out of office, and four years before Harper became prime minister, the principles of Thatcherism were well-established tenets of Canadian conservative thinking.)

MacKinnon says Atlantic Canadians were understandably upset that Harper was suggesting they didn’t want to work. “That wasn’t fair to generations and generations of people who worked digging coal or making steel.”

I guess the old maxims apply here. If Harper really understood the history of work in Atlantic Canada, he probably would not have suggested we were a bunch of layabouts.

And if governments want to see declining regions rebound instead of disappearing, a sensible state policy or two can help. In short, government efforts to rebuild economies in post-industrial areas of Atlantic Canada can soften the blows and promote success.

Here an old maxim applies again - if we know our history, and learn from it, it's less likely to repeat on us like a Saturday night donair.

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