

Who is Richard Florida and what is he telling us?

Published Thursday December 11th, 2008

D7 David Hawkins THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of three columns on The Creative Economy written by Couleur NB President David Hawkins. The next column will appear Thursday, Dec. 18.

In the summer of 1981 I visited the last independent manual telephone switchboard in the Maritimes. It belonged to the Cumberland Rural Telephone System and was the workplace for a team of eight operators in Northport, N.S. Those devoted women plugged and unplugged thick wires into a console to link some 40 subscribers and their hand-cranked telephones to the outside world, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Just 20 years later, I was exchanging messages on my Blackberry with correspondents literally around the world. The information was traveling at 186,000 miles a second -- wirelessly. What a transformation.

How we deal with the enormity of such change and the speed at which it occurs fascinates social theorist and economist Dr. Richard Florida.

Surprisingly to many, Richard Florida has visited New Brunswick twice this year. The first occasion was in February, at the invitation of Mount Allison University and the Town of Sackville. It acknowledged that community's designation as a Cultural Capital of Canada. The second was in October at the New Brunswick Innovation Foundation's R3 Gala in Saint John. That event celebrated the accomplishments of some of our province's top private sector researchers.

Each time, Dr. Florida spoke to a full house. Each time his message was received with great enthusiasm.

In a region that is only a generation away from hand-cranked telephones, I find that to be both exciting and amazing. It's hugely impressive that New Brunswick institutions should have the insight to invite him. It's perhaps even more impressive that a man whose presence is in demand around the world finds New Brunswick interesting enough to accept their invitations. Twice. In one year.

Florida, in case his name is unfamiliar to you, is Director of the Martin Prosperity Institute in the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. Previously, he taught at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh PA, at MIT, and at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. He has achieved superstar status in the fields of social theory and economic development over the past six years with the publication of three books: *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), *The Flight of the Creative Class* (2005), and *Who's Your City?* (2008).

In the first volume of this trilogy, Florida proposes that the world is experiencing a fundamental economic change. He argues that the industrial model of resource extraction, manufacturing and merchandising that has driven economic growth for the past two centuries, is being transformed by the influence of creativity and the emergence of a new "creative class." These people, professionals and technicians, artists and writers, researchers and inventors, designers and innovators, today make up about 30 per cent of the workforce and command more than 50 per cent of its income. He demonstrates that cities and regions, by investing in technology and culture and especially by promoting tolerance and diversity, will be more attractive to creative, innovative people. Communities that do so, he states, greatly enhance their prospects for growth and prosperity in the new creative economy.

In *The Flight of the Creative Class* he extends his analysis. He examines global competition to attract the creative class, noting that key regions around the world are challenging the former dominance of the United States in this regard. And he identifies Canada as one of these up-and-coming areas and has even pinpointed a specific New Brunswick city as a creative hotspot --- although he has yet to announce which one.

Who's Your City looks at the topic from the perspective of the individual. It explores how particular cities and regions attract different kinds of people and offers guidance to creative individuals on how to choose places where they are most likely to find personal and professional fulfillment.

Having spent my entire working life in the creative economy, I'm a keen supporter of what Richard Florida has to say.

Regardless of the sector in which you do business, creativity is most likely to be the key element that advances it. That's not to say that there aren't other important contributors, but creativity is at the heart and soul of progress.

In fact, if you stop to think about it, creativity sparked some of New Brunswick's greatest success stories long before the publication of *The Creative Class*. Would anyone deny the late K. C. Irving's status as a creative entrepreneur who visualized the potential for integrating a host of companies in complementary fields of production and distribution? Or, in the late 1950s, visualizing the enormous potential for a new oil refinery in Saint John? And initially, was it not a stroke of creative insight that catapulted McCain's onto the global stage as the world's largest producer and distributor of frozen French fries?

It was the exercise of creativity, too, that enabled Moncton to withstand the loss of thousands of jobs when Eaton's abandoned mail order shopping in 1976 and again when the CN Shops closed in the mid 1980s. The city's business community, even then, was blessed with a core group of innovative thinkers who recognized that Moncton's primary role as a regional distribution hub was over and saw other opportunities.

Electronic communication was fast becoming the new transportation, transforming the wired world into a global village. A future built around the creative use of communications technology would offer the best hope of avoiding the gloomy fate of "rust belt" communities across Atlantic Canada and New England. Today, Greater Moncton (not to mention other New Brunswick cities) is a dynamic, technologically

diverse, communications-savvy centre of economic strength in the Maritimes and a burgeoning centre of cultural awareness and diversity as well.

We still live in a province where the resources of land and sea will play important roles in our economy. The difference, though, if we truly want to build a prosperous future, is that success will depend more and more on our ability to imagine and actualize innovative ways of doing things. And for that, we need to attract, expand, retain, and promote our own creative class.

The two remaining articles in this series will look at the amazingly strong base of creative resources that already exists here and the wealth of opportunities we have to build upon it.

n David Hawkins is the President of CouleurNB, a strategic communications firm located in Moncton and an operating division of Halifax-based communications agency Colour. He has worked with clients in the field of economic development since the 1970s.