

# Still Forgotten?: The Politics and Communities of the Provincial Norths

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For many people in Canada, the “North” is synonymous with the territories—Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut. That North, lying beyond the 60th parallel, dominates scholarly inquiry, the public policy agenda, as well as the imagination of southern Canadians. There is, however, another North, the vast Subarctic corridor that Ken Coates and Bill Morrison referred to as the “Forgotten North” in their 1992 work of the same title. Coates and Morrison note that this North, which comprises the northern portions of many of the provinces, has historically been ignored by policy makers and popular culture.

But are the provincial Norths still forgotten? Recent events may suggest otherwise. The Northern Dimension of Canada’s Foreign Policy (June 2000) defined the North as the area north of the 55th parallel, a geographic region that includes most of the provincial Norths. David Suzuki’s 2003 television program *Boreal Rendezvous* (a series of celebrity canoe trips drawing attention to Subarctic ecology) has helped put the provincial Norths in the public eye. This belated recognition, however, does not alter the fundamental and long-standing problems facing the provincial Norths. They are still politically weak, economically vulnerable and, most importantly, lack a shared vision of the future.

This issue of *The Northern Review* focuses on these themes and discusses some of the important political, economic and social developments taking place in various parts of the provincial Norths. The articles in this collection serve two purposes. First, they contribute to our understanding of politics and governance in the provincial Norths and fill in some of the gaps in the scholarly literature on this topic. Second, they demonstrate some of the particular challenges facing the provincial Norths at the start of the twenty-first century. The authors represent a diverse mix of academics and practitioners, all of whom have experience living and working in the provincial Norths.

Four main themes stand out among the articles in this collection. First, there is the overarching idea that the provincial Norths are caught be-

tween two defined geographic regions: the populous South and the Territorial North. They are sparsely populated regions within provinces rather than autonomous political entities or regions with significant urban populations. Thus, they are disadvantaged and marginalized within the political hierarchy, both at the provincial and federal levels of government. This marginalization is reinforced by the fact that the provincial Norths occupy an ambiguous position in the Canadian psyche. Despite the fact that they exhibit all the characteristics of “northern” regions, the provincial Norths are often not regarded as the “true” North—a privileged status reserved for the territories. These realities present significant challenges for the empowerment of these geographical regions. Without regional representative institutions of their own, Northern residents feel alienated from the provincial body politic of which they are a part. What is more, many policy decisions that affect the lives of northerners—not always for the better—are made in distant provincial capitals.

Second, a dominant issue in many parts of the provincial Norths is economic development and diversification. Historically, many communities in the provincial Norths experienced the boom-and-bust cycle of resource-dependent economies. Although these communities have attempted to create economic stability through diversification, their successes have been limited. Part of the reason for this lack of diversification is political in nature. As many scholars have pointed out, the provincial Norths are caught in an “internal colonial” relationship with the South. Under such a relationship, the South has benefited from resource development in the North, while at the same time reinforcing the problematic tendencies that keep the economies of the provincial Norths in flux. Moreover, the provincial Norths lack the necessary representation, authority, and autonomy to engage in activities such as economic diversification. Often, the provincial Norths have little or no autonomous political representation beyond the municipal level of government and their small population base means that their political representation at both the provincial and federal levels of government is weak. The link between governance and economic development is key. Without effective and autonomous governance structures, or adequate representation and a strong voice at the provincial and federal levels, the provincial Norths may continue to experience the state of limited development and economic dependency that has existed in the past.

A third important characteristic of the provincial Norths is the presence of numerous First Nations communities and populations. In recent years, First Nations self-government issues have taken on added importance in many parts of the provincial Norths. The Nisga’a Treaty in British Columbia and emergence of Nunavik in northern Quebec are just two examples of this trend. As more self-government arrangements are negotiat-

ed and begin to function, First Nations will come into even greater contact and collaboration with existing governments at all levels in the provincial Norths, especially local and municipal governments. The need for some form of intergovernmental framework to address the needs of all peoples living in the provincial Norths, therefore, has never been more crucial. One dimension, of course, is the desire of many First Nations to break free of the Indian Act. In many respects, First Nations peoples have historically been caught in a nested internal colonial relationship both within the provincial Norths and within the wider political system. Recent political developments suggest that First Nations are slowly breaking out of this difficult situation. Like non-Aboriginal residents of the provincial Norths, they desire forms of political representation, autonomy and governance tools that will allow them to secure a stable and sustainable economic and political future. The arrangements that First Nations negotiate will have profound consequences for the future well-being of the provincial Norths and all its residents.

A final striking feature of the provincial Norths is the relative lack of cooperation among political actors across this vast region. As Ken Coates, Geoff Weller, and others have pointed out, political relations are arranged along a North-South axis that, in many respects, perpetuates many of the dysfunctional tendencies noted above. Consequently, there are very few linkages, political or otherwise, between the provincial Norths. Cooperation along an East-West axis could create a strong presence at the federal level of government. At the very least, communities and governments in the provincial Norths could learn from each other.

As a collective endeavour, the articles in this special issue of *The Northern Review* explore all of these themes and provide examples and cases from Quebec, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. The articles are revised versions of papers that were presented at First Annual Steelhead Seminar, held in Smithers, British Columbia in October 2002. The seminar was organized by the Political Science Program at the University of Northern British Columbia to bring together scholars and practitioners from across Canada to discuss the issues and challenges facing communities and peoples in the provincial Norths. The presenters covered a wide range of topics and issues and included academics from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario, as well as practitioners and former officials from northern British Columbia.

His Worship Brian Northup, the Mayor of Smithers at the time, gave the keynote address. In his address, Mayor Northup reviewed the basic services provided by the municipal government in Smithers and discussed how these have changed over time, with a particular focus on the consequences of downloading responsibility for them from the federal and pro-

vincial governments. He also touched on some of the pressing issues for Smithers and the surrounding Bulkley Valley region. These included the fragile state of the forestry and resource extraction economies at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the consequences of proposed legislative changes that would grant greater autonomy to local governments, the continuing First Nations treaty negotiations, and the relations between the town and local First Nations communities. On this latter point, Mayor Northup was optimistic in his assessment of the future. The global economic changes we are currently witnessing, coupled with the greater empowerment of First Nations peoples and their governments in the provincial Norths provide tremendous opportunities for collaboration among First Nations and non-Aboriginal communities in areas such as resource and environmental management, tourism and recreation.

The articles that follow have been arranged thematically. The first two deal with issues of Aboriginal self-government in the provincial Norths. In their article "Reconciliation in Northern British Columbia? Future Prospects for Aboriginal–Newcomer Relations," Ken Coates and William Morrison examine the main trends affecting Aboriginal–non-Aboriginal relations in northern British Columbia and the effects of these trends on the long-term stability and reconciliation of the different communities in this region. As the authors point out in their introduction, "in northern British Columbia, the challenges of reconciliation are not vague, theoretical concepts.... They are, instead, real issues, of pressing concern, seen by almost all observers as critical to the long-term prosperity of the region."

In the second article, Gary N. Wilson compares recent political developments in northern Quebec with the state of Aboriginal self-government in the Russian Federation. The new institutional framework proposed by the Nunavik Commission sets a clear model for Aboriginal self-government in Nunavik and Canada. This governing structure also closely resembles the nested federal arrangements that have existed in the Russian Federation and in its predecessor, the Soviet Union, since the 1930s. Wilson charts the problematic development of nested federal arrangements in the Soviet Union and in the Russian Federation as a way to identify some of the challenges that will face Nunavik and Quebec as they embark on this new phase of regional development.

The next three articles address issues of regionalism and regional representation in the provincial Norths. In his article "Local Government: Competing or Cooperating," William D. Kennedy, the former Director of Finance for the City of Prince George, traces the development of regional institutions and bodies in northern British Columbia. Kennedy observes that, while local government officials in northern British Columbia have recognized that there is strength in unity and have attempted to build co-

alitions among northern communities, results have often been mixed and the coalitions temporary. In the early years, inter-municipal interaction was characterized by a "culture of opposition" and a lack of consensus among northern communities. Over the past thirty years, municipal cooperation, aimed at producing a meaningful voice for the North, has occurred but it has been hampered by such conditions as the lack of a vision or unifying concept for northern British Columbia, the lack of public participation in or even knowledge of the efforts to foster broader regional cooperation and the lack of communication between the major stakeholders.

Paul Ramsey examines the plight of northern British Columbia from a somewhat different perspective. Ramsey, a former provincial cabinet minister, explores the inability of successive BC governments to develop structures and agencies to address specifically northern issues. Ramsey examines the reasons why such agencies have not been established in the past and looks at the different models that the provincial government could use to represent northern affairs in cabinet. He proposes the development of a Northern Ministry, an option that he feels has "the best chance of surviving the vicissitudes of political change" and meeting the needs of the Provincial North.

Boris DeWiel's article provides a highly original contribution on the political values and orientations of northerners and westerners in Canada. Using the data from the 2000 Canadian Election Study and the Statistics Canada Postal Code Conversion file, he has quantitatively studied the values of northerners with regard to such issues as Aboriginal–non-Aboriginal relations, gun control, and capital punishment. His study reveals that Canadian northerners do have distinct political values. Moreover, he finds a basis for the political alienation that many northerners feel.

The last three papers focus on the challenges that face local communities in the provincial Norths. In "Municipal Governance for Northern Communities," Joe Garcea explores the work of Saskatchewan's Task Force on Municipal Legislative Renewal and its recommendations for municipal reforms in northern Saskatchewan. Garcea first sketches the evolution of the municipal system in northern Saskatchewan. He then turns to the process of municipal reform, and the needs identified by the Task Force. Finally, he assesses the recommendations of the Task Force and discusses the potential for their implementation.

Ian Urquhart paints a revealing picture of conditions in northern Alberta. Although northern Alberta is resource rich, its communities are faced with enormous political challenges in terms of their abilities to chart their own futures. Urquhart examines the reasons for these challenges, and then offers solutions, particularly the rebirth of regional planning commissions, for ameliorating the weak political position in which the communities of

northern Alberta find themselves.

Tracy Summerville and Greg Poelzer explore the evidence for a distinct northern provincial political identity. They investigate public attitudes to the moratoria on bear hunts, gun control, health care, and the political economy of North-South relations by examining newspaper editorials and government documents. The authors find that the provincial Norths do have distinct political identities. Moreover, they find northerners are taking steps to change their position in Canada from hinterlands of the South to new heartlands in their own right.

This special collection on the provincial Norths is a modest contribution to our understanding of the politics and communities of the provincial Norths. We hope, however, that it will encourage expanded study of the issues and realities of this critically important region of Canada. There is much we can learn and much we still need to know. And if we are successful in this latter goal, then the provincial Norths—rightfully—will no longer be forgotten.