

# Reconciliation in Northern British Columbia?: Future Prospects for Aboriginal–Newcomer Relations

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## Introduction

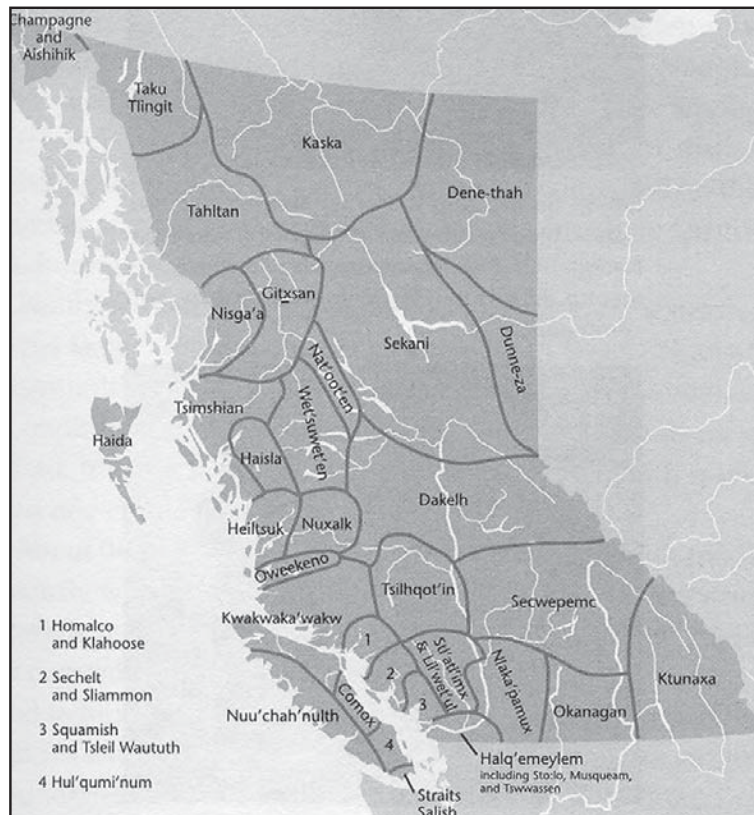
Reconciliation has become a prominent socio-political theme in many liberal democracies around the world. Governments and dominant societies, driven by what one scholar has called “the guilt of nations,”<sup>1</sup> have gradually come to terms with unsavory and hurtful episodes and processes in their history. The United States wrestles fitfully with the prospect of reparations for slavery. Japan struggles with the question of compensation for Korean “comfort women,” enslaved as prostitutes during World War II, and for Allied prisoners of war. The Swiss try to deal with their tainted financial relations with Nazi Germany. In Australia, calls for reconciliation between the European majority and the Aborigines have become a national mantra, and New Zealand has made similar gestures through a comprehensive land and rights resolution process tied to the Treaty of Waitangi (1840).

Canadians, too, face the challenge of living with their past and finding ways to redress the errors of the past. In recent years, major struggles have erupted over veterans’ rights, employment equity in the federal civil service, and the mistreatment of Chinese, Japanese, and Ukrainian–Canadians. The major focus of Canada’s efforts at reconciliation, however, remains on the Indigenous peoples of the country. Across Canada, Aboriginal groups have sought legal, political, and economic means of securing compensation for past injustices and of ensuring themselves an appropriate and influential place in the nation’s future. This struggle has been underway for decades and promises to continue well into the future. In few parts of the country are the issues of reconciliation and Indigenous struggles for a place within the regional order more critical or better articulated than in northern British Columbia.

In the previous paragraph we used the phrase “errors of the past.” The choice of words in this very delicate and contentious issue is important, for the description of the past in this case can certainly influence the outcomes of the present and future. Suppose we had used “crimes” or “sins” instead of “errors,” as others have done. An error is something from which one can absolve oneself with an apology, but a crime suggests punishment and redress, and a sin requires confession and expiation. We are conscious that

the issue presents a minefield of nomenclature, and that there are many points of view on how to describe it.

Aboriginal people represent a substantial percentage of the 350,000 people of northern British Columbia (defined as encompassing the regional mandate of the University of Northern British Columbia, stretch-



First Nations of British Columbia from R.J. Muckle, *First Nations of British Columbia: An Anthropological Survey* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998), p. 7. Used with permission.

ing from 100 Mile House (51°39'N., 121°17'W.) to the Yukon border and from the Alberta boundary to the Queen Charlotte Islands), ranging from a low number in the northeast to nearly a third in the Prince Rupert region. There are approximately fourteen cultural groups in the region (see map, above), residing on reserves and in villages, towns and cities throughout northern British Columbia and in the province's southern centres.<sup>2</sup> There is tremendous cultural diversity between these societies, which range from the hierarchical and highly ordered Nisga'a of the Nass Valley to the more decentralized and widely dispersed Kaska of the far north of the province. The Indigenous peoples and communities represent the full range of the Aboriginal experience in British Columbia, from positive and hopeful to

extremely negative. Some of the most successful self-government initiatives in the country are in this region, but it also contains more than one dysfunctional and traumatized community. There are families and settlements that have integrated well into the market and resource economies of the province and others that remain welfare dependant, with virtually no means of subsistence except government transfer payments. Several of the region's major cities have established strong, workable relationships between Indigenous peoples and newcomers; others labour under a legacy of turmoil and racial disharmony. There is, more than anything, intense regional debate about Aboriginal rights, particularly relating to resource use and land claims, and there is nothing yet approaching a consensus on the proper and future role of Indigenous communities in the North. In northern British Columbia, the challenges of reconciliation are not vague, theoretical concepts—as northerners often claim they are to those they accuse of being the latte-sipping yuppies of the Lower Mainland, whose economic welfare is not directly affected by them. They are, instead, real issues, of pressing concern, seen by almost all observers as critical to the long-term prosperity of the region.

### Reversing Patterns of Development

Northern British Columbia, like most resource-dependent regions, has long been a classic victim of boom and bust economics. During the widely spaced periods of prosperity, particularly the British Columbia gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s, the railway construction era of the early twentieth century, when the Grand Trunk Pacific was built from Edmonton through Prince George to the coast at Prince Rupert, the construction of the Alaska Highway and ancillary facilities in 1942-44, and the post-World War II resource boom (based on timber, hydroelectric development, secondary processing and mining), newcomers flooded into the region, towns grew rapidly, only to fade subsequently when the resources ran out. Some disappeared entirely—the town of Cassiar<sup>3</sup> is a recent example. These development periods emerged in large measure from external pressures. The priorities of southern markets, international demand, and southern British Columbian initiatives spurred (and eventually ended) eras of expansion. Some outsiders came in, generally to make a fast dollar, and most left the region with the money they earned. Others, such as many residents of Cassiar, put down roots, appreciated the beauty of their surroundings, and were bitterly unhappy when they were forced to leave. Profits from the resource activities rarely stayed in the North, adding to the transient nature of the investments and developments.

The polarity of northern developments appears to be shifting somewhat, although external influences remain strongly in evidence. Interna-

tional markets for mineral products determine the pace of mineral exploration and mine openings and closings. External forces over which northerners have no control—most notoriously the recent American duties on softwood lumber—can crush the northern economy. Southern environmental concerns weigh equally, if not more highly, with governments adjudicating major development plans than do northern desires for job-creating megaprojects; the recent ban on mining in the Tatshenshini watershed is an example.<sup>4</sup> Provincial interest in job creation or, as in the first two years of the Gordon Campbell Liberal government (2001-2003), government downsizing, often has had a profound impact on the region. Within a general context that still sees most of the resource wealth in the North developed to the benefit of southern British Columbians or international companies, northern priorities are emerging more regularly on the agenda. Northerners are, like other Canadians, increasingly concerned about job and community security. Most of the major debates in recent years—the Tatshenshini-Windy Craggy mining project, the Kemano Completion-Alcan initiative—have revealed sharp internal differences of opinion about the future of the North. In the Kemano debate, which resulted in the provincial government's closing of the project (after \$500 million had been spent by Alcan on the initiative), Aboriginal groups, environmentalists and area farmers lined up in opposition to urban promoters, union workers from Kitimat and others in contesting the bitterly fought battle. The acrimony surrounding the debate is clear in the vitriolic prose written about it at the time. Bob Hunter, writing about Kemano in *Eye* magazine, stated that "Brian Mulroney's most shameless abuse of office was the way in which he helped out his buddies . . . to try to ram through the \$1.3 billion Kemano Completion project . . . [legal challenges to the project] got Lyin' Brian's boardroom-loving juices flowing."<sup>5</sup> There was much more in this vein, particularly on the anti-Kemano side of the debate.

On other issues, the best example of which was the development of the University of Northern British Columbia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the region demonstrated an uncommon unity of purpose, and was able to force the provincial government to commit resources to the opening of a new, research-intensive institution.

While aspects of the debates over development have changed, a great deal remains unresolved. Aboriginal groups have only rarely aligned themselves with non-Indigenous organizations, and then only fitfully. Environmentalists struggle with the pro-development forces in the region, often finding greater support in the southern cities than within the North. And the long-standing pattern of newcomers seeing northern British Columbia as a temporary home, an opportunity to make money rather than as a place to settle, is still a pervasive feature of northern development. Still, to

a degree that is striking compared to even the 1950s and 1960s, northern British Columbia is increasingly finding its political and collective voice, albeit sometimes discordant and ill-rehearsed.

### Foundations for New Relationships

There are, however, striking and important reasons to believe that the future could be radically different than the past. A series of major developments have changed the political balance in the region, altered social relationships and provided a different foundation for economic development. While many of these processes remain underway, they may hold the preconditions for forging a radically different relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in northern British Columbia.

#### Aboriginal Land Claims and Settlements

The decision of the provincial government in 1990 to commence formal land claims negotiations with Aboriginal people has restructured political and economic relationships in the North. The Nisga'a Final Agreement,<sup>6</sup> which came into effect on May 11, 2000, is still the only successfully negotiated modern treaty in the province, and has set a benchmark against which all expectations and plans are now based. The Nisga'a Agreement provided for the transfer of \$253 million for various purposes, the cost shared by the federal and provincial governments. The total cost of the Final Agreement, including the value of land transferred, foregone forestry revenues, and the like, is quoted as \$487.1 million in 1999 dollars, with the federal share being \$255 million. Even more important, this landmark treaty assured the Nisga'a of both the right of self-government and an ongoing role in the management of regional resources. The mere presence of the land claims process provides a foundation for the future of the North, one that will be marked by greater financial resources in the region (money transferred to Aboriginal peoples tends to stay much closer to home than income in the resource sector, for example), an increasing level of local control over resources and environmental matters, and the dramatic re-empowerment of Aboriginal peoples and communities. The North, to put it simply, will never be the same again.

#### Aboriginal Political Power

In addition to the expansion of Aboriginal land claims negotiations, the federal and provincial governments have committed themselves (with varying degrees of enthusiasm) to Indigenous self-government. This has, in fact, become the mantra of liberals in this generation, offered as the panacea that will address the ills and challenges of Aboriginal communities. What tastes sweet to the political Left is bitter in the mouth of the

Right. During the debate in Parliament over the Nisga'a Agreement, Ken Epp, Canadian Alliance MP for Elk Island, Alberta, stated that it "will go down in history as one of the darkest points of the Thirty-sixth Parliament because of the fact that they will have put into the constitution rules that divide us based on race."<sup>7</sup> While self-government, like previous panaceas for Aboriginal peoples, has been oversold, northern British Columbians are well aware that self-government is a partial reality. Aboriginal communities and tribal councils have control over resources. They increasingly have a formal presence in regional decision-making bodies, and they continue to assert their demand for greater autonomy and regulatory freedom. While some of the transitions are political and administrative, the most profound impacts have been socio-cultural. Aboriginal peoples and communities have become more publicly assertive, their experience in government adding to their self-confidence, and there is increasing understanding in Indigenous circles that Aboriginal issues must figure prominently in the future of the region.

#### Decline of the Resource Economy

For much of the post-World War II era, a rapidly expanding resource economy dominated northern British Columbia, especially after the great industrial boom that began around 1965. Southern and foreign companies began to dominate the economy, whose industrial sector had previously involved small-scale, often locally owned industries. After 1970, local business people played a declining role in determining the economic course of northern British Columbia. Worse, from the point of view of northern employment, was what has happened to the resource sector after 1990. Since then, the northern resource sector has been in a virtual free fall, with mine closures and a huge assault from interest groups in the United States on the region's forest industry. The company town of Cassiar was closed and the buildings were removed. Tumbler Ridge and Granisle saw their mining activity drastically scaled back or closed altogether.

The history of Tumbler Ridge was, like that of Cassiar, an example of what could happen to a community whose economy was entirely in the control of outside interests. It was founded in the early 1980s to service the "Northeast Coal Project," a \$3 billion scheme to export 100 million tonnes of metallurgical coal to Japan. A well-planned community was laid out, connected by road to the provincial highway system, and a 129-km-long spur of the BC Rail line was built to carry the coal to new port facilities at Prince Rupert. The first coal was shipped in 1984, when the town had a population of 3,833. The population peaked at 4,650 in 1991. But when the world price of coal fell, one of the town's two mines shut down, and by 1999 the population was 2,633. Unlike Cassiar, the community did not dis-

appear, but it was forced to search for economic alternatives, which were hard to come by in such a remote region. Town boosters have had some success in selling company-owned houses at distress prices (a bungalow for \$25,000) to people wanting a resort home, but its future is uncertain.<sup>8</sup>

The major hydroelectric projects of the 1950s and 1960s, of which the Bennett Dam at Williston Lake is the most famous, proved to be the apogee of river developments; the one attempt to restart the sector, the Kemano Completion Project of the mid-1990s, foundered and was killed by the provincial government. The reason the first project was completed but the second was not is that the Bennett Dam was finished in 1967, in an era before environmental concerns were taken very seriously, especially in the North, and the second was proposed at the height of such concerns.<sup>9</sup> In the 1990s, logging expanded and stayed comparatively strong, but major technological improvements resulted in mass downsizing of northern workforces and the loss of thousands of high-paying, unionized jobs. While the economic consequences of these changes were considerable, the decline of the resource sector had other impacts. Southern and foreign companies have largely retreated from the region; they are no longer the potent force that they once were in the North. Southern politicians, likewise, no longer view northern British Columbia as a *tabula rasa*, upon which the province and nation can paint an economic and social picture of their liking. Northerners have become, in turn, more suspicious of the motives of larger firms, better disposed toward regional entrepreneurs, and increasingly interested in small-scale, sustained initiatives. Dreams of northern mega-projects resurface from time to time, but most northerners have become more incrementalist in their thinking about economic development.

#### Growing Concern About Environmental Protection

Until the 1980s, environmental considerations played a relatively small part in regional planning. Rapid resource development resulted in the construction of the WAC Bennett Dam, with effects on the health of the Peace River Delta and on the First Nations people displaced by it, all still subjects of controversy. Most of the major towns in the region (notably Prince George and Quesnel) were built around noisy, smoky sawmills or malodorous pulp and paper plants. Northerners joked about the unpleasantness as reflecting the “smell of money,” and accepted environmental damage as a cost of economic opportunity.

What was once a fairly uncritical approach toward environmental concerns, however, has shifted toward a greater balance. Developers are increasingly held accountable, not just to federal and provincial regulations, but also to regional sensitivities. There is no regional consensus on these matters—the development-environmentalist divide is among the

most bitter in the North—but environmentalists are increasingly important in the region.

More generally, northern British Columbia has shifted gradually from a commitment to short-term development to a greater understanding of long-term needs and obligations. This, in turn, has had a substantial impact on the economic planning for the region and on relations between Aboriginal peoples and the non-Indigenous population.

#### Increased Stability of the Non-Aboriginal Population

Through much of the twentieth century, the non-Indigenous population of northern British Columbia has been extremely transient. Many workers came North only for the summer construction season and for seasonal resource work. Those who remained year-round typically migrated out of the North, taking most of their earnings and investments with them. That pattern appears to be shifting. An increasing number of northern residents have moved North because of the environment, outdoor recreational opportunities, the small size of regional centres, and the opportunities to work with Indigenous peoples and communities. At the same time, some communities have reached a size where they can offer amenities that appeal to people who do not necessarily want the “wilderness experience.” In 1935, when Prince George had a population of only a few thousand, it was truly a frontier community. Even in 1960, with about 12,000 people, it had few big-city amenities. Then the pulp mills were built, the population zoomed to nearly 70,000 by the early 1970s,<sup>10</sup> and a managerial class moved in. By 1975 it had a semi-professional symphony orchestra and two theatrical companies (one professional), and by 2001 two Starbucks outlets. People with a higher degree of commitment to the North—and time will tell if this commitment continues to hold—are more likely to be concerned about long-term possibilities, opportunities and responsibilities than those who came North to make money and leave. Long-term residents, as well, are more likely to make efforts to reach an accommodation with Aboriginal people in the communities.

Ironically, the Aboriginal population appears to be heading in the opposite direction. There is a significant movement from reserves and villages to towns and cities in the North. There is a secondary, and also substantial, migration from northern settlements to southern centres. The Nisga’a, for example, maintain “virtual” villages in Terrace, just outside the Nass Valley, Prince Rupert and Vancouver. Women, usually with their children, make up the bulk of this migration out of the villages.



### UNBC and Regional Colleges

Regions need icons, symbols of their potential and the possibilities. The University of Northern British Columbia plays this role, particularly since it was built over the objections of southern British Columbians (who wanted to spend the money on southern institutions) and because it has exceeded expectations by such a sizable amount. Before UNBC was created (the university opened officially in 1994), the region was served by three regional colleges (the College of New Caledonia in Prince George, Northern Lights College, with campuses in the northeast, and Northwest Community College, with seven campuses between Smithers and Prince Rupert) and the University College of the Cariboo, based in Kelowna. These colleges seemed to epitomize the limited reach of the North. They did well with limited resources and complex mandates, but they struggled to serve diverse and widely dispersed populations. The colleges, by their mandates, produced little original research and worked closely with the large companies that dominated the regional economy. UNBC, in contrast, represented a declaration of regional self-confidence. Northerners, when launching the institution, seemed determined to assure themselves of a “complete” society, one that had the capacity to conduct research on regional themes, teach students from the North, attend the intellectual and educational needs of First Nations peoples, and represent northern British Columbia to the world. Because its founding was strongly supported by communities across the northern part of the province, UNBC gave tangible evidence of the benefits of intra-regional cooperation, for the initiative flew in the face of long-standing and divisive struggles between sub-regions and, even more disruptive, between neighbouring communities. The successful establishment of a new university demonstrated a growing regional self-confidence, a stronger understanding of the region as a northern environment, and a commitment to collective self-improvement.

### Barriers to Reconciliation

While there are promising signs of a merging of Indigenous and newcomer interests, of greater understanding of Aboriginal aspirations, and of acceptance (if grudgingly) of the needs of Indigenous peoples and communities, major issues remain. The path to reconciliation in northern British Columbia includes a number of formidable barriers and impediments, and there is no assurance that the end goal will be reached. Reconciliation has proved distressingly elusive around the world. There is little reason to believe that northern British Columbia will find it any easier to resolve the struggle for cultural understanding and cooperation.

### Debating Responsibility for the Past

In northern British Columbia, as elsewhere in Canada, debates about history and historical responsibility often interfere with attempts at reconciliation. From the Aboriginal perspective, the matter is clear. Newcomers took the land and resources and offered little in the way of compensation. Intrusive government policies and the work of missionaries and teachers attacked Indigenous ways of living. Any attempt at resolving differences, the argument goes, has to begin with a recognition of historical guilt and contemporary responsibility for the injustices of the past. Apologies are seen to be an essential element in the reconciliation process. In response, some non-Aboriginals, notably church leaders, find it easy to apologize. These people have a strong sense of historical guilt and are prepared to accept the responsibility for addressing the wrongs of the past, even to the extent, as in the case of the Anglican Diocese of Cariboo, of going out of business as a result of paying compensation for past wrongs done to Indigenous people.<sup>11</sup> At the opposite extreme, growing numbers of newcomers reject the idea of collective responsibility and argue that the focus should be on the future, not the past. Some suggest that Aboriginal peoples benefited from the contact experience and that the guilt of the past has been expiated through generous government subsidies. For several decades, the large middle group between these positions leaned in favour of accepting responsibility for the past. The balance appears to be shifting, with a greater emphasis on contemporary situations, support for equal legal rights, and less commitment to the idea of paying in this generation for the actions of past ones.

### Ideological Differences

There are profound differences of opinion between and within the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sectors. In northern British Columbia, there are individuals and groups committed to working cooperatively with provincial and national governments to create viable administrative and legal solutions to contemporary difficulties. Other First Nations groups maintain a sovereigntist stance and argue that Aboriginal people still own the land and resources, that they are "nations" that should deal with Ottawa on equal footing, and that any concession to government demands represents an abandonment of Aboriginal ideals. And, as with most groups, the majority of the Indigenous people fit somewhere in the middle. Non-Aboriginal ideological differences are just as profound. The "liberal" position holds that contemporary governments should provide compensation for the past, respect the legitimacy (within national parameters) of Aboriginal self-government, and commit themselves to the empowerment of Aboriginal communities through government support and legislative protections.

The “conservative” position, represented by the Canadian Alliance party and personified by Prince George Member of Parliament Dick Harris, argues for equality and the “level playing field.” The Canadian Alliance rejects the idea of separate legal status for Indigenous peoples, suggests that segregationist policies are making a bad situation worse, and urges free market and democratic solutions on Indigenous communities. Since members of this party have been elected with large majorities, it seems safe to assume that this is the predominant view of First Nations affairs in this part of the country.<sup>12</sup> With such ideological divisions throughout northern British Columbia, it is difficult to create a political environment where support for Aboriginal rights stabilizes and rises. At present, for example, the growing assertiveness of separatist (Nisga’a) or sovereigntist positions usually has the effect of enhancing non-Aboriginal support for legal and constitutional equality.

#### Racism and Intergroup Animosity

Like other parts of the country, especially those in which there is a proportionately large population of First Nations people, northern British Columbia has legacies of troubled race relations, made worse by the fact that it was outside the treaty process until the present day. Aboriginal people remember the long-standing tensions that divided Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Official policies of segregation kept these communities apart across much of the North; unofficial racism drove severe wedges between the ethnic groups. While there are now few racist outbursts in public settings, since public racism is no longer fashionable, private conversations among non-Aboriginal people are often infected with a strand of anti-Aboriginal sentiment. Increasingly, Indigenous conversation is sometimes laced with anti-newcomer images and suggestions. There are tensions within the non-Aboriginal sector (particularly involving Europeans and South Asians) and the Aboriginal population, where inter-tribal conflicts have a long and occasionally bitter history. That the relationships among northerners have sometimes included racist outbursts, strong language and bitter divisions presents an impediment to regional reconciliation.

#### Financial Instability

In the 1960s, northern British Columbia brimmed with confidence. New mines seemed to open annually. Large lumber and pulp and paper operations expanded routinely. Communities developed at a rapid pace. Wages were high and work seemed available to all who wanted it. In the first years of the twenty-first century, however, a very different picture emerges. Almost all of the mines have shut. Company towns are mostly abandoned. Technological change has reduced the workforce in the remaining indus-

trial plants. Resource developments that once fuelled dreams of unending prosperity lie mired in government regulations, environmental challenges, and Aboriginal claims, if in fact declining world prices have not already reduced the demand for the resources. These times of uncertainty carry their own dynamics: out-migration, high unemployment, lower wages, declining housing prices, and inter-community rivalry, which is one of the most consistently disruptive elements of northern British Columbian life. The difficulties, in turn, generate a search for scapegoats—and many local observers have held Aboriginal peoples (and, to a lesser extent, environmentalists) responsible for the declining economy. It is important to remember that the provincial government's costly decision to close down the Kemano Completion Project in 1995 was celebrated by environmentalists and some key Aboriginal communities but was sharply criticized by many union workers and communities that stood to gain jobs and income from the massive project. Times of economic difficulty are generally not the occasion for expansive and creative efforts at social cohesion. Or to put it more bluntly: bad times often bring out the worst in people, and these are not good economic times in the region.

#### Political Unknowns

On a more general level, northern British Columbia is awash in political uncertainties. Aboriginal self-government is a reality, but only at a preliminary and somewhat theoretical level. It is not known if the third level of government concept will work, or if municipal and regional governments in the North will support this initiative. The federal government is in the process of rethinking its relationship with First Nations groups and has launched a highly controversial revision of the Indian Act. The Government of British Columbia under Liberal leader Gordon Campbell is committed to redefining the role of government, and significantly reducing the administrative presence in the lives of British Columbians. At the federal level, new imperatives are replacing old certainties. A long-standing obsession with Quebec is waning (one hopes permanently, but probably not), but so is the traditional southern interest in rural, Aboriginal and northern issues. These have long been near to the hearts of the thinking sector of the Canadian electorate, representing age-old commitments of the country and its founding peoples. But there is a new order unfolding in Canada. More than twenty percent of the population is now made up of naturalized Canadians, and most of those come from non-European countries and have settled in a handful of major southern cities. They are in the process of redrafting national priorities, refocusing attention on urban and southern issues. Federal politicians, it seems, are gradually realizing that there are relatively few votes to be won by responding rapidly

to Aboriginal issues (hence the pattern of largely ignoring the Assembly of First Nations) or paying much attention to the country's northern regions. There is no new John Diefenbaker in the House of Commons stirring interest (albeit incoherently) in the idea of a national northern vision. At a variety of levels, therefore, political uncertainty characterizes the political life of northern British Columbia. Again, this is scarcely an environment in which new models of reconciliation and ethnic accommodation are likely to arise and flourish.

#### Internal Rivalries

If there is one fundamental flaw in the political culture of northern British Columbia it is the existence and intensity of sub-regional and inter-community rivalry. For several decades, the proximate communities of northern British Columbia (especially Dawson Creek, Fort St. John and Chetwynd in the northeast, Prince George, Quesnel and Vanderhoof in the middle, and Terrace, Kitimat and Prince Rupert in the northwest) have struggled against each other. Efforts to secure government commitments or private-sector investment have often run up against inter-community competition. The strength, and occasional bitterness, of these rivalries has enabled southern politicians to play communities off against one another and, in the process, delay making substantial commitments to the North. The one major exception to this rule—the region-wide effort to convince the Government of British Columbia to build the University of Northern British Columbia—illustrates the potential power of intra-regional cooperation. There are not many examples of the successful bridging of community tensions and rivalries.

#### Radicalism of Aboriginal Communities

It would be incorrect to leave the impression that the barriers to reconciliation rest entirely with the non-Aboriginal community. First Nations peoples in northern British Columbia face a series of comparable dilemmas and challenges. Inter-group rivalries are every bit as strong in the Aboriginal world as between newcomer communities. Long-standing tensions between the We'etsuwueten and the Nisga'a, for example, are but one of dozens of cases of intense disagreements over borders, resource rights and land entitlements. The fact that the land claims of various First Nations actually overlap does not bode well for a harmonious settlement of the issues.<sup>13</sup> Intra-community struggles in Aboriginal communities are as strong, and often stronger, than those in northern newcomer towns and villages. Perhaps the greatest challenge rests in the gathering radicalism that can be seen in many northern Aboriginal villages. Young people—particularly unemployed, poorly educated and culturally disoriented

men—are increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of change. While elders talk of historic relationships to the land, while community leaders counsel caution on land claims and resource negotiations, young people appear to be getting more and more angry. These frustrations bubble up in numerous ways, primarily through self-destructive behaviours (suicide, violence, drug and alcohol abuse), alliances with sovereigntist Aboriginal leaders, and an increased willingness to engage in public protest. Angry outbursts, in the form of roadblocks and other direct actions, have had the effect of stiffening non-Aboriginal resolve, rather than generating greater sympathy or a desire to speed the process of reconciliation.

### What Would Northern Reconciliation Look Like?

There are no assurances that reconciliation will proceed smoothly or swiftly in northern British Columbia. Despite the barriers noted, however, it appears as though the process of bridging the cultural, political and economic gaps between Indigenous peoples and newcomers is more advanced in the North than in most parts of Canada. In northern British Columbia, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people share the same communities, interact through the institutions of civil society, work together and, often, argue face-to-face about very different visions of the region's future.

While reconciliation is a theoretical concept in much of southern and urban Canada, something of a parlour game among the middle-class liberals who populate metropolitan areas, the concept speaks directly to the everyday experience of many northerners. The success or failure of attempts at reconciliation may well determine the economic and social trajectory of the region in a way that simply will not happen in southern, urban environments.

There are a variety of activities and processes underway, which, cumulatively, contribute toward the drawing together of peoples and cultures and that may begin to build bridges across the once seemingly unbridgeable ethnic chasm in the region.

### Economic Joint Ventures and Commercial Cooperation

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are increasingly working and living together. Educational and training programs are slowly adding Indigenous people to the market economy. Aboriginal members of the middle class are not as rare as they were in the early 1970s. In addition, the expanding flow of money into the hands of band governments and tribal councils has resulted in commercial joint ventures between Aboriginal communities and newcomer-controlled enterprises. These economic connections hold the potential of creating even more positive interaction and collaborative economic development.

### Intermarriage

In northern British Columbia (as across North America), there is a growing number of inter-racial marriages. The general pattern has been for non-Aboriginal men to marry Aboriginal women, especially those with advanced education. These relationships draw families and communities together, creating opportunities for interaction and understanding. This same pattern, however, causes significant problems within First Nations communities. Aboriginal women are more likely to pursue advanced studies and, equally, are more likely to marry outside their ethnic group. This has produced a large gap between the number of eligible men and eligible women in many Aboriginal communities.

### Cooperation of First Nations Governments and Local Authorities

Probably the most important element in the process of reconciliation attracts almost no attention. In every community in the North, First Nations and local governments are interacting on a more regular and intense fashion. These discussions, negotiations and agreement focus on extremely pragmatic issues—fire protection, water and sewage systems, access to libraries and swimming pools, education, snow clearing and the like. The agreements that have resulted have bound communities together in new and intricate ways and, perhaps more importantly, have created a much higher level of social and political understanding than existed before.

### Recognition by Non-Aboriginal People that Aboriginal Cultures are Real, Alive and Vibrant

For much of the twentieth century, non-Aboriginal Canadians assumed that Indigenous cultures were dying. The growing assertiveness of Aboriginal governments and peoples, coupled with a resurgence of public displays of Indigenous cultures, has made it clear that Indigenous traditions, customs and values remain very much intact. Non-Aboriginal northerners found it difficult over the years to generate enthusiasm for negotiations with “dying” cultures, which were, in any case, considered inferior. The realization that these cultures and communities are alive, even vibrant, and certainly real has encouraged many non-Aboriginal people to take far more seriously Indigenous claims to the right to participate in shaping the future of northern British Columbia.

### Gradual Equalization of Circumstances

Although movement in this area has been slow, the closing of the economic gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples has produced a greater sense of equality, and should continue to do so. Improvements in education for First Nations, coupled with declining wages and lesser job

security for non-Aboriginal peoples, have created a better sense of shared circumstances and, therefore, a shared destiny. So long as Indigenous peoples lived impoverished lives on isolated, rarely visited reserves, it was difficult for non-Aboriginal people to see them as partners in the region's future. That understanding is changing, albeit slowly.

#### Open Discussion of Problems

Northerners are not, as a rule, shy people. Public conversation is blunt, frank and to the point. Political correctness has not taken full root yet in a society that favours directness and is tolerant of bluntness. The North is getting accustomed to an open airing of regional problems, ranging from political marginalization to economic distress and from alcohol abuse (in both sectors of the population) and widespread health problems. Community leaders are hard pressed to find solutions to problems that are not openly acknowledged. The North acknowledges the issues, seeks solutions, and encourages debate.

#### Land Claims, Resource Controls and Financial Settlements

We would argue that the fundamental basis for reconciliation rests in the non-Aboriginal acceptance, however grudging, of the inevitability of Aboriginal empowerment. The message cannot be clearer: Aboriginal self-government, major court decisions in the favour of Indigenous communities, land claims agreements and negotiations, massive transfers of funds from the federal government to First Nations, and other changes have created a sizeable amount of political and economic space for Aboriginal people. Indigenous northerners will play a critical role in the future of the North, regardless of the wishes and the plans of the non-Aboriginal communities. Armed with the resources and authority necessary to chart their own futures, Aboriginal peoples now have the power to command the attention of the non-Indigenous majority in northern British Columbia. Pragmatic considerations, rather than soaring rhetoric or high-sounding political and constitutional principles, have provided the most fundamental precondition for reconciliation.

#### Conclusions

Northern British Columbia is changing in fundamental and important ways. Aboriginal people now play an increasingly prominent role in northern decision-making, and their political and economic importance in the region will expand in the years to come. Non-Aboriginal northerners and the Government of British Columbia, are increasingly accepting this reality and are working on the creation of viable models for sustainable interaction. But the path forward will not be easy; both sides will make



mistakes, their reserves of goodwill will be strained, and roadblocks will emerge. But the direction appears to be firmly set, and the trajectory of reconciliation has been firmly set.

The even more fundamental accomplishment of northern British Columbia, shared to varying degrees with other northern jurisdictions, is that the North is taking the lead on determining the pace, nature and intensity of the transformation. The reconciliation between people of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent on both personal and practical levels has not been mandated by external authorities, but rather is emerging organically from the changing dynamics of northern society and the regional economy. The North is seeking to find solutions based on northern needs and imperatives. Southern Canada, which for generations imposed national and provincial priorities on politically powerless northern regions, lags far behind in making progress on these critical relationships. While few people are currently taking notice of the developments, the steady advance toward reconciliation will eventually find its audience. In time, the rest of the country will gradually catch on. Eventually, Canadians will come to realize that some of the key lessons on how to create an environment for reconciliation are to be found in what used to be described as the "land of tomorrow"—the Canadian North.

### About the Authors

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### Endnotes

1. Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (New York: Norton, 2000).
2. Just over half of First Nations people in British Columbia today do not live on reserves. Larry Loyie, "Vancouver First Nations People," <<http://www.discovervancouver.com/GVB/first-nations-people.asp>>, accessed March 2003.
3. Cassiar was a town in northwestern BC built around an asbestos mine that operated from 1953 to 1992. In the mid-1970s it had a population of 1500. When the mine closed, the town was abandoned. A group of former residents keeps its

- memory alive. See <<http://www.cassiar.ca/cassiar/cassiar.html>> (March 2003).
4. In June 1993 the British Columbia government blocked the plan of Geddes Resources Ltd., to open a copper mine at Windy Craggy mountain by declaring the region a wilderness park. Geddes had planned to employ 600 people at the mine <<http://www.american.edu/TED/GEDDES.HTM>> (March 2003). For the contemporary debate on mining in the region, see D.A. Barr, "Wilderness and Industry Can and Do Co-Exist" <[http://www.bc-mining-house.com/land/opin\\_db.htm](http://www.bc-mining-house.com/land/opin_db.htm)> (March 2003), and Joel Connelly, "In the Northwest: B.C. Mining Industry Wants its Pound of Flesh," <<http://www.earthcares.org/press-nov-25-02.html>> (March 2003). The Kemano completion project involved the diversion of water from the Nechako River watershed to permit Alcan to generate more power. After a campaign of protests the project was cancelled.
  5. Eye Weekly, 14 July 1994.
  6. A useful guide to the history of the Nisga'a First Nation and the treaty has been prepared by the Research Branch of the Library of Parliament, and may be found online (March 2003) at <<http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/PRBpubs/prb992-e.htm>>.
  7. Ken Epp, press release 29 October 1999, <<http://www.kenep.com/spandcl/release/nisga.htm>> (March 2003).
  8. A good deal of information on Tumbler Ridge can be obtained on the internet, almost all of it quite upbeat; gloomy news must be taken from newspapers: <<http://www.nwcorridor.com/bc/tumblerridge.html>> and <<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/kingcoal/5/tumblerridge/project.htm>>.
  9. The WAC Bennett dam is one of the world's largest earth fill structures. It stretches 2 km across the Peace River Canyon, and is 183 m high. It created Williston Lake, 166,000 hectares in area. Along with the Peace River Canyon Dam, 23 km downstream, it can generate nearly 3.5 million kilowatts.
  10. The population of Prince George peaked around 1999, when the provincial government estimated it at 80,000 (probably a high estimate). It then declined; the census of 2001 gave it at 72,000, and if recent school closures are an indication it was probably less than that as of 2003.
  11. See the Anglican Journal, October 2000 and October 2001, and The B.C. Catholic, 7 January 2002, on this issue.
  12. The First Nations critic for the Canadian Alliance party is, however, not from this region, but from the prairies—Brian Pallister, member for Portage La Prairie.
  13. There is a huge literature on the subject of land claims in British Columbia. A web search using the words "land claims BC" produced 148,000 hits.