

Trade agreements: Open debate needed

By RICK CLARKE

It seems weekly, if not daily, Nova Scotians and others in Atlantic Canada are reeling from announcements of the loss of more and more manufacturing jobs, due to plant closures, with the production being moved south of the border to the U.S. or Mexico.

Although there is much concern and anger being voiced over the announced closures and intent to move production elsewhere to enhance the profit margin of the corporation, the real anger needs to be focused on the government policies that permit this to happen – the free trade agreements.

These agreements had been hatched in the backrooms, without benefit of public debate, and the results have been devastating to workers, their families, their communities and our economy in general.

Yes, it can be said that there are some who have benefited from these free trade agreements: The gap between the rich and the poor has greatly increased, as has the profit margin of large multi-national corporations, oil companies and financial institutions. But we need to look at who is paying the price.

It is time for an open and public debate on what's really needed for the sound economic recovery of Atlantic Canada, to address and stop the loss of our manufacturing capacity and the resulting outmigration of our skilled labour and youth, and to rebuild our communities.

We need to discuss what it is we really want for the future of this province and region. Do we want sound economic development policies that support and enhance local economies and communities, providing much needed employment and economic activity? Or do we want to see more of the same with continued job losses, plant closures, outmigration of our workforce and shrivelling communities through the fast-pacing of elements of the NAFTA, as being promoted and disguised under Atlantica?

The Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) has been one of the more public proponents of Atlantica, as reflected in a recent column in this newspaper, titled "Like it or not, Atlantica does exist, thankfully," in which the acting president goes to great lengths attempting to say what Atlantica "is not," rather than being forthright on what Atlantica truly is from the AIMS perspective and what it will ultimately cost us.

A review of other commentaries and comments from AIMS supports the view that Atlantica played out would be enhancing the provisions of the NAFTA, to ensure even greater flow of goods across borders. We believe this will lead to further or continued loss of our manufacturing sector and jobs.

Before the free trade agreements, Canada had the balance of trade with the U.S.; today, it is another story. Therefore, one must question how enhanced south-north trade, at the peril of east-west trade, would be beneficial to the region or country.

AIMS, in the aforementioned column, implies that there is no cost to Atlantica. It is widely known that there is great cost in infrastructure requirements as well as a threat to public policy, which are viewed in an AIMS document as "public policy distress factors," implying that these factors should be addressed to reverse the decline of the region.

We believe there is much at stake if we continue to stumble down this road without full and open debate. In addition to the fear of further loss of the manufacturing sector, there is the threat of the undermining of public sector jobs as well as social standards, due to the focus of the "public policy distress factors," which include the size of government relative to the economy, government employment, total government revenue, minimum wage legislation and union density.

Clearly, the way to better the economy and economic prospects of the region and its citizens is not through policies that will lead to further job losses and a race to the bottom in standards; we need policies that will rebuild our manufacturing sector, support our public sector and give our children a future at home.

No more closed-door deals. Let's have an open, public debate on what we want for the province and where we want to go. Our future depends on it.

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