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Our small communities shouldn't be poor and forgotten

Joyce Fairbairn

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In recent years, the national media have extensively discussed the rise in economic, political and cultural importance of large metropolitan centres or megacities.

Academics like Richard Florida, now at the University of Toronto, affirm that national prosperity is tied to the vibrancy of our urban centres and their "creative class." There are scenarios about cities overtaking provincial and national governments as the true loci of the nation's economic and political power.

Amid this cacophony of urban news, one could be forgiven for shrugging at the latest census data which show rural Canada's share of the national population falling below 20 per cent for the first time in our history.

Many of our political and intellectual leaders have done just that. Commenting on the census data, Globe and Mail columnist John Ibbitson wrote that rural Canada "has become so irrelevant demographically that it increasingly exists only in myth."

Somehow, for some observers, rural Canada just doesn't matter or, at least, should not matter as much as it does. There is a fatal flaw in this line of thinking. It assumes that urban Canada's prosperity is somehow detached from the fate of rural Canada.

It forgets that rural Canada is where we produce the vast agricultural, mineral, forestry, fisheries and energy wealth that pulses through our urban centres and is exported around the world. It does not mention the increasing desire among urban Canadians for a tangible connection with rural life.

It ignores 20 per cent of the population or six million people -- six million fellow citizens who should be as much a part of the national discussion as anyone else.

Two years ago, the standing Senate committee on agriculture and forestry, which I have the honour of chairing, initiated a study on rural poverty and rural decline in Canada.

Our final report, "Beyond Freefall: Halting Rural Poverty," was long overdue. No other federal parliamentary committee has previously written a report exclusively on rural poverty.

To address this, the committee recommends the creation of a Department of Rural Affairs whose minister would sit at cabinet and champion the concerns of rural citizens.

One of the first tasks of the new Department of Rural Affairs is to help move at least 10 per cent of the federal employees working in large urban centres to smaller towns in rural Canada, a practice that has been shown to create important economic benefits to destination communities and will save money in the long-term.

The evidence also showed that rural Canadians lag behind their urban counterparts on a

number of fronts, including educational attainment, health status, incomes and employment. To a large extent, these outcomes can be traced back to a relentless process of change and pressures of technology and global competition that have erased thousands of jobs in some of the mainstays of the rural economy, namely agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and mining.

Our nation needs to have a serious discussion about its forestry sector, a crucial part of the rural economy that has seen tens of thousands of good jobs disappear almost overnight with little discussion or action on the part of our political leadership.

We also think it is high time that urban Canadians recognize the value of all the ecological goods and services provided by farmers and rural landowners. In fishery-based communities, we urge the federal government to provide more financing for local wharves and harbours.

These actions will not, on their own, raise the profile of rural issues or address the needs of rural residents, especially the rural poor. To that end, the committee recommends that the federal government work with the provinces to devise a national anti-poverty strategy sensitive to important urban/rural differences like transportation challenges.

Rural communities have a responsibility and desire to be their own agents of change. To that end, we propose measures that would make it easier for rural small businesses to prosper and for volunteers, who play a vital role in rural Canada, to raise money.

So can we do it? Can we put rural Canada back on the agenda? Can we ensure that the next generation of rural poor is not ignored?

We can and we must. Our recommendations are an important step, but ultimately the place to begin is by recognizing that rural and urban residents need each other. This is not about us versus them, but about how we can come together to ensure a more prosperous future for all.

Senator Joyce Fairbairn chairs the Senate committee on agriculture and forestry. Its report is at: www.parl.gc.ca/39/2/parlbus/

[commbus/senate/Com-e/agri-e/](#)

[rep-e/rep09jun08-e.pdf](#)

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