

New Brunswick should not be shunning global ambition

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I have observed over the years the bigger a firm gets in New Brunswick, the more of a target for criticism it becomes. This is not just a problem in our province, but it does seem to have even greater resonance here.

For the most part, we romanticize small business. The small firms are helmed by altruistic, hard-working, roll-up-the-sleeves entrepreneurial New Brunswickers who live alongside us in our local communities, drive trucks and drink Tim Hortons' coffee. By contrast, the big firms are headed by rapacious, "one per cent" millionaires always using their power to put it over on the rest of us.

This love of the small business filters into our economic development efforts. There are several dozen different government grant and loan programs if you are a small- to medium-sized business. If you are a small exporter or in a targeted industry, you will find bureaucrats at your door offering help with marketing, exporting, productivity, training and other needs.

The problem is that too few of the tens of thousands of small businesses in New Brunswick ever grow to a size where they can truly compete on a world scale. Even the province's largest home-grown firms, with the notable exception of McCain Foods, are small when compared to their global competitors.

This is why we should tip our hat to Cooke Aquaculture. It is rapidly becoming a major player in the global finfish aquaculture market.

Last week the firm announced it would be buying the Scottish subsidiary of Norway-based Marine Harvest in the Orkney and Shetland Islands for \$203 million.

From its humble beginnings as a small business in Blacks Harbour, after the acquisition Cooke Aquaculture will employ a total workforce of 2,500 people with global revenues of \$1 billion.

Through a series of organic expansions, targeted acquisitions and savvy distribution deals, Cooke has become a serious global competitor. One media report quotes the firm as saying the Marine Harvest acquisition "puts Cooke in a strong position to compete for business on a global scale".

This is music to my ears.

In addition to Scotland, Cooke Aquaculture has fish farming operations in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Maine, Chile and Spain. The firm is primarily known for its salmon farming but it also produces trout, sea bass and sea bream.

If we want a strong and dynamic economy that is generating enough taxes to sustain the public services and infrastructure we care about, we need more globally competitive firms that are exporting products and services far and wide.

This is essentially the primary economic challenge facing New Brunswick. Our economy doesn't generate enough investment and export-based business activity. This leads to not enough jobs and the chronic outward migration of our youth. It also results in more reliance on federal transfer payments to cover the cost of public services. It ends up with communities across the province fighting for their share of a stagnant economic pie instead of focusing on growing the size of the pie.

We either need to attract more globally competitive firms or we need more entrepreneurs like the Cooke family to step up to the plate. Ideally, we will see a combination of both.

I have no problem with the romantic image of the small business. It is true that small business owners play a very important role in our economy.

But we need a few of them to have the ambition to build large and globally competitive businesses. This will be critically important if we want New Brunswick to have a strong and vibrant economy in the years ahead.

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