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This study examines the disruptive effects of the coronavirus pandemic through the lens of family, business, and community as Canada's smallest province reopened to more normalized activity in the summer of 2022 after more than two years under one of Canada's (and the world's) strictest Covid-19 policies. Using a qualitative case study methodology including document review, participant observation and open-ended interviews to gain retrospective accounts of life during the pandemic, this fieldwork study focuses on nuclear and extended family interactions, business activity particularly in tourism which caters to people from off-Island and which comprises one of the largest industry sectors, and the re-imagining of community during and after Covid. In doing so, it explores the interconnections between identity, public health and economic activity in Canada's smallest province.

Keywords: Covid-19, coronavirus, social impact, Prince Edward Island, economy, tourism, family, community, identity, case study methodology

1. Introduction

I was born in Toronto and lived there for the first 18 months of my life, after which my parents' interest in exploring central Canada waned and they returned to their home province of Prince Edward Island on the east coast along with many of their friends who had made the same decision to move away but who, like them, had discovered that the grass is not always greener elsewhere. My parents' decision first to leave PEI and then to return after only 18 months meant that before I was even able to hold a conversation, I had already been branded for life as someone "from away". Never mind that I could not remember a moment of my "pre-PEI" life or that, apparently, I had even been conceived on PEI. I could never become a true "Islander." Thus, I failed to qualify as a full resident of the place where I grew up and the only place I knew as home.

Although this traditional definition of an "Islander" is usually presented in a light-hearted manner, when I made certain life choices such as leaving Prince Edward Island for education and work, I discovered that those decisions constituted *prima facie* evidence of the fact that I was not a *true* Islander, for if I was a *true* Islander, I would never have left. Further, in high school and as a young adult, when my attitudes or opinions did not coincide with others, they were often met with the rejoinder: "I *knew* it! I knew that you were not a *true* Islander!" For on PEI, there are only two groups of people on earth: "Islanders" and those "from away." And for a province with only 160,000



people, the even smaller subset of *true* Islanders is a very select group indeed.

Visitors to PEI with opinions come to know this very quickly. They are welcomed, feted, and truly appreciated for bringing a breath of fresh air to what sometimes can be a rather staid culture, but the minute they offer suggestions or recommendations about how things *should* be, they are likely to be shown the door, figuratively if not literally. The definition of Islander is thus important because it gives voice to some while shutting out the voices of others. Though PEI is now connected to the mainland by the 9 km long Confederation Bridge, prominent local historian David Weale (2010) relates the finer points of defining an Islander in the days before the bridge's construction in 1997 when a 90-minute ferry ride was required. What would happen if an Islander gave birth on the ferry? Would the child be considered an Islander? According to Weale, the answer depended upon whom you asked. Many would consider the line demarking the midpoint between PEI and the mainland to be the crucial factor: On what side of the line was the child born? Others might consider the direction the ferry was traveling: Was it towards PEI or away from it? Still others, who considered these definitions to be weak and unsatisfactory, required nothing less than the strict criterion that one cannot ever be a true Islander unless one is born above the high-water mark on the shoreline. So, in order to satisfy this definition, if some unfortunate expectant mother happened to be splashing among the waves at Cavendish Beach or strolling along the vast red sandbars on the south shore at low tide and have labor pains, it would be imperative to scramble to the shore and up the sand dunes to ensure that the imminent offspring would be born on the Island and not have "come from away".

I am unsure to what extent this folklore was ever considered fact. However, it does reflect a well-known and generally accepted view of the dichotomous nature of PEI residents, even among those with Anglo-Saxon ancestry like myself. It must be said that life for non-Islanders on the Gentle Island as it is sometimes called was for the most part quite pleasant, with rolling hills, beautiful shores and a relaxed bucolic existence based on farming, fishing and tourism. However, when times became tough, when an important tie-breaker was needed to settle an argument, or when the consequences were serious, the "Islander" card could be played and the non-Islander would always lose out, as their voice was always less important. In life-or-death situations, it was important to know who was a *true* Islander and who was not. The Covid pandemic has been one of those times.

2. Methodology

A small island is a microcosm of broader socioeconomic forces that are often more difficult to identify in a larger population. A small island is thus a case, a bounded entity, in which otherwise intractable factors may be discernable. This case study of Prince Edward Island follows the qualitative, interpretive case study methodology of Stake (1995, 2010) as well as the small island focus of Webster-Stahel (2018), who examines the nexus between the ecosystem and human health on the small island of Dominica. The present study, conducted from June-September 2022 in order to capture the entire



peak tourism season and the effects on both businesses and visitors, employed participant observation, a method through which the researcher gains insight not by achieving distance but by observing people's actions while participating in community activities as a member. Other methodological strategies adopted in this study include document review and informal open-ended interviews, otherwise known as conversation.

3. Covid-19 on Prince Edward Island in 2022

By May 10, 2022 (The Guardian, Six Covid-19 deaths), the cumulative coronavirus case count on Prince Edward Island since the beginning of the pandemic stood at 36,332, with six deaths during the week bringing the total death count to 32. With 1,273 active cases and an average of 128 new cases per day during the previous week, this was considerably higher than earlier in the year, when the cumulative case count was less than one thousand and the death count zero. The reason for the sudden rise in cases and deaths was the arrival of the omicron variant, a game-changer for PEI, laying bare the fundamental weakness of the government's Covid policy that until that point had been extremely successful. The omicron variant easily broke through systems designed to prevent people from carrying the virus across interprovincial barriers, a strategy that had been successful for the PEI government for so long.

However, it is axiomatic that when there is movement of people, the movement of diseases cannot be prevented, no matter how hard one tries to prevent infected people from entering through testing, quarantine, tracking and other measures. Nonetheless, while the case numbers were indeed exploding in the spring of 2022, the high rate of vaccination on PEI and the apparent weakness of the omicron variant itself meant that the burgeoning case load was not unduly burdening the health care system. This, together with pressure from tourism businesses that had seen their revenues plummet for two years, prompted the government to change its policy and completely relax its Covid restrictions, re-opening the province to off-Island visitors for the 2022 summer season.

4. Effect on Family

While Prince Edward Islanders are mostly an accommodating lot and have been generally observant of Covid mandates, the severity of the pandemic restrictions limited contact even among siblings and parents, so Islanders in 2022 eagerly embraced the opportunity to return to familiar activities without such hindrances as capacity limits or mask requirements. On June 30, the day before the July 1 Canada Day celebrations, PEI Chief Health Officer Dr. Heather Morrison announced on *Compass*, the local CBC television news program, that the mandate to wear a mask in social situations had been lifted in most situations (it would remain in place in high-risk situations such as in long-term care homes for at least another two weeks, and self-isolation would still be required of anyone presenting Covid symptoms). This allowed family picnics and get-togethers to begin again, not to mention weddings and funerals, many of which had been postponed



indefinitely.

One of the ways of building and maintaining family connections is through family reunions, all of which had been suspended due to Covid protocols. In 2020, my own matrilineal line of the family tree had planned to hold a family reunion celebrating the 200th Anniversary of its arrival on Prince Edward Island. Already a year in planning and with hundreds of guests expected to arrive from throughout North America and beyond, the reunion was postponed and has yet to be rescheduled. Many other families, however, were finally able to hold reunions in 2022 that had been postponed for two years.

One of these was a DeWolfe family reunion held in Pictou, Nova Scotia within view of Prince Edward Island across the Northumberland Strait. Forty-six of the 111 family members attended, ranging in age from two months to 80 years. For Doreen (née DeWolfe) Juurlink, the opportunity to reconnect with extended family was much more than merely sharing memories but was equally about creating new ones: “It was a gathering like no other. We laughed, we cried and spent three days sharing stories of mom and dad [both now deceased] and their eight children and what it was like growing up in Dartmouth in the 1950s and 1960s.... At the bonfire, we saw shooting stars that we want to believe were mom and dad watching over us and smiling.... What an amazing time we had. It ended too quickly, and we returned to Ontario with memories to cherish” (Rossiter, August 30, 2022). Some family reunions are less formal, such as for Ontario resident Sarah Jones, whose husband is from western PEI. The relaxing of Covid travel restrictions allowed them to visit for the first time in three years, giving her the opportunity to introduce her youngest child to PEI: “My daughter touched the ocean for the first time, and my son showed her how to make sandcastles” (Rossiter, August 30, 2022).

One might say that for families, the summer of 2022 was cathartic. Even something as simple as a birthday party could now be held without needing to consider capacity limits and restrictions on who could be invited. During the peak of the lockdown in 2020, each household was permitted to include only a maximum of five people from one other household in its “bubble”. In the summer of 2022, however, such restrictions were no longer required. Other more somber events were also finally able to be arranged after some delay. One of the most unfortunate situations regarding Covid is that travel restrictions prevented many individuals from visiting family members who were ill. Many were unable to say their last goodbyes. Passings were recognized with informal ceremonies until more elaborate celebration of life ceremonies with the extended family could be held, many of those occurring in 2022.

The inability of people to meet and interact with their families, together with the additional time that people were spending at home, contributed to an increased interest in an already popular pastime: genealogy. While genealogy has long been popular on PEI, it received newfound interest during Covid which continues today, perhaps because of a greater need for connectedness in a post-Covid world. Genealogy also has the advantage of requiring people to frequently confer with relatives and to travel in search of information (excuses to socialize, in other words), both of which were restricted during the depths of the pandemic. In the summer of 2022, my own family traveled to Souris, PEI,



on a quest to discover more about a Joseph H. Lane, a paternal ancestor who we had learned was a sailor from Souris who had drowned at sea when his ship, the Abana, had sunk with no survivors on a trip from Summerside, PEI, to Pictou, Nova Scotia. We had heard the story and were looking for corroborating evidence. Armed with pages of the family tree, we searched four cemeteries from Souris to South Lake towards the eastern tip of the province but had little to show for it. We did find a gravestone at the tiny but picturesque St. Alban's church cemetery that provided evidence of a link between the Lane and Poole families. But while we did find gravestones for several members of the Poole family at other cemeteries, there was no further evidence of a Lane. There were also records in our prior research suggesting that the Lane family name had several versions, including McLane and MacLean, which made the search even more difficult and us uncertain as to what exactly we were looking for or would find. Finally, as we were about to leave Souris, we learned at the local museum about a Fisherman's Memorial on the waterfront that had been recently refurbished. On it, among memorials to other fishermen, we found one for Joseph H. Lane who had indeed drowned at sea when his ship sank in 1914.

Without a doubt, family and friends with whom one is closest are those who help sustain you in difficult times. However, during the Covid pandemic, while it was still possible to communicate via telephone or videoconference, face-to-face meetings were restricted and indeed impossible for family members who lived abroad. After two years of limitations even for informal family gatherings, the relaxation of restrictions in 2022 was most welcome. Genealogy also helped people reconnect by providing an excuse to travel in search of details about family ancestry that might have seemed less important and thus neglected in the past.

5. Effect on Business, Industry and Government

"Whatever the specifics of the new normal, the tourism sector will be very different in 2022 from what it was in 2019. This brings challenges for the sector, but also opportunities..." PEI Tourism Strategy 2022-23

After a 2019 season that broke all records, tourism establishments were looking forward to an even better 2020 season, but Covid changed that. Due to the closing of international and provincial borders, tourism providers catering to out-of-province guests lost their entire market. While the government encouraged these establishments to consider the local PEI market and asked PEI residents to go on "staycations" within the province, many seasonal restaurants and accommodations providers simply did not open.

For tourism providers catering to an upscale off-Island market, shifting their strategy to focus only on PEI residents was a considerable challenge. For chef Michael Smith, whose noted restaurant at his Inn at Bay Fortune provides a five-hour farm-to-table "immersive" dining experience that cannot adequately be described in the traditional language of a six-course meal, what could possibly be done to salvage the 2020 season? The \$195 per person price for fine dining is far higher than what most PEI residents



would even consider paying for a meal. After some thought, and given the additional social distancing restrictions that prevented in-person dining throughout PEI which contributed to many restaurants closing, Chef Smith decided to shift away from multi-course meals and instead create lunch baskets of prepared food for Island residents (personal communication, July 26, 2022). He was adamant that he would keep his core staff employed, and he felt that perhaps a lower price point for a small taste of fine dining might be an attractive proposition for Islanders. But a remaining challenge was how to deliver these baskets and still satisfy the six-foot social distancing requirement. His solution was to use an online no-touch payment system and have customers pick up the basket on site from a mechanical arm Smith constructed that would swing the food to customers from a comfortable distance. Culinary ingenuity met performance art, all in the interest of providing guests with a memorable dining experience.

While Michael Smith, a celebrity PEI chef known throughout Canada, is clearly entrepreneurial by nature, these are the types of decisions that all tourism providers on PEI were forced to make in 2020. Would it be better to try to salvage some portion of the season or instead close up shop and wait until some unknown point in the future when it would again be safe and worthwhile to re-open? Many tourism establishments decided not to open in 2020, and many of those that did open, like the Inn at Bay Fortune, did so not primarily in search of revenue but instead to ensure that their employees would obtain at least some income during those uncertain times (personal communication, July 26, 2022). As it turned out, the difficulties experienced by businesses in hiring new staff to re-open in 2022 showed the benefits of this humane and longer-term view. However, when the initial decision was made in 2020, the common belief was that the yet-to-be-determined point in the future at which life would return to normal would be no further than the 2021 season. That the Covid restrictions continued into 2021 was thus quite unexpected, and even more troublesome was that Covid had now become an existential threat for businesses: if closed for another season, would they ever re-open?

Yet, well into 2021, restrictions still had not been lifted and prospects for the 2021 tourist season were dim. On PEI, the summers are short and so the peak tourist season consists of only about eight weeks in July and August, with planning for the season beginning early in the new year. However, by early 2021, nothing had changed in terms of Covid health policy or the epidemiological facts underlying it. It seemed that 2021 would be another disaster just like 2020 had been. Facing pressure from businesses and the public, the PEI Department of Health announced a partial relaxation of restrictions that would begin on August 8 and which would allow PEI to receive off-Island visitors from elsewhere in Canada (but not international visitors, as border restrictions had not yet been lifted by the federal government) which allowed the latter portion of the 2021 season to be salvaged, at least to those businesses who served a Canadian clientele. Restrictions were further relaxed in 2022, with federal limits lifted at international borders and no testing conducted at the entrance points to the province, allowing the tourism industry to enter 2022 collectively hoping that the season would return to “normal,” or at least something approximating the pre-Covid era.

Chef Smith, however, does not seem to dwell on the past, as the operation is always



evolving, looking to the future. In 2022, the dining experience included immersive forest trails, mushroom patch, apple orchard, free-range hens to provide guests with farm-fresh eggs for breakfast, cookbook, observation deck and fire garden. As one guest told me, it is “an experience of a lifetime.” Staff also explained that there is always something new and exciting being developed on the premises that makes the restaurant/farm/inn an interesting place to work. In 2021, a vegetable testing program was established to determine what varieties and growing conditions were best for specific vegetables on PEI. Tomatoes were tested in 2021 and resulted in a reduction in planting varieties from about sixty that were tested to eight winners that will continue to be grown on the farm. Lettuce was the focus vegetable of 2022. Further, in 2022, an experimental chef’s garden was introduced to grow exotic vegetables that would challenge the cooking staff to assess and decide within one hour how the vegetable harvested that day might be added to the evening meal. Also in 2022, a pilot project was introduced to create the restaurant’s own salt from natural water drawn from Fortune Bay, and staff is discussing how in 2023 they might shift the process from heat over firewood cut from trees on the property to a less labor-intensive solar process (personal communication, July 26, 2022). The operation is constantly evolving and looking into the future, providing new experiences not only for diners but also for employees to challenge them and maintain their interest. This entrepreneurial and forward-looking approach might provide a roadmap for other tourism establishments on PEI to be quick on their feet and thus well-equipped to handle unexpected events in the future.

There is, of course, industry and government support available for businesses as they attempt to navigate this new normal. As tourism fully re-opened on PEI in 2022, in addition to the traditional tools to support tourism start-ups and business development provided by government, the industry strategically focused on a fourteen-point plan to stimulate demand in the short term by targeting markets that could immediately support a rapid recovery from Covid-19 (Tourism PEI, 2022a) while also creating a ten-point strategy to grow revenues in the next two years (Tourism PEI, 2022b). The short-term goals included eliminating bottlenecks in transportation and labor, improving collaboration among stakeholders, sharing market and resident sentiment research, developing new and existing air routes, protecting operators and developing resiliency to ensure tourism supply, and encouraging private-sector investment in festivals and events. For the two-year horizon, initiatives included improving tech platforms, developing air access, reviewing the current regional tourism association model, developing hiking and biking trails, identifying and developing experiential tourism needs, attracting more private-sector initiatives in tourism, and enhancing PEI as a premiere events and conference destination (Tourism PEI, 2022a, 2022b).

Even industry initiatives, however, are subject to government policy, and while industry groups have an important role to play in the return to normal, businesses have been restricted by government Covid policies that created the conditions faced by businesses the past two years. Tourism has been one of the hardest hit industries not only on PEI but throughout Canada and the world. While the provincial government permitted visitations to people from outside of the Atlantic region in the latter half of the summer of



2021, federal government policies prevented the province from allowing international guests to visit, including cruise ship passengers who in recent years have contributed meaningfully to visitations. Not surprisingly, then, the partial relaxation of border controls in 2022 allowing international visitors to enter PEI for the first time in three years and cruise ships to dock for the first time since 2019 created excitement in the tourism industry.

The widespread opening to tourism in 2022 without any quarantine restrictions or testing requirements upon arrival was not unique to Canada but followed a path like that of many countries, though some countries relaxed restrictions more quickly than others. Similarly, the provincial government of PEI apparently found in 2022 that the substantial commercial benefits of relaxing restrictions outweighed the now more muted costs, for while the omicron variant had brought about community spread, its impact was less severe, leading to fewer hospitalizations or additional stresses upon an overburdened health care system. While testing remained available in the summer of 2022 to those who exhibited symptoms and isolation continued to be mandatory for those who tested positive (though few were now tested), there were few restrictions on the activities of residents or visitors. For example, masks were still recommended but wearing masks was no longer mandatory, so very few people were observed wearing masks in 2022. While in conversation some residents expressed some unease about this situation, the relaxed policy generally seems to have been embraced with open arms.

With the relaxing of travel restrictions, the focus for government in 2022 pivoted from public safety to promoting business development. With the business climate still very uncertain, there remained an apprehension about what types of businesses to support, not only in tourism but also more generally. Tina Dickieson, Executive Director of the Community Business Development Corporation (CBDC) for Central P.E.I., noted that Covid has made the substantial challenges already faced by small businesses even more restrictive (personal communication, August 14, 2022). New entrepreneurs with a good idea but untested business plan have always had difficulty obtaining financing, with many digging into personal funds to get their idea off the ground. While the CBDC aims to support these entrepreneurs by arranging customized financing not normally available from traditional sources, the Covid pandemic has raised the level of uncertainty not only about the business plan itself but also the market opportunity. When will the market stabilize and what will that market look like when it does stabilize? What is the 'new normal' and will it be large enough to support the business? These are the additional questions that the CBDC must now consider when deciding whether to support a small business in the new post-Covid era.

Infrastructure Support

On the other hand, while appropriately targeting business development may remain a challenge, there are unambiguous needs for infrastructure to support Island businesses and their employees, including transportation and broadband internet in rural areas and housing in urban centers. Since these are also needed by PEI residents, one might hope that this alignment of policy goals means that the prospect of these being addressed is



promising. Another transportation challenge for PEI tourism businesses, though, is developing easier access for visitors to arrive on PEI. Additionally, while providing adequate healthcare is a perennial challenge throughout PEI for Islanders and visitors alike due to a long-running shortage of family doctors and nurses, the severity of the shortage appears to be rising in intensity.

One feature of the 2022 tourist season was a substantial pent-up demand (or so-called “revenge travel”) from long-time annual visitors who had not been able to visit PEI for two years, including Americans who had been limited by federal government restrictions. These long-term regular visitors will continue to find a way to reach PEI, but because access is not always easy due to limited flights, reaching out to new markets remains a challenge. Improving air links is an item on both the short-term and medium-term tourism industry priority lists mentioned above. One form of improving access is to develop more direct point-to-point flights to Charlottetown because the hub-and-spoke system prevalent among legacy carriers in North America such as Air Canada causes many flights to PEI to be routed through the regional hub of Halifax. In the past, the provincial government encouraged seasonal direct flights between PEI and urban centers such as Boston and Chicago by offering subsidies or guaranteeing revenues.

However, with the widely-reported stress experienced throughout the air travel industry in the summer of 2022, most notably at Pearson International in Toronto which is Canada’s busiest airport, the immediate concern became protecting existing flights rather than working to develop new links to support tourism markets further away. On television news programs throughout the last week of June in 2022, stories were prevalent about flight cancellations and delays in Canada and the United States, with more than 50% of flights delayed at some airports. On June 30, 2022, Air Canada announced that as a preventive measure, it would cancel 154 flights per day in July and August in order to better manage the numbers of travelers that (apparently) had far exceeded expectations. Although the action was similar to that taken by most North American airlines at that time, Air Canada seemed to be experiencing a “record of flight cancellations and delays among some of the worst on record in the world” (MacGregor, 2022, July 1).

Another immediate concern for the tourism industry on PEI in the summer of 2022 was the shortage of available rental cars which, in a rural province, are practically essential for visitors arriving by air. Apparently due to a perfect storm of conditions including the reduction of staff during Covid and difficulty rehiring, sales of assets during the pandemic to reduce expenses, supply-chain shortages in the auto industry that affected both the new and used car markets, and a surprisingly rapid resurgence in travel, car rental agencies reported that even with skyrocketing rental car prices on Prince Edward Island, back orders of new cars made it difficult to access sufficient supply, and so they simply did not have enough cars to rent. Ozlem Toprak, owner of P. E.I. Car Rental, stated that “We ordered 50 vehicles, but we got only five” (McEachern, 2022, June 27). In addition to the difficulty of finding cars to rent at any price, visitors also faced a price of gasoline which, at a peak of C\$2.40/litre in June 2022, had approximately doubled from three years earlier. Thus, while travelers embraced the removal of Covid



restrictions, travel businesses seemed to be insufficiently prepared for this event.

This shortage of local transportation generated several responses. One was the arrival of Turo, an Airbnb-type vehicle-sharing business which some entrepreneurial Islanders embraced, including Gerald Cañada who offered four cars on the platform including two that he purchased for this specific purpose and who in June 2022 was fully booked throughout the tourist season (McEachern, 2022, June 27). Another response was a plan by the PEI government to use a fleet of EV school buses they had recently purchased so that rural public transit could be provided along the north shore, the longest-established tourism destination on the island (The Guardian, 2022, June 3). This latter decision follows a common Canadian pattern of monetizing educational assets such as university dorm rooms and transportation equipment that are not being used for their primary purpose in the summer.

As with Covid worldwide, the pandemic has caused people's daily lives to change and so business needs to change to accommodate. In addition to insufficient public transportation, another infrastructure problem that was well-known prior to Covid was inadequate broadband internet. Although what seems like an endless succession of government programs have aimed to provide 100% of Islanders with broadband internet for some time, it remains a challenge in the most rural areas of PEI, and the effects are felt by visitors and Islanders alike. With more people working from home, the location of that home has become crucial, and as many of PEI's most-loved and scenic sites are in remote rural areas, the lack of acceptable internet service has concerned tourism businesses in remote areas. Extending an earlier March 2020 announcement of shared federal/provincial funding for broadband enhancement, Gudie Hutchins, the federal Minister of Rural Economic Development, announced a more expedited timeline to provide 95% of PEI households with broadband internet by the end of 2022 and to the remaining 5% of residents constituting "the last mile" by 2025 due to the greater "urgency around broadband internet" (Neatby, 2022, June 3).

Housing

Anyone traveling throughout Prince Edward Island in the summer of 2022 would have been well aware of the bustling housing boom on PEI, most notably cottages in scenic rural seaside areas. Meanwhile, however, unprecedented population growth has overwhelmed housing development in Charlottetown, leading to a housing "crisis," along with long-running concerns about healthcare (both of which continue in 2023). During a forum discussing the problem, Green MLA Trish Altass raised the concern about the slower growth in housing and healthcare since 2017 while the population has simultaneously soared: "We can't look at how we can grow our population without looking at where are people going to live. Do we have adequate health care? What will be different about the new strategy that will take into account all of the variables that are necessary to understand and build on to effectively and safely grow a population that will be a benefit to everybody?" (Neatby, Sept. 7, 2022). A government representative admitted that because of silos between government departments that prevent sharing of information and coordination of strategies, "It probably was a bit disconnected," but that PEI is



developing a planning tool to better integrate housing and population growth and “get a better understanding of maybe when investments should be made”. Economic growth minister Bloyce Thompson stated that “We’ll make sure that our immigration goes along with our housing. It has to be equal – we can’t put one in front of the other” (Neatby, September 7, 2022). Nonetheless, in the immediate term, the extent of the problem in 2022 reached such heights that the University of Prince Edward Island made the unprecedented step of sending a message to already accepted international students to stay at home and not come to PEI if they had not already arranged their accommodation due to the lack of housing (Neatby, 2022, September 7).

Labor Market

Another, perhaps surprising, challenge on Prince Edward Island in 2022 was a shortage of labor. Heading into the 2022 summer season, even with international visitations still reduced by as much as 44% from the peak in 2019 (Zucker, 2022), PEI tourism businesses were expecting a bumper season – so much so that they were concerned that they may not have enough staff. Many businesses were needing to train new staff, as many long-time workers had left the industry for other more stable jobs due to the uncertainty of tourism during the pandemic (Stewart, 2022, May 6). So, even with the prospect of a successful season, there remained an apprehension among businesses about whether and, if so, how they could meet the needs of visitors. Though cautiously optimistic that “this will be the best summer in three years,” with expected visitors of 1.2 million in 2022 compared with 1.6 million in 2019, 0.53 million in 2020 and 0.65 million in 2021 (Stewart, 2022), if the last two years had taught businesses anything, it was that there may be surprises down the road, so staffing challenges and the potential for additional Covid surprises remained top of mind. Nonetheless, 2022 brought an optimism of perhaps not yet a normalization in visitations but at least visitations of more than twice as much as the pandemic lows which had seen declines from the peak of almost 70 per cent.

Nonetheless, the impact of Covid continued to cause employers challenges in managing seasonal staffing, especially in tourism and construction, because of people moving away, deciding to change careers, returning to university, or retiring early. According to Roger Godfrey, CEO of the Greater Charlottetown Chamber of Commerce, even though employers were offering perks such as higher wages and flexible hours to attract and retain workers, “many owners are coming up empty-handed. They’re working the front lines themselves, they’re doing whatever they have to in order to keep their businesses going [ahead of] what’s going to be a great season, really, in terms of numbers, on the tourism side in particular” (Morse, 2022, May 28). Therefore, echoing Chef Michael Smith’s concerns and one of his reasons for retaining his staff during Covid, tourism operators who dismissed their staff for two years when Covid restrictions caused visitation numbers to become so low as to require shutting down the business were now finding it difficult to ramp up capacity to serve the pent-up demand from travelers ready to move on from Covid.

With an industrial base founded on agriculture, fishing and tourism, the PEI economy



has always been seasonal. However, as with elsewhere in the world, Covid has had a profound impact on the labor market on Prince Edward Island that is likely to persist well into the future. Workers near retirement have contemplated the meaning of work and some, considering work-life balance, have retired early. Younger workers have become accustomed to working from home and some, having decided that the elimination of the commute allows them to be more productive, are now unwilling to return to the office. Service workers in frequent contact with others question the safety of such frequent and close contact with customers and the cost-benefit of remaining in their positions. Faced with numerous possibilities, many workers in the service industry have found jobs elsewhere, leaving employers leading into the summer of 2022 looking to hire new workers but finding that the vacancies were not being filled. This was despite PEI experiencing an influx of immigrants and their underutilized labor.

In 2022 and continuing today, PEI is experiencing an extreme skills mismatch, with many people wanting a job but not having the qualifications to fill current vacancies. This is particularly true for nurses, tradespeople and cooks (Neatby, Sept 7, 2022), the latter two of which are seasonal and so perhaps most affected by the sudden increase in demand for labor as Covid travel restrictions have been lifted. Mary Hunter, director of workforce development on PEI, states that “We’re experiencing a labour market tightness that we’ve never experienced in our province before” (Neatby, Sept 7, 2022). According to Statistics Canada, there was less than one unemployed Islander for every job vacancy posted on PEI, which caused the labor market tightness to be one of the most severe in Canada and which saw politicians scramble for solutions such as training programs (Neatby, Sept 7, 2022).

This labor shortage exists despite an unusually strong increase in population due to immigration. The province’s original goal of attaining a working-age population of 100,000 was achieved in 2019, and the goal of a total population of 160,000 by 2022 was also achieved, reaching 167,680 in April 2022. Kal Whitnell, executive director of PEI economic and population growth, stated that the population is forecast to increase further to 201,000 by 2035 (Neatby, Sept. 7, 2022). For a province that long has experienced out-migration as residents leave for more prosperous jobs elsewhere (such as oil industry work in Alberta, financial services in Toronto, and IT in Ottawa), the recent success in recruiting new residents appears to have caught politicians off-guard in providing adequate infrastructure to support them.

Moreover, government might be exacerbating the problem. One cause of the rise in the immigrant population is the federal temporary foreign worker program (TFWP) which encourages temporary immigration to Canada for jobs experiencing high vacancy levels but not high skill levels (VisaGuide World, n. d.; IRCC, 2022). Unlike previous government programs encouraging immigration that were less successful because new arrivals to PEI tended to move elsewhere as soon as possible, especially to the urban centers of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, the TFWP program has made a noticeable impact on the labor market in Prince Edward Island. This is especially true of the service sector, which is dominated by South Asians to a much greater extent than their share of the provincial population, particularly in low-level service positions at interna-



tional and national fast food restaurant franchises (KFC, Burger King, A&W, Tim Hortons, McDonalds), gas stations (Irving, Petro Canada) and, to a lesser extent, big box stores such as home improvement chains Home Depot and Kent Building Supplies. The reason is simple: TFWP requires a minimum number of hours of work per week – more than some PEI residents currently desire – so foreign workers on the program concentrate in jobs such as in the service industry which require many hours of work, while long-term PEI residents focus on higher paying jobs with fewer work hours and with telework possibilities. What this means is that there is now a distinct and obvious bifurcation in the composition of the workforce.

While these foreign workers are clearly needed in a labor market facing shortages and, moreover, the employer must submit a Labor Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) to show that it had been unsuccessful in filling the vacancy with Canadian citizens or permanent residents (VisaGuide World, n.d.), the foreign worker program also contributes to labor instability. Though possible to extend for up to four years, the work visa is applicable for only six months. After that initial period, in order for the visa to be extended, the employee must obtain a document signed by the employer as guarantor. The TFWP process is quite arduous, with numerous documents to submit. Further, the visa that is typically granted is an employer-specific visa which attaches work privileges only to a specific employer (IRCC, 2022). Understandably, this puts the foreign worker somewhat at the mercy of his/her employer when applying for an extension. While the large retail chain stores listed above which have a heavy demand for workers in lower-paying service positions do appear to be facilitating these extensions, other companies are losing competent workers because they decline to do so. Johnathan Eagles, warehouse manager at Sekisui Diagnostics PEI, explains that many competent foreign workers have left after only a short period of time because of this, leading to staff turnover and a warehouse that in the summer of 2022 was three people understaffed, placing extra pressure on the remaining staff (personal communication, August 24, 2022). Thus, while the foreign worker program preceded and is not directly related to the Covid pandemic, when viewed together with employees' shifting views about appropriate work-life balance and the gains that can be achieved by working from home, it has literally changed the face of front-line workers throughout the province. On the positive side, the foreign worker's program seems to have outperformed the many other schemes throughout the years aimed at improving in-migration to PEI. Further, the Covid pandemic has also caused a shift in mindset throughout Canada about the relative pros and cons of living in a hectic urban area such as Toronto versus the relatively bucolic rural province of PEI, with PEI becoming more favorable in the minds of many. The province in 2022 experienced one of the highest per capita levels of in-migration in Canada, which is a first in recent memory.

Although Prince Edward Island is known as a bucolic rural island province based on agriculture and the fishery, tourism is the second largest industry on PEI after agriculture, accounting for 6.2% of provincial GDP in 2019 (versus 2% for Canada) and 8,782 full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs and \$486.5 million in revenue (TIAPEI, n.d.). For entrepreneurs and businesses on PEI, there have been substantial government programs sup-



porting both employees with income support and businesses with start-up or development funding. While the extent of government spending throughout Canada during the Covid pandemic has reached unprecedented levels, causing per capita income to *rise* in Canada in 2020 which was unique among the G7 nations, government funding and guidance is nothing new for PEI, a “have not” province (one with below-average income from among the thirteen provinces and territories of Canada) that receives equalization payments from the federal government every year and whose provincial GDP is as much as 80% attributable to government transfers. However, going forward, while government funding is necessary to provide infrastructure such as broadband internet and rural transportation that enables businesses to be successful, and while industry groups always will have a role to play in providing businesses with direction, ultimately it is the individual businesses that know their customers best. Covid has shown that government policy and industry support are laggards. So, although this is certainly not the majority view, taking lessons from the approach taken by chef Michael Smith, perhaps the best path for business growth and stability going forward is for a company to pay less attention to government policy and industry direction and simply attempt to provide the best experience for one’s customers and employees.

6. Effect on Community:

“I don’t want it to open up completely. It seems like they [the PEI government] have just thrown in the towel. We still don’t know what the long-term effects will be.”

This was my father’s response to the announcement that effective May 6, 2022, the PEI provincial government would no longer be testing those entering the province (personal communication, May 5, 2022). For the 78-year-old resident in a high-risk category who until this point had abided, though somewhat reluctantly, the provincial policies which had been among the strictest in Canada if not the world, it seemed strange that the policy would be suddenly relaxed to such a great extent when new cases of Covid remained near the highest level they had been throughout the pandemic. He was not alone in thinking this.

As mentioned above, the provincial restrictions were among the most severe worldwide, at their strictest, limiting entrance only to returning residents or property owners and contact among Islanders to only a maximum of five members from a single additional nuclear household, thus forcing awkward decisions about whether to include parents or which sibling in one’s household ‘bubble’. Until the omicron variant arrived, however, the results of this harsh lockdown had been astounding, with fewer than fifty Covid cases, few hospitalizations and no deaths. International movement was also severely restricted by federal government policy, as entrance by non-Canadian residents was limited to essential services, mainly for trade and cross-border employment.

In Japan, by contrast, while a strict border policy limited entrance to returning nationals as well, there were no official limits to crossing prefectural boundaries. There were



recommendations to limit movement, however, and there was also some evidence that rural provinces were wary of visitors from Tokyo because of fears of contracting Covid-19. Lee Xian Jie, CEO of tour operator Craft Tabby, noted that “I saw signboards at public parks and tourist attractions saying ‘no cars from outside Wakayama. People were quite fearful of others from outside the prefecture” (Jacob, 2022). My own family, residing in Tokyo and aware of these concerns, limited our travel outside the prefecture. On PEI, there were reported incidents of cars with out-of-province license plates being “keyed” (the paint scratched by a key), though unbeknownst to the vandals, some of the victims had moved to PEI and set up residence quite some time before (MacEachern, 2022). In Japan, as everywhere, tourism was also affected by Covid, with international visitations down to 250,000 in 2021 from nearly 32 million in 2019 before the pandemic. Prior to Covid, however, concerns had been expressed about over-tourism in many popular destinations such as Kyoto, so many Japanese residents of tourist destinations still did not appear very eager to return to the pre-pandemic days, with a 2022 survey indicating that 65% of Japanese did not want the international border to be relaxed (Jacob, 2022). However, while tourism contributes only about 5% of Japanese GDP (Jacob, 2022), it is the second largest industry on PEI whose industrial base is not as diverse as Japan’s, so the impact is much more important and difficult to ignore.

Nonetheless, a similar apprehensive attitude towards outsiders existed on PEI, especially among those residents not connected to the tourism industry. Aiming to get Islanders to support each other during the depths of the pandemic, PEI chief health officer Heather Morrison concluded each of her public announcements with the words “Be kind to one another.” In retrospect, however, this rhetoric used by Health PEI to get Islanders to pull together perhaps only served to awaken xenophobia among some residents (MacEachern, 2022). In particular, the fear that contact with visitors “from away” might increase one’s chances of contracting the disease was indeed initially evidence-based, as the small number of Covid cases that did occur prior to the omicron variant were invariably traced to one of the provincial border entry points, with no evidence of community spread within Prince Edward Island itself. It was possible to track and trace these entrants to prevent further spread, which was important from a public health perspective. Among businesses, however, in early 2021 when it was widely rumored that interprovincial travel restrictions would be lifted at least partially during the peak summer tourist season, there was cautious optimism but still great uncertainty as to whether businesses would open up and when, to what degree government policy would allow travel, and also – in a Field of Dreams scenario – whether people would actually come if they were permitted (an attitude that persisted prior to the 2022 tourist season as well).

This concern was justified, for leading up to the summer of 2021, while businesses and individuals involved in tourism were embracing the lifting of travel restrictions, there was an ambivalence among the general population, particularly in Atlantic Canada which had briefly formed regional interprovincial travel ‘bubbles’ in 2020 but were clearly more apprehensive about visitors from further afield. According to the April 6, 2021 edition of Destination Canada’s weekly sentiment tracker of concerns about travel and Covid in



provinces across Canada, although attitudes among Atlantic Canadians⁽¹⁾ were not substantially different from those from other regions of the country in expressing that they “felt less safe to travel” (Destination Canada, 2021, p. 2), Atlantic Canadians were significantly more willing to travel to “communities near me” (91%) or “communities in my province” (76%) than those from other regions of Canada while being significantly less willing to travel to other destinations in Canada (22%), the United States (11%) or internationally (9%) (Destination Canada, 2021, p. 7).

Further, residents of the Atlantic provinces exhibited the largest range throughout Canada in the relationship between destination and attitudes towards travel, being much less concerned about nearby locations but more concerned about destinations farther away. This might in part be due to the successful “staycation” promotions undertaken in the region in 2020 and the success of the “Atlantic bubble” which permitted residents to travel to other destinations within the region, subject to some restrictions. It was not until the summer of 2021, however, that many provinces in the region began to relax the restrictions further to accept visitors from across Canada, and the April 2021 survey results reflect an apprehension in Atlantic Canada to this relaxation of Covid policy. This hesitancy towards visitors outside the region can also be seen in the Destination Canada survey results about how comfortable (“level of happiness”) residents were about advertisements promoting their community as a tourism destination to potential visitors from elsewhere. While Atlantic Canadians felt much more comfortable than other Canadians with advertising to potential travelers within their community (+54) or province (+41), they were much less comfortable with ads aimed at potential visitors outside their province in Canada and internationally (-23, -48) (Destination Canada 2021, pp. 23-28).

Additional distinctions between Atlantic Canada and the rest of the country could be seen in April 2021 in the trends in attitudes leading up to the expected lifting of travel restrictions in the summer. Unlike in the rest of Canada where feeling “safe to travel” was trending up, it was trending down in Atlantic Canada from November 2020 to April 2021 for all travel outside the immediate community. Further, while the trend over the previous four months about attitudes towards advertising to potential visitors outside the region was increasing throughout Canada, including in Atlantic Canada, attitudes towards U.S. and international visitors were rising from extremely low levels in Atlantic Canada (-76 and -73 respectively, on Sept. 15, 2020, as compared to -51 and -39 for those from Quebec, whose residents showed the most positive attitudes to visitors from the US and abroad at that time).

One final perhaps surprising feature about attitudes towards travel in early 2021 is that residents of rural areas exhibited more positive views towards both travel and receiving visitors than urban residents, regardless of the travel destination or home residence of visitors. Perhaps this is due to a greater sense of connectedness and community among rural residents and a greater sense of disconnectedness among urbanites. However, all regions showed generally positive attitudes toward travel to and from com-

(1) Because of their small size, the results for the Atlantic provinces of Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador were aggregated, so the results for PEI alone are not available.



munities nearby or at least within their province. Thus due to the Covid pandemic, perhaps unintentionally exacerbated by the exhortations of health officials to “work collectively” to fight Covid as well as policies restricting interprovincial movement, a concept of “community” has coalesced in the minds of many residents that is associated with safety within one’s own province and fear of those outside. For provinces such as Prince Edward Island where the dichotomous concept of belonging (“from here” vs “from away”) already existed prior to Covid, the pandemic may have exacerbated these already latent attitudes towards outsiders.

Summer Fairs

In the summer of 2022, however, with tourism showing the beginnings of a rebound (Zucker, 2022), the concept of community was top of mind, and there was a palpable desire among Prince Edward Island residents to get out and embrace life again after a difficult two years of restrictions. In a manner not unlike how family gatherings and reunions revitalize and maintain family roots as discussed above, the annual summer fairs held in small towns throughout the province are social events that maintain the vibrancy of communities on PEI. Based typically on farming or fishing, these events had been suspended for two years during Covid, making the comparison to the “pre-pandemic” period inevitable in 2022. For example, the Dundas Plowing Match and Agricultural Fair marked its 80th anniversary in 2022. The popular fair known for its plowing contests using traditional plows pulled by horses or vintage tractors draws visitors from throughout Atlantic Canada, and the crowds were larger in 2022 than in 2019, making it a “big, big year...” in more ways than one (Neatby, August 30, 2022). For retired dairy farmer Nicky Halman, it was a chance to reconnect with other farmers: “It was shut down for Covid. It was the first one in three years. I think that’s what made this a success too. Everybody missed it.” The ox pull and tractor pull competitions attracted fans and competitors from other Maritime provinces as well, including John Fleet of Nova Scotia who raises oxen as “just a hobby” but took the opportunity to show his off in the ox pull. Though perhaps a hobby, he does not only raise them for shows but also puts them to practical use at home: “We log at home, bring home our firewood. And we bring out all the hay.... We plow, harrow, put our gardens in. We have a lot of fun with them” (Neatby, August 30, 2022).

Another event, this one aimed at Islanders, is the 70-mile yard sale in eastern PEI held annually in September when most tourists have left. Also held in 2022 for the first time in three years, the yard sale aims mainly to be a community-building event rather than purely a business proposition. According to Jill Harris of the Wood Islands and Area Development Corporation (WIADC) which supports the event, “It’s a wonderful way to reconnect with the community. We find that the social aspect of it is a great way to get back onto the whole new year.... The event is a great opportunity to connect with the neighbours” (Morse, September 18, 2022).

Diversity and Community

The challenge of cultivating community on PEI, however, becomes greater when the



diversity of the population is increasing. The neighbours that Islanders are interacting with in 2022 are not the same as in 2019, for the population of PEI itself has grown. Making newcomers feel welcome and integrated into PEI society is the key to creating community while increasing diversity. One of the sources of in-migration has been the movement of disillusioned urban Canadian residents searching for a more enriching life. While the coronavirus has caused many people to re-examine their lives, for those experiencing the hectic lifestyle of Toronto, a more relaxed lifestyle in Atlantic Canada seems to be an appealing proposition. The ability to work remotely and live more cheaply (with housing prices about 50% of those in Canada's largest cities) has caused many Canadians to move to PEI (Neatby, September 7, 2022).

As mentioned above, this sudden appeal of PEI as a residential destination is somewhat ironic for a province that has long faced difficulty maintaining its population and preventing young people from leaving for greener pastures elsewhere. In 2018, the PEI Department of Workforce and Advanced Learning conducted a survey of graduates of institutions of higher education on PEI who had left the province, aiming to discover why people who had at one time lived on PEI decided to move and settle elsewhere (Department of Workforce and Advanced Learning, 2018). The survey of 683 former students of the University of Prince Edward Island, Holland College and College de L'île found that the overwhelming majority (97%) of those surveyed still felt a connection to PEI even though the majority (55%) had not lived in the province for more than 10 years. The main reason for leaving PEI after graduation was to find employment (70%), and 80% expressed an interest in returning to PEI to live, the most common reasons for that being to achieve a better lifestyle (79.3%), including 48.5% who indicated a better work-life balance, and family reunification (60.5%). The results of this pre-Covid survey are prescient, as the Covid pandemic has indeed contributed to a migration within Canada for these very reasons, with PEI being one of the most popular destinations for those migrating.

Real Estate

This influx of newcomers is not without its challenges, however. In particular, urban residents of central Canada who are moving to PEI and taking advantage of real estate prices that seem unbelievably low to them are creating a construction boom and a housing affordability crisis for long-term residents of PEI (MacLean, 2022). Carpenter Boyd Hill and plumber Greg McEwen stated that they had never been busier (personal communication, June 4, 2022). When asked about the source of all this construction demand in 2022, Greg immediately replied "It's all off-island", and Boyd agreed, stating that "Yes, it's becoming like Vancouver [the current Canadian poster city for absentee ownership]. Soon we won't be able to live here ourselves".

However, an ideology exists on PEI that being grounded and working hard will pay off. Greg, pointing to his apprentice, offered his rejoinder to Boyd that "Yes, but he'll be all right. Look at his feet - he's wearing work boots. He's learning how to work." Greg further recalled that "When I began 20 years ago, it was very competitive. There were more plumbers than jobs. I'd give someone a quote of \$1000 for a job. Then they would



go down the road and get a quote for \$900. Then they would get another quote for \$850. It was a race to the bottom. Nobody could make any money.”

“But now, it is not ‘how much,’ but...”

“When,” I interject.

“No. ‘Can you?’”, Greg replies.

In 2022, it did indeed seem challenging to gain the attention of a tradesperson at any price or timeline. The conversation then proceeded to the bidding wars for real estate on PEI, with listings only lasting a day and being sold for \$100,000 over the asking price. Thus, the coronavirus seems to have indirectly contributed to the construction activity on PEI, as people “from away” have become interested in a more relaxed lifestyle than their hectic work-focused life in Toronto and the apparent impossibility for many there to achieve the Canadian dream of home ownership. As the summer of 2022 moved into September, however, it remained to be seen how long this migration and associated construction boom would last, as the Bank of Canada increased interest rates several times to tamp down inflation caused at least partially by the unprecedented federal government spending that actually *increased* Canadian personal incomes during the Covid lockdown in 2020. The interest rate increases quickly showed signs of substantially reducing real estate activity in 2022. However, in the summer of 2023, while the Bank of Canada continues to raise interest rates, the real estate market that had shown depressed housing sales and starts is now rebounding, both in projects under development and sales.

7. Tourism, Indigeneity, Identity, and Belonging

What began as a seasonal sideline in the nineteenth century evolved into an economic powerhouse that now attracts over 1.5 million visitors each year, employs one in ten Islanders, and is the province’s second leading industry.... Over time, the Island has marketed a remarkably durable set of tourism tropes – seaside refuge from industrial angst, return to innocence, literary shrine to L. M. Montgomery, cradle of Confederation, garden of the Gulf. As private enterprise and the state sought to manage the industry, the Island’s own identity became caught up in the wish-fulfillment of its summer visitors. The result has been a complicated, sometimes conflicted relationship between Islanders and tourism, between a warm welcome to visitors and resistance to the industry’s adverse effects on local culture.

– The Summer Trade (2022)

The sign of indigeneity – of rootedness in an island – is the ability to walk across it, a question of local knowledge and physical adaptation.

– Hulme (2000), cited in Webster-Stahel 2018, p. 100–101).

While during the summer of 2022, there was indeed a feeling of community coming



together again after being separated by Covid for two years, this fails to acknowledge the varying definitions of community and how the very act of cultivating a sense of *belonging* among certain members simultaneously may cultivate a sense of *exclusion* in others (Hodges, 1998). Notwithstanding the increased diversity associated with population growth and in-migration, it is apparent that the definition of community is narrower for some folks than for others. While there has been a clear criterion for indigeneity among the Anglo-Saxon population (“Are you from the Island, or are you ‘from away’?”) for as long as I can remember, this concept ignores the original indigenous peoples of this land, the Mi’kmaq, and concepts of indigeneity, of community, and of belonging have become further complexified in recent decades. While in Canada a national reconciliation with the indigenous population is the leading edge of an effort to create a more inclusive view of community, this effort has yet to lead to any major advances but only the merely performative recognition at any theatre, sporting or music event that “the lands upon which we sit are unceded territory of the indigenous peoples of Canada” before the entertainment begins. However, on Prince Edward Island, although in-migration has been a policy goal for decades (Neatby, September 7, 2022), the increased population diversity associated with it has created cracks in the sense of belonging among new Islanders, caused by social frictions that are predictable but which nonetheless seem to shock officials.

An extreme example of this friction is the racially-motivated assault on two recent PEI immigrants at the Acadian Festival in Abram Village on September 3, 2022 (RCMP, 2022). The Acadian Festival, held in the Evangeline region of PEI, celebrates Acadian (French) culture. Historically, the population of PEI has been predominantly Anglo-Saxon (English), followed by Acadian (French, but until a revitalization in recent decades, many of the members of this community spoke little French, and English was their dominant language) and with indigenous Mi’kmaq culture a distant third. The capital city of Charlottetown is somewhat more diverse, with a thriving long-established Middle Eastern Lebanese population as well as a smattering of other ethnic groups drawn to PEI by the university. In the past decade, however, immigration has increased the East Asian (Chinese, in particular) and South Asian populations, among others.

Diversity brings the potential for cultural friction, as exemplified by the aforementioned assault which “took us all by surprise” and which is “incomprehensible that this has happened” according to Kathleen Couture, executive director of the association des centres de la petite enfance francophones de l’Île-du-prince-Édouard (ACPEFIPE), a child-care enterprise that employed one of the victims. In order to address the shock of the attack and show support for the victims in what was seen as a “first step in healing,” the association held a meeting on September 8 (Gardiner, 2022), where Couture explained that “It was the first time for the community to come together to show support for the victims. We wrote kind, warm messages not only to the victims but to all newcomers who are coming into the area” (Gardiner, 2022). However, the extent to which this effort will meaningfully help the victims feel more embraced by the community is questionable. The evening local TV news broadcast on September 9, 2022 reported that the two immigrants were “targeted as outsiders” and one victim who was an employee at the



early learning child center in the community had already decided to leave the community because he did not feel safe (CBC Compass, September 9, 2022).

While Couture stated that “We were very saddened, very shocked” (Gardiner, 2022), one unspoken factor that perhaps contributed to the impact this incident seems to have had on the community is that the Evangeline region and Acadian culture on PEI identify as a minority community in a largely Anglo-Saxon province. Therefore, one tacit assumption is that this minority community would be more supportive of new immigrants and empathetic of the conditions they face, for they too have struggled against a dominant culture. However, as discussed above, Island society has long experienced intersectionality, with various divisions between “us” and “them” and the obvious implications for belonging and exclusion (“Are you one of the Catholic MacLellans or the protestant MacLellans?” is a question I have often been asked). Consequently, it is not difficult to comprehend that a definition of community that creates a boundary between PEI and the rest of the world – a definition that was actively utilized during the Covid pandemic to determine not only whether people could enter PEI but also promoted and legitimized by Health PEI officials in their efforts to encourage Islanders to join together to fight Covid – could be readily adapted to create more fine-grained community boundaries as population diversity increases on PEI. Indeed, the boundary between the Acadian francophone population and the dominant Anglo-Saxon English-speaking population is one such community boundary that is currently being actively supported (including with educational services by government) through efforts to revitalize and maintain French heritage on PEI. Conceptual divisions that may seem less relevant in a monoculture readily begin to appear as cracks in the community fabric as diversity increases.

Embracing community and highlighting boundaries often occur simultaneously. During the pandemic, chief public health officer Heather Morrison often called on Islanders to come together, to support each other. However, this emphasis on Islanders sticking together raises the question as to how Islanders should respond to those not from PEI. During the period when PEI was locked down and isolated, with non-Islanders not permitted to visit with very few exceptions, there were reports of cars with non-PEI license plates being targeted and vandalized (MacEachern, 2022). However, the owners of some of the damaged cars had already been living on PEI before the lockdown but had not yet changed their license plate. Even PEI residents renting cars at the Charlottetown airport experienced such incidents because the cars are sourced not on PEI but in neighboring Nova Scotia, so the cars all have NS plates. We also know from reports that Islanders who were driving cars with off-Island license plates felt very apprehensive and were on high alert when driving during this period (MacEachern, 2022).

The boundaries may at times seem invisible, causing people to question whether they really exist. However, a change in mindset requires openness, and the traces of these boundaries are deep and difficult to erase. A simple example can be found in the CBC report of the Abrams Village attack, which concluded with the statement that “newcomers should feel safe and welcome, as Islanders do.” (CBC Compass, September 9, 2022). *As Islanders do.* This very language implies boundaries between who is and who is not a true Islander: Islanders *do* feel safe, and so the newcomers who do not feel safe must



not be Islanders but outsiders “from away.” And do *all* Islanders really feel safe? Slips of the tongue like these illuminate the challenge that remains in changing the linguistically-encoded traditional mindset about community on PEI.

Social cohesion becomes more challenging as the population becomes more diverse, and while the meaning of “community” will surely evolve with changes in the population over time, it will also continue to present PEI with a challenge not only to provide a wider range of services to serve a more diverse population but also to ensure that newcomers are accepted and integrated so that they identify as Islanders and feel that they belong. While this challenge has been created by forces beyond the Covid pandemic itself, the pandemic has perhaps exacerbated and accelerated the effects.

8. Conclusion

While the Covid pandemic has had a profound effect globally in all aspects of life, including work, business and industry; family and social relations; and community, it is clear that on Prince Edward Island, there is a desire to move forward, with inevitable comparisons to pre-pandemic 2019. While in 2022 there was a palpable desire for the Island to return to “normal”, new Covid case numbers remained elevated and Covid-related deaths continued to occur. Nevertheless, the hosting of family gatherings, reunions, weddings, funerals, community festivals, theatre and other local events in the summer of 2022 that had been suspended since 2019, as well as students returning to in-person learning in schools in September, contributed to a feeling of a return to normalcy. Regardless of the official visitation numbers, there is no doubt that the 2022 tourism season made a large step in the process of returning to what might approximate the pre-pandemic situation. From the early data on 2023, it appears that a return to normalcy is continuing.

Nevertheless, the direct and indirect effects of Covid on life on PEI will be felt over the long term and have already begun generating discussions about healthcare, education, industry, real estate, professional trades, the labor market, immigration, and the challenges of an increasingly diverse population. In some areas such as healthcare, Covid merely brought to light challenges that had already been percolating for a long time. Other more fundamental indirect effects of Covid such as a changing mindset about what it means to live a meaningful life have created new challenges associated with the labor market and migration, as well as an inflationary economic environment that has not been present for decades. Rising real estate prices due to in-migration from other jurisdictions, a changing labor force and attitudes towards work, and an evolution in the demographic characteristics of the province are apparent. While 2022 witnessed a joyful reconnecting between families, friends, and seasonal residents, the challenges of reconnecting communities, addressing imbalances in the labor market, resuscitating a business environment that relies heavily on tourism, and developing a customer base that feels confident in the future remains a work in progress. As it will take some time before the full impact of these medium and long-term forces will be observed, there is a need to re-examine the effects of Covid-19 on PEI again in the future.



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Key Facts:

- Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada's smallest province, has a population of 160,000, about one-quarter of that of Tottori, Japan's least populated prefecture. The population of Charlottetown, the capital city, is about 38,000, roughly half that of Kunitachi City, where the main campus of Hitotsubashi University is located.
- PEI has an island culture ("from here/from away," similar to Japan's *uchi/soto*) and limited access points (one bridge, one airport and two ferry terminals).
- During "lockdown," Prince Edward Island had one of the world's strictest Covid policies whereby only residents or those owning property could enter. The policy initially experienced amazing success, with less than one hundred Covid cases and no deaths until the omicron variant arrived in 2022.
- The restrictions on PEI families under Covid were quite severe. For example, during the strictest lockdown, each household could form a "bubble" with only one other nuclear household consisting of a maximum of 5 people. This meant that siblings were forced to choose from among parents and siblings whose nuclear household to include in their bubble.
- After having experienced strict requirements to enter the province for two years, PEI completely relaxed its border restrictions in 2022, eliminating all testing and removing all government presence at border points.
- Tourism is the second most important industry on PEI after agriculture, but it was almost completely shut down for two years, with visitations down 90%. As the tourism industry prepared to re-open to widespread visitation in 2022, there was great apprehension about potential post-Covid effects on both demand and supply.



Abstract

Reconnecting after Covid : The effect on family, business, and community in Canada's smallest province

Philip C. MacLellan

This study examines the disruptive effects of the coronavirus pandemic through the lens of family, business, and community as Canada's smallest province re-opened to more normalized activity in the summer of 2022 after more than two years under one of Canada's (and the world's) strictest Covid-19 policies. Using a qualitative case study methodology including document review, participant observation and open-ended interviews to gain retrospective accounts of life during the pandemic, this fieldwork study focuses on nuclear and extended family interactions, business activity particularly in tourism which caters to people from off-Island and which comprises one of the largest industry sectors, and the re-imagining of community during and after Covid. In doing so, it explores the interconnections between identity, public health and economic activity in Canada's smallest province.

Keywords: Covid-19, coronavirus, social impact, Prince Edward Island, economy, tourism, family, community, identity, case study methodology



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