

One Podcast to Start Your Day

Season 1, Episode 3: Newfoundland and Labrador

Alex Usher:

Hello and welcome everybody. This is the third edition of our podcast, one podcast to start your day. Today, a little bit of a different format, just one on one, me and Dale Kirby, who is professor of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador and formerly, in a former life, he was Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. That puts you in a really interesting position, doesn't it, Dale? I think you may be one of the only education pros that- education pros, write all the time about government. But you actually know government, right? Like, I think you may be one of the very few people who's got a foot in both worlds. I mean, Newfoundland and Labrador is an interesting province, right? I mean, it has gone through booms and busts. It's had times when it's had a lot of money to spend, and it's had times where it doesn't have a lot of money to spend. It's only got two institutions at the postsecondary level. And so that creates a different kind of dynamic with between government and institutions, you know, the, the one college and the one university. and so, you know, maybe tell us a little bit about how Newfoundland and Labrador is different from the rest of the country. I mean, you've got, it's a fairly unique history. It's a fairly unique policy making environment. What does the rest of the country need to know about colleges and universities in your province?

Dale Kirby:

Well, I mean, the question is how much time do you have? I mean, really, we, we reflect on our history a lot, or at least we should. Most of the European settlers came here in the 17th century. We were a colony British colony, then a self-governing dominion. So, we were a country I think we were the only country in the world to give up our sovereignty, which we did after the, or during the Great Depression, we had a bank crash here. The province sort of went in receivership for a period of time and then we had a referendum to join Canada in 1949. So it's, it's, people are surprised sometimes when I go to international conferences, I tell them that story. But I mean, Newfoundland was poor, right?-But arguably we were like a third world country. We used to refer to countries in that way, malnutrition, high child mortality rates. The economy revolved largely around the fishery, and there was a lot of forestry, logging, and so on. Very much manual labor jobs that didn't require a lot of advanced training and then some mining. The university here is much younger than universities in Upper Canada. You know, it was a two year college called Memorial University College from 1925 to the time of Confederation and there are some books that have been written that are very unflattering about the quality education that was even delivered there. We had some well, the vocational schools, so, you know, trades colleges didn't really come into existence until around the time of Confederation. The first public college was created around the time of Confederation. We had this system of district vocational schools that were opened; You know, so they're all around the province. Some have closed, but like many post-secondary institutions in the country, the college system has undergone a lot of consolidation and merger. So, they were district vocational schools. They became regional colleges with multiple campuses, and then finally a province-wide provincial college consisting of all of them. In fact, the funny thing most people wouldn't know is that for a year there, it was actually called the Provincial College, and they had a sort of a contest to decide what to name College of the North Atlantic.

Alex Usher:

Just so I'm getting the timing right. That's, that's early 1990s?

Dale Kirby:
Mid-1990s.

Alex Usher:
Yeah, mid-nineties. Okay.

Dale Kirby:
So, so we've had, you know, an, an interesting history, but the university's reasonably new, you know, in comparison to universities in Ontario and Nova Scotia even. And the college system has been merged and merged and merged, but is still relatively new. I mean, I guess colleges are newer than universities, generally speaking in the country, but that's sort of the history of how we got to the two institutions. There was one institution called the College of Fisheries that was merged, that became the Marine Institute, which later was merged into Memorial.

Alex Usher:
Yeah. Interesting. But I, so tell me though, cause it seems to me that the relationship between government and Memorial University in particular is a lot more... how can I put this... fraught? Government seems to think it can take a much larger role than other governments in the provinces. So I would say the, you know, the role, you mean it was, it's only what? 15 years ago, I guess, that you, that the province vetoed a university president that the university had chosen. How did that come to be and how is there any prospect of that changing?

Dale Kirby:
Well, on paper, the university is autonomous, right? In the statute, the Memorial University Act, it says in black and white that the authority to make all these decisions, fiduciary and so on, are vested in the Board of Regions. So that it's the board, not the government that makes those decisions. But I would say that sometimes the paper that that's printed on is of rather low quality because there has been quite a bit of political influence over time. There's, I mean, that affair with the the government of the time interfering with the presidential search process was one of the more extreme ones that I've experienced. But we had another one in the tuition-freeze policy, and it became much more of a provincial government policy priority instead of a university priority and that's another good example of the low quality of paper that, that statute sometimes is written out on. Even now you know, when the current government was talking about lifting the tuition fee freeze in recent years, they were saying at the time, "well, you know, we're going to allow the university to have more autonomy because it, you know, it should have more autonomy." And then almost as soon as the horse had left the barn, as soon as the tuition freeze was lifted, the government announced that it, well, it amended the University act to allow the auditor general to have more oversight and then has since basically started the Auditor General on what I would call a multi-year fishing expedition. And to quote from the press release, it says, "the auditor general is going to determine if significant investments are being managed with due regard to the economy, efficiency and effectiveness," whatever that means.

Alex Usher:
Right. let me ask you, I mean, one other thing that has really struck me about post-secondary education in Newfoundland over the last two decades, I remember it was when I was working at the Marine Institute and, and Glen Blackwood, who was the Vice President for Marine, obviously,

he was there for a very long time, I think 15 years in total. He told me that in his tenure at Marine, there had been 20 different presidents at the College of North Atlantic, if you included all the interims. Why do they have such trouble keeping hold of presidents?

Dale Kirby:

Well I'll tell you a funny story and a short one. About 30 years ago when I started down this road of wanting to be, you know, less of a student activist, less of a policy activist, and more of an academic in this area I was talking to a senior administrator in the system and that person said to me, "look, Dale, the university is arm's length and the college is elbows length." And that's really, really sums it up. I mean, the uni the government interferes with the working of the university and doubly so when it comes to the workings of the college. There's political intervention, and some would argue political interference. We've had instances where personality conflicts and turf battles end up with ministers, dispatching presidents by the Board of Governors based on some combination of advice from the senior bureaucracy within the ministry and then within the system. That's the best I can tell you. The college presidency wouldn't be a job that I would be applying for. Let me put it that, that way. I think they've damaged their brand somewhat by having that amount of churn when it comes to leadership. But we'll see what happens. I think one of the things that's unfortunate when it comes to the college is it has not really managed to capitalize on the international student recruitment in the same way that other college you know, non-university post-secondary institutions in Canada have managed to capitalize on international student recruitment. If you look at their enrollment numbers, there's certainly not like some we've seen at other institutions, including the one just down the road from them, Memorial, which has significant reliance on international students these days.

Alex Usher:

Right. Outside Newfoundland, I think one of the things that the province is known for is the fact that it has low tuition fees. And you, you've got a really interesting view on this, because of course you were, you were part of that. If I re if I remember correctly, you were part of that as a student leader in the province. So, you saw it from that perspective, and you've seen it from the perspective of a minister in a government that had to, that, you know, sustain that policy. And you've seen it from the perspective of a researcher who's looked at the effects on access and migration and that kind of stuff. What's the two minute version of what's been the effect of 20 years of, of a tuition freeze?

Dale Kirby:

Yeah, I mean I was very much on the vanguard of this as a student activist with the [Canadian Federation of Students] back in the nineties. That was a period of time where tuition was increasing, and grants were replaced with loans, student debt was going up. It was a very, very different situation than today. Inflation - by the time, they got around to getting rid of the tuition fee freeze inflation adjusted tuition for Newfoundlanders and Labrador was less than what it was for me when I attended there in the 1990s. So after 1999, the funding was sort of a portion by the provincial government separate from the grant and aid to cover the freeze for the university and the college. And there seemed to be an agreement, you know, with both parties on the freeze between institutions and government. But that all started to unravel just a few years ago when the province started cutting the university budget while still insisting on holding the freeze and it became sort of like a [inaudible] village. You know, for example, in 2016, the province earmarked \$4 million for the freeze and cut the overall operating grant by several times that amount. So they were, we were arguing that the freeze was covered. But, of course, that

was really a bit of a facade. I mean, what was the impact? Obviously students paid lower tuition fees, especially students here in Newfoundland and Labrador had much lower costs than students in the rest of the country. We saw some spikes there. I wrote a couple of papers about maritime students coming here in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick tuition fees were going up, so for a few years we had you know, a spike in enrollment from there. My friend who's a public policy commenter said, used to say that it was, the policy was cheap tuition for mainlanders. So people started to get a bit concerned that, and the Auditor General wrote a piece on this several years back about how you know, how much money was being, going towards subsidizing this freeze for individuals from out of the province. If you look at the overall investment in the university. So I mean that satisfied groups that are, I would say ideologically believe in this mantra that free or cheap tuition fees with no regard to the net cost of students, that that's sort of job well done. So I mean, that doesn't account for those who are left out of that narrow model of access, that bases access on this idea that tuition fees create access because that's not true. And we have to look at the overall costs. But if you wanna look at the the effect of the tuition fee freeze, come to our campus and look at the crumbling infrastructure, you know, there, that's just one example and that has impact on learning and it has the impact on the ability of faculty to conduct research, to have research output, to attract research funding. But more than that, I mean there were more for students, there were more non tuition fees. It was like, Hey, well freeze your tuition, but hey, look how much more you're going to pay in residence fees and meal plans and other service fees. We have larger classes and fewer course choices. We have more courses being taught by short term contractual faculty. On top of that, in my own faculty, it's been a policy for several years now since all of this started to unravel that we have to have three retirements of tenured faculty before we can advertise a new tenure track appointment. Another problem, we have less competitive staff salaries. So we have problems recruiting staff because we can't pay as much as other employers in the province. So that leads to delays and processes like admissions, anything that involves a chain of command. So that, that problem with having staff recruitment and staff shortages, it exists to this day and is probably worse than it was than the pandemic. So we have fewer staff to support programs ends up, we end up having slower processes, reduced student services, challenges to provide services. And again, on top of that, the crumbling infrastructure. So I don't have a really positive story to tell you about the tuition fee freeze. When I was a young student activist back in the nineties, I really didn't envision it ending up this way and I think in large part it was because the tuition freeze was not fully funded and you know, in the absence of that, we probably should have had an inflation adjusted tuition fee. In any case, we probably should have that now. I would argue most institutions should have that and look at other things that enable students to access post-secondary education beyond the cost of the tuition. But anyways, that's a long-winded answer and not an overly flattering one, but that's how, how I see it.

Alex Usher:

Now, of course, you talked about the amount of money that the government's been able to put into Memorial, as you say. And, and, and you know, there were a few years there where there was a lot of money going into Memorial. More recently there have been cuts, I think, I think the peak year was around 2013 or 14 when there was still oil price was high and exploration money was still coming in. So it's been about a decade of decline since then. Then of course you had what was called "the big reset" and that was a a new government in, or at least a new leader in, in, in a recently elected government. And you had you know, I think it was cuts of 20 or 25% across the board in, in post-secondary education that were meant to be brought in over five years. Tell us about that big reset and what did it, how has it affected Memorial? You know, I guess almost a year and a half on from that from that point.

Dale Kirby:

The province has serious fiscal problem in that we are overly reliant on the cost of a barrel of oil and we have fairly large public service and it's labor intensive, and we're spending a lot more than we're bringing in, and somebody's going to have to pay for that at some point. So the current Premier, you know, promised a lot of change when he was coming in, you know, big changes in fiscal policy, more prudence if you will. They appointed these outside individuals to provide advice to the premier and his cabinet on future directions for the province. But it's largely been shelved. I would say, say there's really been the big impacts we're going to see are going to be the result of not doing anything in response to that. I mean, there have been some aesthetic changes. Around the same time, they also had a review of post-secondary education. There was this report called "All Hands On Deck", and I keep saying it should have been called "Consider, Enhance and Explore" because it, that was the sort of thing, it was over 300 pages of everything but the kitchen sink and really didn't provide any strategic direction for post-secondary education. But I think these two processes are, were more about delaying doing anything about the fiscal problem than they were about coming up with solutions. Oftentimes you'll see governments doing this when they come into office instead of, and especially ones that are more left leaning or liberal, instead of acting on these overly generous things that they campaigned on during the election, they'll have a review or a task force or a panel of experts spend the next 8 to 12, 14 months you know, doing some intro-retrospection and then hoping that you know, the fiscal or something is different at the end. And of course it's not. So I, well, but

Alex Usher:

Hang on a sec, because in Newfoundland it is, right, because you, you have, so here you have a plan, we're going to cut so much out of government, we're going to get, you know, 25% reduction in the, in the funds to Kona and, and, and Memorial and then within 12 months there's the Muskrat Falls bailout and the price of oil goes back up, right? So maybe that was it, right? Maybe that was the, that was the, the DSX Machina that that we, we needed to

Dale Kirby:

On the post-secondary end, I mean, so I mean, I was a cabinet minister when the decision was made to do the post-secondary review, and I was the person who recommended it. It was evident that the Premier at the time was not interested in, I think the 2016 budget had some rollbacks and was met with a lot of opposition. And so the, the, our government was concerned about doing a whole lot of anything else in the reducing line. And so I think they were just a bit shocked about doing anything. So we had done a comprehensive review to k-to-12 in the Department of Education Early Childhood Development. I oversaw that. And so I said, well, why don't we do a review of post-secondary? If you're not going to act on the tuition issue now have someone from the outside come in and then, you know, prior to the next election you'll have something you can, you know, act on or not, but at least it buys some time if you don't want to you know, deal with the tuition fee issue. And that issue again, was this Potemkin Village of, you know, saying we're funding the freeze while, you know, cutting, you know, several times that amount from the base operating budget of the university. So, so that's what was done. But I mean, because I was the, a guy in the room, I can tell you that it was an exercise in delay. And I mean, and, and the, the tuition fee freeze issue was subsequently dealt with you know, because of that report and the Great Reset report was another report it, you know, bought into this idea obviously, and then they, the government was able to say, well, hey, look, we've got not one but two reports saying we should get rid of the freeze and the university thinks we should get rid of the freeze. So, hey, you know, who are we to say we should keep it Right? So it was again, this

exercise in washing your hands of any responsibility for making that decision. They did do something really positive, I think the province did, which was bringing an enhanced student aid model, increased grants for students from Newfoundland Labrador. So that was a good thing that came out of it for sure. But if you go and look at those reports, but especially the Great Reset one, Alex, very few things that were in that have been done and you know, there's, it will be another government that does a whole lot of anything that's in there because it doesn't look like there's a whole lot of interest.

Alex Usher:

So let me ask you one last question. I mean, the obvious, if you are a university in a province that has trouble making ends meet and there's a lot of opposition to domestic, large domestic tuition fee increases, surely the only, the the logical end game is a much larger international student presence because that's the swing money really in higher education in Canada. and I know Memorial has done a quite a job in attracting some of those students. What do you think the likelihood is that it, it starts heading down that, that route that given that you've got, it's the one province where young people the number of young people is actually decreasing right? it's increasing in the, in the other nine provinces, but it's, it's going down in Newfoundland. What do you think the odds are of Memorial going down the same route as say Cape Breton University, which you know, is now well over 50% international because that's the only way to keep the lights on and, and take, get rid of the buckets along those those corridors?

Dale Kirby:

Well, I'm from rural Newfoundland and you know, I, I'm the same as all the rest of those people from rural Newfoundland. I, I love it and I wish the what was happening there, it wasn't happening, but it is happening and it's happening all over the world, Alex, that people are increasingly moving to larger population centers and our industry has changed much here in the province. And our feeder population from the high schools are, is just going down, down, down more than, or less than half of what it was in the seventies. And so we have far fewer domestic local students to draw upon. there have been changes, you know, the tuition fee structure is not as at attractive for you know, other Canadian students to come here. Some all, you know, some will for a lengthy period of time. There's no doubt there'll be some of that. but I think there's difficult decisions that will be made down the road just because they will have to be made because what's, it's not going to be sustainable without some change. The chances of this happening, becoming you know, an institution much like CBU with all of this reliance or continued and more reliance on international students, I think that's entirely plausible, highly likely. The problem there, of course we learned during the pandemic because when it didn't happen the way that you know, it might have but I think we, we just learned or remembered how over reliant we are on international student recruitment to keep the lights on at the institution. and so it's, you know, it's quite possible that Memorial University will head in that direction. It's also quite possible that College of North Atlantic will have to start more aggressively looking to recruit because their campuses around the provinces our, our province is seeing similar challenges when it comes to recruiting a, you know, smaller and smaller pool of local high school graduates. But back to your main point, yes, I mean, we are going to continue to rely on and on international student recruitment because really there's not a lot of other options. So we'll have to do something and that something that's probably going to be international student recruitment. The problem there again, is there's a top to that as well, right? There's only so much you can charge and remain competitive with the rest of the, the country and other competitor nations in that top five or so.

Alex Usher:

Good stuff. Dale, thank you so much for your time. Really appreciate it.

Dale Kirby:

Thank you very much for inviting me. I apologize for being long winded, but I think that we're like that down here.