

The Incorporation of the University

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Red-breasted nuthatch or upside-down bird (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

For the past 30 years I have been fortunate to work at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador. I love the people and the place. During my time there have been lots of changes and transitions. Some for better, some for worse.

When I first arrived, our faculty consisted primarily of Brits, Yanks and Upper Canadians in about equal proportions. Some outstanding Newfoundland and Labrador faculty members were sprinkled among them. We now have a world-renown international faculty with a strong and stunning core of home-grown experts.

Thirty years ago, my graduate student lab group consisted of an excellent group of students from Canada, the US, South America, Europe and elsewhere. There were some Newfoundlanders among them. Today, my world-class group of students is made up mostly of Newfoundlanders

and Labradorians with some terrific Canadian and international scholars as well. Things change with maturity.

The role and responsibility of tenure

Besides the great opportunity of having this job, I also enjoy the privilege of tenure. That rather grand luxury carries with it some very important responsibility. In our society, only three professions are awarded tenure. They are judges, senators and University professors. They hold this privileged responsibility for important reasons, most basically so that they can take a longer term view, to look beyond the immediate benefits, costs and consequences of current activities, plans and perspectives.

Privileges like these carry responsibilities that have to be lived up to on a continual basis. Like all privileges they can be abused.

Innovation and ideas

I remember well when the E was put in NSRC, the Natural Sciences Research Council of Canada to make it NSERC - Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada. The new president of NSERC came to Memorial and addressed faculty in the engineering board room. He described innovation as putting new products on the table. I questioned his definition. I can't remember his answer because like his definition, his answer was unsatisfactory.

This is not a diatribe against engineering. I am keenly well aware of the excellent engineering research at Memorial – applied science has an important place at the University. And Engineers-Without-Borders have shown impressive global leadership in many realms.

Yet innovation at the University is about ideas. Some of those ideas result in new products. But perhaps more importantly many of those new ideas result in new knowledge, insights and perspectives. It is that knowledge and those perspectives and insights that help to shape our values and the directions of our society.

In many instances, ideational innovations have advanced understanding of the nature of things, and how humanity, the ecosystem and the earth evolved and how they are changing. In a societal context, many of those innovations have been used to overturn inequalities, to right injustices and to expose unfettered governmental restrictions. There are many examples here and around the world. The best thing we can work for with such a vitally essential and powerful social institution as a University is to maintain its independent integrity.

The homogenization of the University, government and industry

We have evolved into a paradigm of partnerships between government, the university and industry. There are many benefits. There are also costs.

My research program and students and colleagues working with me have been benefitted and supported by collaborations between the University and government and between the University and industry. Partnerships can be very beneficial.

Partnerships can also be stifling. For example, when being funded by government to carry out a particular project, it could be difficult to comment on the negative aspects of such a project or key issues that the project does not address. There are lots of examples. The same is true as well for industrial support. They are many examples.

The University and its responsibility for independent criticism

Of all the things that a University can offer a society, independent perspective and criticism are some of the most important. It won't always be negative, it won't always be right, but it must be unfettered.

In aspiring to its role as a place of independent thought, the University awards tenure. This responsibility is particularly important when those who

work for government are not allowed to speak about policies that may be having negative impacts on society. There are lots of examples. This also holds for industry. There are lots of examples.

University endowments

The motto of Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador is Provehito in altum. It means to venture forth into the deep or the unknown. Today as our University ventures forward, it is very richly endowed with industrial support. This support is of great benefit to the University and drives many initiatives and activities in engineering, earth sciences and business, as well as in many other disciplines.

Concurrent with these investments over the past couple of decades, we have witnessed a massive erosion of governmental support and responsibilities. This is particularly striking with respect to the environment and natural resources. Governments have in fact given so much away (they always deny this) that industry now supports government activities. And even though we put so much trust in money, this is not necessarily a fully beneficial relationship for society.

The corporation that is controlling and selling you drugs or oil today could be controlling and selling you water tomorrow. As we move boldly ahead today, we need to protect the role of independent criticism in our society, because it's those very tomorrows that all of us and especially those with tenure need to be concerned about.

Birds In the area and around the province

It's reassuring to know that the winter eiders and harlequin ducks are returning to Cape St. Mary's where 8 caribou including a calf are walking along the road (Tony Power). Some interesting bird sightings from Ramea. have come in from Richard Northcott. During mid-November, Richard observed a pied-billed grebe, 2 American coots and lots of dovebies flying along the west coast of Ramea.

A turkey vulture sighted in Cartwright, Labrador in early December made headlines throughout the province. An eagle foraging just off the Portugal Cove wharf drew much excited attention from those fortunate enough to be onlookers (Kathryn Welbourn).

Red-breasted nuthatches are common here being birds of the boreal forest. White-breasted nuthatches are common in the Maritime Provinces and New England, but before one made a recent visit to a feeder in St. Lawrence the bird had not been recorded on Newfoundland.

During November, western kingbirds showed up in the far east and the far west on the island. Chris Doran found one in his yard in Trepassey, while Derek White had one in his feeder at O'Reagan's in the Codroy Valley. Derek also had a visit from female Baltimore oriole.

A flock of about 100 stunning bohemian waxwings cleaning a Mountain ash of its brilliant red crop of dogberries made an early sunny morning in Northwest River Labrador even brighter in early December (Gioia Montevvecchi).

Merry Christmas and very best wishes for 2012

Our ever industrious and dedicated Editor of the Northeast Avalon Times, Kathryn Welbourn reminded me that writing a newspaper column is like having an ongoing conversation with your readers. Personally, I am simply grateful to have readers. And for those of you who read this and even those of you who don't, I wish you the very best for a warm Christmas and holiday season with family and friends, and for and for those of you who have neither - Godspeed and God bless. Onward to a prosperous, enriching and heroic 2012.

Contacts – mont@mun.ca, 895-2901 (H), 864-7673 (O), 693-5305 (C)