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OPINIONS DEBATS

Sharing Irving's opportunity starts here

What is the Halifax we want? This is a question that the Irving shipbuilding contract invites and is one most politicians and news reports have missed. Instead, they've focused on the economic potential of the contract. Less attention has been paid to the social and cultural opportunity to reimagine ourselves. An opportunity we should take, otherwise the contracts will follow the ill fate of so many other large-scale projects in

the region. According to the Ships Start Here campaign, the shipbuilding contract is "a once-in-a-generation opportunity to secure long-term jobs" and the city has already won. If you look around HRM, this appears to be true. Construction cranes and new businesses are popping up all over. But so far most of this has been the result of speculation, and recent reports say that work in the shipyard will only begin in 2015.

The shipbuilding contract will also bring social and cultural changes, and these are less predictable. How will Haligonians embrace the many people "from away" who come to work in the city? Will the shipyard and other businesses make an effort to include under-employed communities? Will the new mayor and council make transparent changes to promote innovation? How do we imagine our future?

An under-acknowledged fact is that many of the top-paying shipbuilding jobs will demand expertise from professionals outside the province, from across the country or abroad. For those that come from other countries, it is important for Haligonians to ask themselves if they will make the city a welcoming community. Will they embrace difference and change or fear it, as in the past?

Haligonians should also ask Irving and the municipal and provincial governments how they too will welcome people from abroad. Will they attract skilled immigrants to settle in the city, who will have the same rights as other Canadians, have access to settlement services and build families and communities? Or will shipbuilding rely on temporary foreign workers who will stay only as long as the jobs last, without equal rights and without services to help their integration?

Irving, the city and the province also need to be asked what they will do to tap into the un- and under-employed communities already in Nova Scotia, as well as African

Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq communities excluded from past opportunities. What about Nova Scotians living in rural communities? How about shipbuilding jobs for women? It appears that Irving and the province have moved in this direction by announcing a new 30-year deal to recruit and train members of these communities at the NSCC.

In a city that hosts five universities, each one will also play a crucial role in imagining the future of the city. Shipbuilding needs computer programming, engineering and visual designing and not just welders and tradespeople. It needs social scientists to assess the successes and failures of the project. The universities' capacity to play these roles, however, is seriously hampered by a provincial government that cuts 10 percent of their budgets over three years.

What will the municipal government do to promote the innovation and creativity that the shipbuilding contract demands? Will the new Mayor and council hide behind in camera sessions and block economic, social and cultural development or will they promote change?

A recent Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses report comparing 100 Canadian municipalities ranked Halifax 55th in its support of small businesses. These are the very places where creativity and innovation occur and they need to thrive for Halifax to truly take advantage of the shipbuilding opportunity.

The city proudly boasts the successes of its culture industry but its per capita funding of the arts is only 55 cents compared to \$7.51 in Winnipeg and \$10.10 in Ottawa.



VOICE OF THE CITY

COMMENTARY BY
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Imagine what a cultural juggernaut it would be with those levels of funding.

The ongoing debate around the St. Patrick's-Alexandra School site suggests that communities cannot continue to be excluded from meaningful involvement in decisions that will affect them. A new culture of decision-making is needed to fully grasp the opportunities of the shipbuilding contract.

The city and province sit at a crossroads and we have an opportunity to ask how we want to imagine ourselves and how we want others to see us. Do we want to continue to be defined by our past or do we want to promote our resourcefulness and innovation? If at the end of decades of shipbuilding all we can say is that Irving built a bunch of ships, we will have truly lost out. ▀



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