Second OPINION

Amateur hour AT TOURISM PEI

If you want to know what's wrong with tourism leadership in this province look at an overgrown Par 30, 9-hole golf track on the left-hand side of the entrance to Brudenell Resort.

Today it is a symbol of Tourism PEI's lack of vision, its disregard for data and its habit of doing whatever the hell it wants, regardless how dumb an idea is. It is a symbol of detached political and bureaucratic leadership with neither the courage nor interest to lead.

Maybe it's because the Tory government is getting long in the tooth, but Tourism PEI is motivated more by pet projects than doing its job…you know, growing tourism.

What it has achieved since 2019 is to drive respected senior employees out because they were not part of the old boy's club. It has squandered $8 million plus on an NHL sponsorship deal, while ignoring 30 years of tourism data to do it.

It's the biggest boondoggle in Island marketing history, but great for free tickets and frequent flyer points. Between April 1, 2024, and March 31, 2025, Tourism PEI CEO Kent MacDonald chalked up $35,000 in travel costs jet-setting to Miami, New York, Boston, Montreal, St John's and Vancouver, with much of it related to the NHL deal. This doesn't count whatever the additional cost is for department lackeys to tag along.

Nice work if you can get it.

What Tourism PEI is exceptional at is growing its bureaucracy. Today there are more directors and managers than ever before and each wants to imprint their own mark, making the delivery of quality frontline service more difficult.

Where an on the ground manager used to report to a single manager, now there are two additional layers of bureaucracy to navigate. Has it improved what we do and how we do it? Not a hope in hell. But a lot of friends of government have landed cushy jobs.

Don't forget Tourism PEI's decision to steal jobs from rural PEI by taking tourism property inspection services in-house and away from a respected rural based non-profit that delivered quality results for three decades.

You often hear tourism leadership reference data, but Tourism PEI doesn't give a damn about data when it comes to its pet projects.

Exhibit A: NHL waste that has become a massive management distraction. Exhibit B: Divine 9 and the politically stained piece of land it sits on.

Paul MacNeill

Against the Tide
paul@peicanada.com

Built by a private consortium alongside Dundarave, the government of Pat Binns purchased both for $10 million in 2000 by valuing Dundarave at $7 million and Divine 9 at $3 million.

When it closed in 2012, Divine 9 was allowed to grow over until last year when some of the original holes were cut out. Many hoped Tourism PEI would see the benefit to the whole resort of reopening.

What has changed in the last decade is demand for golf has grown exponentially. Cape Breton is now the undisputed leader in Canada. Don MacDougall has transformed Mill River into the best golf experience on PEI, while government courses have garnered a growing reputation as a place where bad behaviour is tolerated by senior department leadership.

It is a classic case of how to destroy a hard-won reputation.

That reputation will only continue to shrink next year when Tourism PEI, under PEI Parks, opens a disc golf course on the Divine 9 layout.

Where's the data to suggest disc golf will enhance existing golf properties and generate revenue? There is none.

Where is the input from frontline workers? No frontline worker was asked.

Where's the business plan for a disc course? There is none. Just as there is no master plan for the Brudenell property including undeveloped government land.

How much, if any, will be charged to play disc golf? PEI Parks doesn't know.

How much will the development cost? Apparently $40,000 from existing budget. What's the operating overhead? No idea.

Opening a disc golf on the Divine 9 site is an embarrassment and as dumb a bureaucratic decision as you will find. There is a similar course just down the road in Georgetown that is largely unused, but there are 180 juniors between the three provincial courses who could benefit from a short-course. Even a modest amount of research would show this.

We are better off spending a million dollars to reopen Divine 9 and generate real revenue on accommodation, green fees and food and beverage than waste one cent on disc golf in the wrong location. Sometimes you must spend money to make money.

Tourism PEI doesn't understand its core business and we're falling behind because of its self-absorbed leadership. Golf is a tough political sell, but it also pays a lot of bills and employs a lot of Islanders.

If we want to play in the big leagues, we need to stop making unsupportable amateur decisions that are the hallmark of Tourism PEI under the PC government.

Paul MacNeill is Publisher of Island Press Limited. He can be contacted at paul@peicanada.com

Our SPACE *Eastern Graphic Staff*

Josh Lewis

Gail Shea was a rare breed

In an age when polarization and nastiness are at an all-time high in politics, Gail Shea was a shining example that it doesn't have to be this way.

In Ottawa, where the antics inside the House of Commons often resemble a jungle gym at McDonald's, she was as fierce as they come, while maintaining civility and respect - much as she had previously at Province House.

Here, MLAs are more accessible than anywhere in the country and debate is generally less nasty because opposing politicians could run into each other the next day at the local farmer's market. That is the style of politics the wife and mom from Skinner's Pond brought to Ottawa.

Even when she was pied in the face by a seal hunt protester, she was charitable, returning to the podium and saying it strengthened her resolve to stand up for sealing families.

The mark she made continued to be felt long after her retirement from politics, with Pierre Poilievre calling her a "larger than life figure" in the Conservative Party due to her "energy, warmth and good humour."

It may feel like everything in politics has changed since 2000, when she was first elected. But politicians today and into the future should learn from her example.

Too many politicians now, especially to the south, are more focused on ragebait, half-truths and scoring points at all costs than developing good policy and improving the lives of their constituents.

Those slick social media videos filled with questionable content might win over a few voters, but that cynical brand of politics undermines the democratic process and reduces the public's trust in politicians even further.

In the four-year bubble where winning is everything, politics changes a lot of people.

Gail Shea never changed.

Winning isn't everything. Integrity is. And she had it in spades.

Josh Lewis

Kyle Cotton

PSB has some work to do

As Islanders flip their calendars over to September, thousands of students are getting ready to get back in the classroom for the 2025-26 school year.

But many parents are being left with more questions than answers when it comes to the protection of their child when they're sent to school for the day – understandably so.

Everyone is hoping this year will be a turning of the corner for the Public Schools Branch in more ways than one.

The first issue that must be addressed is how they are going to improve the screening process for hiring new substitute teachers.

After the mishandling of the Craswell situation by the PSB, many would think that it would be much more difficult to become a substitute on PEI.

But no real change is going to take place until Justice David Jenkins' report comes out, which could be months into the school year, even 2026.

Trust won't be won back by sitting and waiting for a report. This shows a lack of urgency from the PSB.

Meanwhile, there was a student in Kinkora who was jumped by her peers in the middle of the summer as a result of something that started in school.

The nine-year-old's father said that the school knew, yet nothing was being done.

As a result, she was left bloodied and bruised and she still has to return to the same classroom as her bully once school kicks up again.

Bullying is up all over Canada, which is putting an exclamation mark on the importance bullying awareness campaigns, like pink shirt day, have in getting rid of it altogether.

Students should be able to learn in peace without being bullied by a peer or having a predator as a teacher.

Many hope Education Minister Robin Croucher's pledges for more training and stronger hiring and reporting practices are going to be better than the response Islanders have gotten so far.

Kyle Cotton