

Take Action: Rethinking New Brunswick's Flag

By: James Upham

Identify Your Concern

My concern is the provincial flag of New Brunswick. It is a lovely flag, to be sure. It reflects New Brunswick's proud maritime history; our connection to the Houses of Hanover and Windsor; and, of course, front and center we have a proud medieval-era sailing vessel representing the vital importance of the ship building industry to our early economy.

While it might be argued that most New Brunswickers no longer turn to the sea to make a living, or that our connections to the Royal Houses of Europe and England are tenuous at best, or that the last ship yard in New Brunswick closed at the end of the last century, I must state at the outset that I do not take issue with the presence of any of these on our flag. Each represents an important part of our provincial history; and, while that history, as presented, is by no means exhaustive, it is none the less germane. We are even fortunate enough to have an additional flag in le drapeau Acadien to help fill in some of the bits missed by our standard provincial standard.

What I do take issue with, however, is the physical orientation of the ship – that proud New Brunswick Ship of State – as it appears on our flag. In order to make the problem clear, you may wish to draw this out step by step:

1. Draw or trace the provincial flag, making sure to depict the ship as accurately as possible.
2. Take a moment to note the direction in which the ship is travelling, as demonstrated by the direction in which the ship's one sail is heading, and the direction in which the ship's three flags are blowing (one from the forecastle, another atop the mast, and a third flying from the aftercastle).
3. Draw a flag pole attached to the left side of the flag.
4. Take a moment to consider which way the wind must be blowing in order to cause the flag to fly in this direction, and then relish the juxtaposition of the direction of the flags depicted as flying on the ship.

The cold, hard fact of the matter is that the flags on the flag are going completely the wrong way. Not only that, but let us consider the direction in which the ship must be travelling – dead into the apparent wind. Now, this is a square-rigged ship carrying no visible fore-and-aft sails; it is, simply put, physically impossible for a ship of this sort (or any sailing ship, for that matter) to sail directly into the wind.

Our ship of state is depicted as heading, at all times, in an unreasonable, illogical, unsustainable direction. It's not a pretty thing to see in this economic climate. New Brunswick has had a hard row to hoe for years now; our industries have been in steady decline; our provincial debt has been mounting; our total population is on par with that of Mississauga,

Ontario, and continues to shrink. It is not, I think, unreasonable to suggest that we are in something of a pickle. Many New Brunswickers will tell you, if asked, that they hope that things will “turn around” for our province; to that end, I am suggesting that we literally turn our ship around.

Please understand that I am not suggesting that simply altering our provincial flag will be the catalyst for major or immediate improvements in our situation. I am, however, willing to argue that symbols matter, that the symbols on our provincial flag matter, and that symbolic change can also matter.

Research Your Concern

It is not always easy to contact governmental officials of agency spokespersons for interview; quite to the contrary, in my experience it has frequently been difficult to impossible. Fortunately, that is not at all the case when it comes to the Chief Herald of Canada, Claire Boudreau, of the Canadian Heraldic Authority. She was extremely helpful and personable, and has very nearly sold me on the idea of buying my own coat of arms.

In conversation with the Chief Herald I learned that all official emblems, from coats of arms, to municipal crests, military insignia, and provincial flags are the responsibility of the Canadian Heraldic Authority – at least in terms of their design. As far as actual ownership of the flag was concerned, however (and thus the issue of who would have the actual authority to alter any flag), she stated that it was a provincial matter. In fact, any alteration to the flag would require that a motion be passed by the Legislative Assembly, who would (should the motion pass) then request the Canadian Heraldic Authority to make the appropriate changes. I was also interested to learn that there has only been one other serious attempt to change a provincial flag in Canada, that being the flag of Saskatchewan, and that I was lucky to be making this attempt in New Brunswick, since some provincial flags were Royally mandated and any alteration would require the assent of the Privy Council in England.

As for the provenance of the flag itself, it was adopted by the Province of New Brunswick in 1965 and is based on the shield coat of arms granted to the province by Queen Victoria in 1868. This is important, because, as the Chief Herald explained, in the field of Heraldry, the direction of any object is relative to the position of the person holding the emblem. Thus, were I holding the flag or the coat of arms in front of me, the ship and the lion would appear to an observer to be moving toward my right – what Heralds refer to as the “Direction of Honor”, as opposed to the sinister, or left. It is nice to know the reason why the ship is depicted as travelling in the direction it is; I must admit, however, that I find this reason rather less than compelling when it blatantly ignores physical reality.

Find Out Who Supports You

I began testing the water among friends of mine, to see what sort of support there might be for an alteration to the provincial flag. I neglected to take into account, however, that my close friends do not necessarily make up a random sample of the provincial population. I received a good deal of positive feedback at the outset; but, as I asked more people, especially after I mentioned that it

would require an act of the provincial government, I began to suspect that many did not consider this to be a reasonable use of the government's time.

I can understand that point of view, but it did open up a number of questions for me regarding the nature of what a worthwhile issue might be. After all, many issues that seemed flippant the time they were first raised have had their importance borne out over time; for example, I'm sure the first person who inquired as to the number of lifeboats on the Titanic received his or her fair share of crooked stares. I also began to worry that my project would not be seen as socially acceptable, and that pressing too far at this juncture could even have serious negative repercussions. I am, after all, hoping to interview for teaching positions in the near future and I do not particularly like the idea of having someone begin an interview with the phrase "say, aren't you that crackpot?"

The recent events concerning the playing of Oh Canada in schools served to worry me further; perhaps, by suggesting that the flag be changed, I would be seen as unpatriotic and become the target of negative attention. These issues of conformity vs. non-conformity brought me back to some discussions we have had in class. I am in the fascinatingly uncomfortable position of being prevented from acting as an interested citizen with (I believe) a valid concern by social pressures to accept the status quo. Could someone officially decide not to hire me based on my opinions regarding the flag? No. Could someone unofficially decide not to hire me based on my opinions regarding the flag, and offer some other reason instead? Unfortunately, I suspect yes.

It was with this in mind that I finally decided against proceeding to what I had intended to be my next step: creating a Facebook group and making use of social media networks to extend the reach with which I could gauge support and begin to collect supporters. Time constraints were a very significant factor, as will be considered in the Take Action section; but a major barrier to my plan was fear of social repercussions.

Create a Plan

My plan, essentially, was very simple. Once I learned more about the reasoning behind the design of the flag and the means by which it could be altered I intended to create a Facebook group, Twitter account, and a free website outlining my argument that the flag should be changed. These would be supported by letters to the editors of the Telegraph Journal, the Moncton Times and Transcript, the Fredericton Daily Gleaner, L'Acadie Nouvelle, L'Etoile, and Here.

I would set up petitions – both an online petition to gauge popular support, and physical petitions to be submitted to the government – and hope that the idea went viral, to at least some degree. Hopefully, by this point, other media would have caught wind of the story and I would have an opportunity to reach a greater audience. Once I had enough popular support, I would have presented the petition to either my MLA or to the Premier, while requesting that supporters contact their MLAs as well.

Take Action

Aside from discussing this issue with some like-minded individuals, time constraints have prevented me from taking appreciable action with this project. There are two important external factors for this which will be considered below, but I would like first to discuss something more important.

I would like very much to be more active in my community. When I had the time I frequently undertook volunteer positions and community building tasks; I have always tried to be meaningfully engaged in improving my community in at least some capacity. I believe that a great number of Canadians feel the same way about their community involvement, and that a significant number of those Canadians experience the same level of frustration I do when unable to do so due simply to a lack of time. I have spent a good deal of time working with volunteers, and I have noticed that the great majority of those who volunteer are individuals who have at least some spare time, particularly students and retired persons.

As mentioned above, two very important external factors also made meaningful progress on this project difficult within the timeframe provided. For one, My MLA – with whom I would have liked to have had an opportunity to meet in order to discuss this project, and possibly gain some support – was on vacation for the majority of this semester. Similarly, even had my MLA been available, the Assembly has only sat for a total of 14 days this semester, to date. The schedule of the Legislature is set, meaning that had I succeeded in gaining some support from my MLA and popular opinion, the issue wouldn't be likely to receive any useful attention by government until the Fall session.

Evaluate the Plan

On the whole I believe my plan to be a sound one, and I hope to progress with it one day. Raising social awareness of the province's predicaments and involving New Brunswickers in an activity like this could do a great deal to increase our populations political connectivity and interest, possibly offering some very positive results. Were more time available, I have no doubt that at least some worthwhile outcome could have resulted – even if it only caused some people to pause, think about the state of affairs, and consider what they themselves might do about it.

Apply Your Learning

As far as applying the results of my project, I have come to the realisation that when dealing with deeply rooted, complex and difficult to change issues, time is absolutely key. Having the provincial flag changed would likely require several years rather than 10 weeks, if for no other reason than the regular speed of bureaucracy. As noted above, while the flag itself is relatively new, it is rooted in traditions that span epochs.

Having said that, I see no reason to abandon my position or stop trying to affect change. Under a slightly different set of circumstances – with a B contract, for example – this is a truly viable project.