

Effective rural policies needed

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Public policy has failed to address the concerns of rural Canada, with minor exceptions. Time and again since 1945, successive federal governments ignored or neglected the basic needs of rural regions, applied unsuitable theories, and simply did not understand what rural Canada is.

Public sympathy for rural Canada does not translate into policies that are good for rural Canada. Rural Canada is more than a string of farming and fishing communities. It is more than a supplier of raw goods. It is closely connected to towns and cities. Rural populations contribute substantially to the national economy.

Rural Canada is home to one-third of Canadians. Cities can not survive without it. Massive amounts of goods and services flow to urban areas in addition to the traditional products of lumber, wheat and fish. The people and their jobs are as diverse and as modern as those in cities.

Unhappily, governments have believed that rural problems are solely resource based. Narrow thinking has generated two types of programs: get the land and ocean to produce more; and give people money in an attempt to make their lives more equal to others. Instead of addressing root problems, band-aid policies tried to close the standard-of-living gap. That didn't work.

As people continued to move to towns and cities, policy-makers ignored rural regions in order to promote urban industrial expansion. A wave of federal privatization has closed post offices, military bases and rail lines. Provinces have slashed funding to schools and hospitals. In all, rural Canadians feel battered and betrayed as jobs, services and subsidies have been lost.

A few exceptions exist. Programs with some success have a few things in common: rural communities took initiative and control of the programs; planning was done at the community level; and cooperation with other communities was sought. The goal of these programs was to develop expertise within the community, not to import it from outside the community. This is where the future lies.

These insights are based on a report by Dr. Brett Fairbairn entitled A Preliminary History of Rural Development Policy and Programmes in Canada, 1945-1995.



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