

COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN P. E. I. AND THE MAINLAND

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THE most serious problem in Prince Edward Island, next to the land question, has concerned communication facilities between the province and the mainland. To the Island, which is expected to share in the commercial and political endeavours of the nation, an effective link with its neighbours is a vital factor. More than any other, this problem has complicated the relations between Charlottetown and Ottawa.¹

In colonial days distance cut the Island off from intercourse with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick—a separation that had a distinct effect on the outlook of its people and the development of its institutions. The only way of getting to and from the colony was by sailing packet in summer and by ice boat in winter. The service was irregular at the best of times, but in winter it was impossible to ship goods in quantity, ensure safe travel, or avoid long delays in mail service, when the strait was frozen over and crossings tedious and hazardous. With the coming of the steamship and the consequent increase in the speed of mail service, travel, and commerce, the Island government sought to benefit by it. In 1840 the Assembly noted that the British government had let a contract to Samuel Cunard for a steamship service between Pictou, Miramichi and Quebec, and requested that the arrangement be changed to enable the boat to call at Charlottetown both ways. A reply indicated that Mr. Cunard had refused to do this, but that he would provide another boat if the local assembly would pay for it. The first step was taken in 1842 with the formation of the P. E. I. Steam Navigation Company to commence operations across Northumberland Strait. The local government lent a hand by purchasing a hundred shares in the company, provided the latter would run between Pictou, Charlottetown and Miramichi and call at Bedeque and Georgetown once a fortnight. This was the first permanent steamboat connection between the Island and the mainland. The arrangement worked well for a time, but it was expensive, particularly during the severe months of navigation difficulties, and the company lost

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1. The sources for the material in this article are the *Journals of the Assembly, Reports of the House of Commons*, contemporary newspapers, and documents in the Public Archives of Canada. The article will be incorporated, fully documented, in a forthcoming book on the government of Prince Edward Island.

heavily. The local legislature, however, appreciated the importance of the service, and contributed financial aid from time to time. For the next thirty years the service was irregular and beset with the problems of cost and government assistance.

During the negotiations that preceded the entry of the Island into Confederation, one of the main objections raised by the opponents of union was that the Island would be unable to participate effectively in the federation because of its isolation. Consequently the bargain of 1873 included an arrangement for a physical as well as a political link between the new province and the Dominion. An appropriate clause provided that the federal government would be responsible for:

Efficient Steam Service for the conveyance of mails and passengers, to be established and maintained between the Island and the mainland of the Dominion, winter and summer, thus placing the Island in continuous communication with the Inter-colonial Railway and the railway system of the Dominion.

The Island statesmen considered this guarantee an essential part of the Confederation arrangement, without which the province would not have joined and indeed could not prosper. As a part of the Confederation terms the communication clause became, not a mere matter of sectional privilege, but a constitutional right.

Trouble began almost immediately, and for fifteen years the Dominion government did almost nothing about it. In 1873-74 no service was provided beyond the irregular crossings of private vessels in summer and of ice boats in winter. In 1875 and '76 the Federal government provided an old wooden steamer, the *Albert*, which proved unsuitable, and from 1876 to 1888 the *Northern Light*, which was not designed for heavy work and was laid up for many days at a time. Meanwhile a constant flow of correspondence and petitions circulated between Charlottetown and Ottawa. Each year from 1881 to 1885 minutes of council and joint addresses from both houses of the legislature reminded the Federal government of its bargain and protested that the whole economy of the province was suffering for lack of connections with mainland commerce. A side issue in 1882-83 concerned alleged negligence of the Dominion with respect to piers in harbours and navigable rivers, for which the Island was compensated by some \$90,000 in 1884. Throughout the proceedings the local government maintained that the Dominion had broken the Confederation pledge

and was ignoring the Island and allowing its trade to languish while undertaking vast public works and expenditures in the West. Although Premier Sullivan, who was in power at this time, was a close friend of Sir John Macdonald, and worked in harmony with him on other matters, he led a provincial rights crusade against the Federal government. Nevertheless, when Premier Honore Mercier of Quebec invited the Island to send a delegation to a conference of provincial governments in October, 1887, to consider "the autonomy of the Provinces, their financial arrangements, and other matters of common Provincial interest," the Sullivan government refused to attend because it "felt that no good could result from anything that the Conference could do." The real reason, as Sullivan pointed out to a legislature which questioned his wisdom in refusing, was that the Island was not then interested in autonomy or financial arrangements but only in the communications question, which did not concern the other provinces but was a private affair between the Island and the Dominion.

The Dominion government reacted strongly to the Island's attitude and placed the blame on Northumberland Strait itself. In a Report of a Committee of Privy Council in 1885 the Federal viewpoint was stressed. Winter conditions in the Strait were such, it is said, that it was impossible to provide continuous steam service and "it is proper to assume that both contracting parties to the union" understood this and that the Dominion could only provide and maintain what "science and experience might determine as the best and most efficient for the end in view, within the range of possibility." A special committee of the House of Commons had said substantially the same thing in 1883. The Dominion reminded the Island that it contributed comparatively little to the national revenue and rebuked it for comparing the steam service with "a great national work", the C.P.R. This defence invited the obvious retort that an antiquated wooden boat was not what "science and experience might determine as the best and most efficient," and that the Island's steam service, while not an undertaking of such magnitude as a transcontinental railroad, was nevertheless a national obligation recognized in the constitution itself. It was similar to, and no less binding than, the railway part of the Confederation bargain with British Columbia.

Sullivan now played his last card by appealing to the Imperial government over the head of the Federal. The Executive Council appointed the Premier and Provincial Secretary

Donald Ferguson a delegation to lay the Island's complaints before the Queen. Lord Stanley, then Secretary of State for the Colonies, advised that he did not think that the Queen had "any power to give a decision, or direct or enforce action in this case." Nevertheless the delegation proceeded to London, and on March 1, 1886, rendered an elaborate submission to Lord Granville, Stanley's successor. On March 12th Sir Charles Tupper presented a counter memorandum on behalf of the Dominion government, and on the 22nd the Island delegates replied to it. Finally the delegates, Tupper, and Granville held a conference in which there was much argument on details. After the negotiations ended Granville wrote to the Governor General, Lord Lansdown, advising that, while he doubted "whether any really satisfactory communication by steamship can be regularly maintained all the year round," he suggested that rail communication would be desirable and that a "metallic subway should receive a full, and if feasible, favourable consideration on the part of the Government of the Dominion". An obvious hint concluded the letter: "It would reflect great credit on the Dominion Government, if, after connecting British Columbia with the Eastern Provinces by the Canadian Pacific Railway, it should now be able to complete its system of railway communication by an extension to Prince Edward Island."

The immediate result of this Imperial venture in Dominion-Provincial relations was effective for the Island. The Federal government ordered a survey of the floor of Northumberland Strait for subway purposes, added \$20,000 a year to the provincial subsidy, and in 1888 provided a new steamer, appropriately called the *Stanley*. In 1899 a second boat, the *Minto*, was added to the service.

From 1886 to 1900, hopeful expectations centered on the idea of a tunnel for both vehicles and a railroad that would extend under Northumberland Strait between the Island and the mainland at the narrowest part, some nine miles in length. A British engineer reported in 1886 that the project would cost approximately £2,200,200 sterling if the sea bed were suitable. Sir John Macdonald made no definite promise, but from time to time advised his Island friends that the Dominion government was studying the practical problems involved in construction, durability, safety and cost. If the plan were feasible he was "prepared to submit the question for . . . favourable consideration". The whole scheme, however, proved

impracticable from the standpoint of engineering possibilities in 1900. The distance was long for a subway in which trains would run, costs of construction, ventilation and upkeep would be great, and the sea bed was not satisfactory. The plan was thereupon abandoned in 1901.

While the tunnel scheme was under consideration and during the long and friendly relations between the Sullivan and Macdonald administrations the Island remained content with its gains of 1888 and the services rendered by the *Stanley*. During the 1890's however, Liberal governments replaced the Conservatives in both capitals, and fresh negotiations resulted from renewed electoral promises of better terms. In April, 1897, the Frederick Peters government demanded a reconsideration of the communications, which were still not "continuous" or "efficient". The Island, it said, had suffered serious commercial loss through Federal negligence, and had not received a share in public works comparable to that expended on railway communication in the other provinces. It recommended that the claims be paid, or referred to an independent commission of three members, one appointed by the Province, one by the Dominion, and the third by the Queen. The Laurier government refused either to pay or agree to a commission. The same process was repeated in March, 1898, by the Warburton administration. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, aware of the significance of arbitration of Dominion-Provincial relations, promised that the government would give the request "most careful consideration, not only on its merits, but in the light of the precedent the concession of your prayer would establish". While the Dominion did not concede the claims, it fostered an appropriation of \$180,000 for a second boat, the *Minto* which entered the service in the following year.

Party strength in the Island legislature was almost even at the turn of the century, and both sides used better terms as an enticing bait for electoral support. Premier Farquharson and Sir Louis Davies negotiated privately, while the Island government again petitioned the Federal cabinet in the spring of 1901 and presented the old arguments once more. The result was a bargain by which the existing claims for non-fulfilment of the terms of union from 1873 to 1888 with respect to steam communication were settled in lieu of an annual grant of \$30,000. Both sides provided for future difficulties, the Dominion by insisting that it was a "full settlement" of the union claims involved, and the Province by stressing that

the arrangement affected only the communications problem, and not demands on other matters. The Island legislature in a special statute ratified the agreement "in full satisfaction of all claims which the Province now has against the Dominion of Canada" in respect to the communications terms.

From 1901 to 1911 the legislature reviewed each year its demands for better communication facilities, and forwarded a series of resolutions to Ottawa complaining that the boats were no longer efficient, that commerce was hampered by high freight rates on them, and that since the Federal government was then involved in renewed railway building in the West it should bestow some of its attentions on the Island as well. The tunnel scheme was revived again, but Premier Haszard reported that "serious difficulties prevented it". The opposition pressed for action during this period, and when Robert Borden visited the Island in 1903 and 1908 he expressed concern over the state of communications, and promised his support. "I say to you," he said in 1908, "that I believe the Prince Edward Island tunnel would be built out of one year of Liberal stealings". He thus gave a hostage to fortune that would have to be redeemed when he came to power.

The Conservatives under Borden took office in Ottawa in October, 1911, and in Charlottetown under Mathieson, a few weeks later. The changes, and election promises, prompted renewed negotiations that led to far reaching improvements in 1912. "I beg to inform you", the Prime Minister advised one of the Province's Federal members, "that the government has decided to undertake the establishment of a Car Ferry Service between the Island and the Mainland". On January 9, 1913, contracts for ferry and terminals to the value of \$1,290,000 were awarded by federal order-in-council, but as the war effort slowed progress, the new services were not inaugurated until 1918. Meanwhile Premier Mathieson went to Ottawa in March, 1912, and presented a memorial to the Federal government that set out in elaborate details, not only the communications troubles, but fiscal needs as well. The cabinet was in a receptive mood after its recent victory and upon Mathieson's reminders of pre-election pledges. Consequently Finance Minister W. T. White sponsored in Parliament a bill to grant an extra annual subsidy of \$100,000 to the Island in view of the Province's peculiar difficulties in the federation. "The claims of Prince Edward Island", said White, "are not, in my judgment, legal. They proceed upon equit-

able grounds, upon grounds of fairness and justice as between this Dominion and the smallest of the provinces, the little sister as it were, of the Confederation." Mathieson heralded the arrangement in triumph and the communications issue rested tranquil for a time.

The car ferry *Prince Edward Island* commenced operations in 1918, but again the Dominion was slow in completing the necessary arrangements. It was not until 1927 that the railway gauge on the Island was finally altered to permit regular trains traffic from the mainland to points in the province. During the intervening years the gauges provided a subject for prolonged irritation. Meanwhile a significant forecast of things to come was voiced by the critics. What would happen to the Province if an accident should beset the one boat? Each year she went to dry dock either in Quebec or Saint John and no suitable replacement was provided, and it was noted that she invariably went to dry dock during the rush of the tourist season when efficient service was most needed. The Province thereupon demanded a second ferry. In 1920, Mr. MacKenzie King, then in opposition, advocated a second ferry and warned what would occur if anything happened to the one. In 1926 the Duncan Commission reviewed the facilities and suggested that improvement was urgent.

Altogether the ferry boat service is unsatisfactory . . . we recommend that the matter be gone into from the point of view of placing at the disposal of the island such satisfactory means of communication as will ensure as regular and complete a service as can reasonably be made.

Three years later the Federal government, acting upon the Commission's recommendation, studied both the ferry service and the possibilities of a tunnel. Engineers were uncertain about the under-water conditions for a tunnel, but the estimated cost of \$40,000,000 killed any enthusiasm for it. The government thereupon decided upon a new ferry and terminal and, in 1929, an appropriation of \$3,500,000 was provided. Meanwhile the old ferry was inspected and judged inadequate for the service. In 1931 the S.S. *Charlottetown* made its debut on the Strait, a large and beautiful ship, equipped with the latest in marine equipment. The old boat was consigned to the dock side, and like a sad relic lay neglected, save for a few runs during the annual voyage of the *Charlottetown* to dry dock.

At long last it seemed that the communications troubles were over.²

Ten years later, in June, 1941, and, as usual, at the beginning of the tourist rush, the *Charlottetown* was ordered to Saint John dry dock for overhauling. Off the coast of Nova Scotia she hit a reef, and, after lingering for thirty-two hours, went to the bottom of the sea. When word of the disaster reached the Island, the old boat returned and the "efficient" and "continuous" communications clause was revived once more to feature Dominion-Provincial relations for another six years.

The Island forthwith demanded a new steamer as the old was quite inadequate for the service, and since the Province would suffer greatly if anything happened to the old boat. But the war was in full progress, and the Federal government stressed the difficulty of finding a vessel of any kind. "If my hon. friend or anyone else," said Hon. J. L. Ralston in reply to criticism in the House of Commons, "can tell me of a boat tucked away in a bureau drawer somewhere, any boat which we can beg, borrow, or steal, we shall have it. The fact is that such a boat just does not exist at the present time." The issue prompted on the floor of the House a rare case of cabinet disagreement. The Minister of Transport was explaining the problem:

Mr. Gordon Graydon: Does the minister regard the present service as adequate?

Hon. J. E. Michaud (Minister of Transport): The present service, yes. I certainly regard the service of the *Prince Edward Island* as adequate for present needs.

Hon. J. L. Ralston (Minister of National Defence): . . . I wish to say here and now—this may not be an example of cabinet solidarity—that I do not regard the ferry service between Prince Edward Island and the mainland as adequate, having regard to what we should like to have in the way of modern facilities.

For six years the question of completing a new boat was a favorite topic of the local legislature and of one or two Island members in the House of Commons. Finally in the summer of 1947 a new vessel, the *Abegweit*, took over the service, and the old boat retired once more to the dock-side as a stand-by.

Yet the communications problem still remains, for there is still much doubt as to whether the service is "efficient" and

2. Meanwhile a private company in 1940 organized a service between Wood Islands, at the eastern end of the island, and Cariboo, near Pictou, which was subsidized by the Federal government. This service did not carry trains and was not involved in the long controversy with the Dominion over "efficient" and "continuous" communication.

"continuous". The *Abegweit* is judged by some experts as one of the finest ships of its kind in the world, and her regular crossings, winter and summer, fulfill many of the dreams of the Confederation statesmen. But the service is slow, and the boat is so crowded during the tourist and exporting season that travellers and cargo alike have often to wait many hours for service. There is still only one efficient boat, and the problem of loss or damage to her still remains. But the most serious objection is the cost of transporting automobiles and trucks across the strait. Some regard the service as part of the national highway system, an interprovincial link, the use of which should be free of charges. "Ferries," said Premier Jones, "should be a national highway under the terms upon which we entered Confederation." The Canadian National Railway operates the steamer for the Federal government, and, it is alleged, this precludes fair competition from trucks and buses in freight and passenger traffic. "We feel," said the Duncan Commission, "that by reason of its association with railway accounts, this service does not get the attention it should receive." "We as a railroad," wrote the Vice-President of the C.N.R. to an Island premier, "cannot afford to overlook the fact that in reality every automobile we handle on the ferry is in competition with our own rail route." Since the ferry tolls on trucks and their cargo are fixed charges on the transport of produce and livestock across a short distance, they hamper the participation of Island industry in mainland commerce.³ Therefore, the Province has pointed out, the service should not be the responsibility of the C.N.R., but a public utility in the hands of a government department, administered free of charge as a Federal compensation for geography, and designed as an inter-provincial connection that would be both "efficient" and "continuous" in terms of the Island's needs in the Canadian economy of to-day.

3. The Island, of course, benefits from the recommended twenty per cent reduction in freight rates to the Maritimes suggested by the Duncan Commission, and included in the Maritime Freight Rates Act of 1927.