

# Some Thoughts on a Northern Ministry for British Columbia

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For at least the past two decades students of political structures have lamented that British Columbia lags badly behind other provinces in developing government structures and agencies to address specifically northern issues. The gap between the increasingly diversified and vibrant economy of the Vancouver-Victoria region and the stagnating resource extraction economy of the northern two-thirds of the province continues to widen. On almost all measures of social well being—educational attainment, health status, incidence of poverty—the Provincial North ranks significantly below the Lower Mainland. Yet the goal of developing politically stable, bureaucratically powerful agencies to analyse and address the needs of northern communities remains as elusive now as when the first President of the University of Northern British Columbia, Dr. Geoffrey Weller, proposed the establishment of a Ministry of Northern Affairs nine years ago.<sup>1</sup>

I propose to explore common explanations of what has prevented the establishment of such an agency to serve northern British Columbia, to examine various ways in which the provincial government could address the legitimate demand of the provincial North for concentrated attention to its economic and social issues, and to propose an option that, I feel, has the best chance of surviving the vicissitudes of political change and address the needs of the North. I bring to this task no formal training; I am neither an historian nor a political scientist. However, for ten years I was a practicing politician representing and advocating for a northern British Columbia riding. In that task I often wished for the support and assistance that such an agency could provide to the region's elected representatives.

## Why Are We Lagging Behind Other Provinces?

Many reasons are given for the lack of development of such an agency. The economic "opening up" of northern British Columbia for modern resource extraction was late in coming compared to other provinces. Until the granting of large-scale forest licenses and pulp agreements in the 1960s, the forest industry of the North was fragmented and limited largely to inade-

quately capitalized smaller operations. The completion of BC Rail from Vancouver to Prince George and the development of the hydroelectric resources of the Peace River were necessary preconditions for the development of other resource industries. That may be true but, as the decades dragged by and the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, this explanation for the lack of government action seemed increasingly suspect.

Another often cited reason is the lack of homogeneity of British Columbia's North. There are at least three, maybe four, "Norths" within the region served by the University of Northern British Columbia. The damp northwestern part of the province has shared much in economy and culture with the coastal communities of Vancouver Island and the mid-coast since before European settlement. Northeast of the Rockies, the Peace River country is in many ways an extension of the oil and gas and agricultural region stretching west from mid-Saskatchewan across Alberta. And the Central Interior—from the "New Caledonia"<sup>2</sup> of Simon Fraser south through the Cariboo—has built much of its economy on the common and successive foundations of fur and ore and timber. However, distinct as the sub-economies and sub-regions of the North may be, the similarities of opportunities and problems in resource communities unify the vast geography of northern British Columbia. Strong as inter-regional rivalry can sometimes be, it can be and has been overcome when a common goal—such as establishing a university for the North—arises.

A third possible reason is simple bureaucratic resistance. Comfortably counting the March blossoms and buying English tweed in Victoria, why would mandarins want to relocate to small towns in a frozen wasteland that they know little about and can barely locate on a map? Or, to be more serious, why would a deputy minister of education or of economic development wish to aid the establishment of a rival—a northern ministry that would not only usurp some valuable bureaucratic turf but also point out what a poor job the prior owner had been doing of cultivating it?

However, the record will, I feel, not support this analysis either. Where political will is robust enough, bureaucratic dithering and intransigence are not the insurmountable barriers that the author of *Yes, Minister* would have us believe. The real failing has been lack of sufficient political will through successive administrations. Although Social Credit, New Democrat, and Liberal governments have recognized that there are political benefits to be reaped by paying, or appearing to pay, special attention to the needs of the provincial North, none has been sufficiently bold in designing government structures or agencies to address those needs.

### Approaches Tried So Far

There have, however, been some nascent attempts to deal with the issue. In the late 1980s the Social Credit administration appointed regional “Ministers of State,” whose duties were to attend to and advocate for the economic development of and government resources for their regions. Unfortunately these appointments were really political afterthoughts of an administration near the end of its time in office. There was no real policy focus on northern or interior issues; “Ministers of State” existed for all regions of the province. Nor was there any bureaucratic support for the initiative. The various ministers had other—“real”—line ministries to run, real ministerial responsibilities to attend to. And without staff resources devoted to the task of regional development, the ministers became little more than designated ribbon-snippers for government projects in their areas of the province.

In the late 1990s the NDP government resurrected the idea of a Minister Responsible for Northern Development. Such a minister—a minister without portfolio—had been appointed by the Barrett government of 1972-75: Alf Nunweiler, the MLA for Prince George. Mr. Nunweiler had all the glory of the title, and none of the resources to actually do anything more than lobby his cabinet colleagues on behalf of the North. The new minister, Dan Miller, the MLA for the North Coast, had considerably more clout. He ran a line ministry of importance to the North, Energy and Mines, and was also a very active and forceful Deputy Premier.

Moreover, he also established the closest thing to a true agency devoted to northern issues that British Columbia has seen to date: the Northern Commission for Economic Development. Established in 1998, this Commission had a small staff located in Prince George, a small budget of a couple million dollars, and a mammoth responsibility—coordinating government attention to economic development projects that would benefit northern communities. The idea for such a focused agency grew out of a Summit on Northern Economic Development held in Prince George in late 1997. The conference participants, drawn from across the North, were cool to the idea of a new, large northern ministry. Many said that their experience with existing ministries had not been exceedingly positive, and another one of those creatures was not what they desired. However, they did want government assistance for smaller communities that had minimal economic development expertise in their town or city administrations. They badly needed help in attracting new economic ventures. They also badly wanted assistance in coordinating the provincial government’s attention and responses to such projects—sort of a government agent to deal with government processes.

The Northern Commission was a response to this request. The Commissioner, John Backhouse, a well-respected former mayor of Prince

George, had not only a vast territory to attend to, but also a huge Victoria-based public service to influence. By most accounts Mr. Backhouse did an admirable job, and, if politics were a rational exercise, the Northern Commission would be a vibrant agency to this day.

However, 2001 was an election year, and several northern Liberal candidates decided to attack the Commission as an example of bureaucratic fat that should be trimmed. The Commissioner, Mr. Backhouse, was also attacked personally for his ties to the New Democratic Party. After the mammoth Liberal election victory, over the objections of northern municipal politicians—many of them staunch Liberals—the Commission was disbanded, and British Columbia's attempt at developing a northern agency to respond to northern issues ended.

At present, no agency has assumed the functions of the Commission. The new Liberal government did continue the practice of appointing a Minister for Northern Development: Richard Neufeld, the Minister of Energy and Mines, but there is no staff structure to support him in accomplishing the task that his title implies. The government also formalized the group of MLAs representing the region from 100 Mile House north to the Yukon border as the "Northern Caucus." The theory was that this group would be a political force pushing northern issues. However, since its appointment with some fanfare, this group of MLAs has been largely invisible as a locus of political activity.

## The Task

Such is the none-too-glorious recent history of the British Columbia government's attempt to deal with northern issues through organizational initiatives. What, then, are the tasks that need to be addressed and what attributes should such an agency or organization have? Not much has really changed since Weller examined this issue. Diversification of an economy devoted to extraction of natural resources, production of commodity products, and sale of those products in the international market becomes more crucial every year. While the same amount of timber is being logged as two decades ago, while ore is still coming out of the ground, and while the oil and gas sector shows promise for future development, corporate concentration and technological change have led to fewer jobs and community benefits for the same or greater amount of production. Even the largest urban centre in northern BC, Prince George, lost over three percent of its population between the 1991 and 2001 censuses. For some of the smaller villages, the future is starting to look increasingly like that of the gold rush towns of the nineteenth century.

A second large task is designing and delivering social, health, and education programs in ways that meet the unique needs of northern com-

munities—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Dealing with child poverty, inferior health status or other challenges in northern communities is not simply a matter of writing larger cheques—though the current program cutbacks make the task even more difficult. The challenge is designing programs that are sensitive to the real situation in the North. For example, a stated goal of the University of Northern British Columbia was to increase the participation of Aboriginal peoples in advanced education—both as a matter of justice and as a way to build increased capacity in First Nation communities for self-government. Regrettably, the early attempts fell short of expectations; the underlying issue was that the participation and success of Aboriginal children in elementary and secondary school needed to be addressed first—an issue to which the provincial government and northern school districts have now turned their attention.

Underlying inappropriate policy decisions and programs poorly designed for northern needs is a fundamental lack of knowledge about northern issues in the public service in Victoria. This is, of course, not terribly surprising. A growing majority of British Columbians live in urban areas, most within a hundred miles of the US border; government programs and delivery systems must be designed for that reality. But too often addressing the needs of the less than ten percent of the province's population that lives in the North becomes an afterthought—if any thought is given to the issue at all. While the 1990s saw increasing interest by researchers in the provincial Norths across Canada, few results of this research have yet filtered into the day-to-day operation of the provincial public service.

Every northern MLA has his or her favourite story illustrating the lack of knowledge about the North in Victoria; one of my highlights, or lowlights, was the time when, as the Minister of Health, I was touring Peace region health facilities and meeting with care providers. After a full schedule of events in Dawson Creek one morning, I had some time before the AirBC flight left for the South. The person planning the tour, a highly energetic and committed public servant, called me from Victoria and suggested that, rather than waste my afternoon, I should drop in on the hospital in Fort Nelson. The nearly 500 kilometres between Dawson Creek and Fort Nelson were a northern reality that had never entered her mind.

While such incidents, grimly amusing though they are, are not the main problem, they do illustrate the last issue that a northern agency must deal with: the sense of isolation and grievance endemic to the North. If Canadians lost a little faith in their governments during the last part of the twentieth century, in the North everyone became an atheist. The level of political discontent is very high. The archetypal northern rant about the cappuccino-sucking, granola-chomping, condo-dwelling, web-footed southerners who know little and understand less about the part of the

province that shares a climate with the rest of Canada may be amusing, but it reflects real sense of political segregation from the rest of the province. Whatever agency or organization is established must not only be, but be seen to be, focused on the needs of the North.

Aside from a northern focus in all it does, the agency or organization must have a number of other qualities. It must, to a large extent, be located in the North and, preferably, be staffed by people who have actually lived there for a while. It must have a sense of permanence about it: it must be able to survive changes in government or in government direction. It needs to have clout within government—at both the bureaucratic and political levels. And finally it needs to have respect in the North.

### The Options—Political Structures

Two of the options that have already been mentioned focus primarily on the political structure of government. While they may meet the test of being in and of the North they nevertheless have serious weaknesses.

Consider first the appointment of a minister—with or without other ministerial responsibilities—for the North, or for northern development. Such an appointment has political attractiveness. The government is seen to be recognizing the problem and designating an individual to be the point person in dealing with it. It is an option that has been used in other provinces. Avoiding the establishment of a large new bureaucracy to handle northern issues is also attractive in a time of scarce government resources. Since the minister will be from the North, he or she will have considerable knowledge of the issues and will be motivated—for personal political survival—to attend to them. If he or she has personal power within the government caucus and cabinet, northern issues may well get increased attention. Dan Miller as Deputy Premier and, in 2000, I as Minister of Finance had such authority; Alf Nunweiler in the 1970s did not.

Of course, if the northern minister lacks personal clout within government structures, the chances of bringing broad attention to northern issues dim. And that's only one of the drawbacks of this option. A second problem is that, once the minister is appointed, any northern issue can well become solely his or her concern, rather than an issue that the government as a whole must grapple with. Third, since most of the problems that need attention will not fall within the line-duties of the minister, cooperation from other ministries will be essential. But without at least some bureaucratic structure to support the northern minister in seeking such cooperation, attaining the cross-government attention needed for northern issues will be extremely difficult. Finally the option lacks permanence. It is all too easy as cabinet shuffles occur for the appointment of a northern minister to become an afterthought or simply to be dropped altogether.

Problematic as the “northern minister” option is, it is a tower of strength compared to the attempt to make a “northern caucus” the focus of advocacy for the North. Government caucuses of whatever political stripe have always had regional sub-caucuses within them that advocate on issues peculiar to their areas of the province or country; that’s nothing new. Formally or informally, MLAs for the North have worked together over the years to achieve particular goals; sometimes efforts have even crossed party lines and involved MLAs from both sides of the Legislature. Since the entire northern two-thirds of the province is represented by just ten MLAs—less than thirteen percent of the Legislature—they must band together if they want to achieve anything.

The present Liberal “northern caucus” has a couple of other assets. First, except for Mr. Nettleton, the MLA for Prince George-Omineca who was recently expelled from the Liberal caucus, they are all from the same party. They can work together strategically without concern for a large opposition presence on the political scene. Since only two of the northern MLAs have cabinet responsibilities, they have a bit more time to devote to the task of becoming a voice for the North. And finally, because it has given a relatively high public profile to the work of the “northern caucus,” the government has to be seen to be paying attention to it. It has to produce results for political credibility.

However, the weaknesses of this model for attending to northern issues are, I believe, overwhelming. Most troubling is the lack of bureaucratic support. Without “roots” in the public service such a group of MLAs has little ability to formulate detailed proposals for government action, and even less ability to have initiatives carried out. MLAs come and go in Victoria; the public service remains. Without organizational support, any “northern caucus” initiative will survive about as long as the news release that announces it lasts before it hits the recycling bin. Another related problem is the lack of formal links between the northern caucus and cabinet and the senior ranks of the public service. And a final flaw in this arrangement is the simple fact that MLAs have many other duties to attend to; the press of issues and the demands on time are intense. While a pan-northern government initiative may be a nice thing to be involved in, delivering on the needs of one’s own riding is what gets an MLA re-elected.

### The Options—Bureaucratic Structures

Before moving to consideration of options for a separate ministry or agency, I want to spend a little time considering government structures that have some ability to respond to the needs of the provincial North within current ministry configurations. The first of these is the option of establishing sub-units within line ministries. Such sub-units—“shops” in the jargon

of the bureaucracy—would be charged with responding to the specifically northern needs of ministry programs. During my time as Minister of Health, for example, I established a small unit within that mammoth ministry that devoted its full-time attention to rural and northern health care issues. The ministry was, then, required to make sure, using that “shop,” that any initiatives would be applied appropriately in northern and rural areas. It had some successes, and some failures as well. Similarly, in the Ministry of Education it was clear that the public education system was failing Aboriginal children—most of whom lived in northern and rural areas. A unit devoted to Aboriginal education worked with all parts of the ministry and with school boards to draw attention and propose solutions to this problem.

Application of such a model could easily be expanded. Cabinet could require that all ministries with responsibility for programs delivered in the North establish such units, and could further require that any initiative of any ministry clearly identify its impacts on northern communities. The message to all ministries would be that the government has to be satisfied that northern considerations have been addressed before any initiative goes forward. The principal advantage of such an approach would be that the work of the northern “shops” would be integrated with the broader work of the ministries and the government. Attending to northern issues would become everyone’s business. It would also be a very cost-effective approach to the problem.

The potential weaknesses of this option are, however, substantial. To adapt an old bureaucratic maxim: if northern issues are everyone’s concern then they’re really no one’s concern. The lack of clear government leadership—political and bureaucratic—could doom the work of the in-ministry “shops” to marginalization within ministry operations. Without constant reiteration of the importance of northern issues—by cabinet and by individual ministers—the resources devoted to them could easily be siphoned away to other issues or cut altogether, particularly in a time of government restraint. Finally, to the communities and people of the North, this option looks very much like the status quo; without a clear and visible “champion” for northern issues, government assurances that all ministries are attending to them will sound hollow.

A second option for addressing northern issues is to accelerate the movement towards regionalization in administration of government services. School boards in the North have a long and proud history of adapting a provincial service—public education—to regional needs. Community colleges are run by local boards, not provincial bureaucrats, and they are expected to offer education and training that both meets northern needs and is offered in ways that are accessible to northern populations. A Northern Health Board has been developed over the past decade to coordinate

and run all health services in the North. It too is expected to address the specific needs the northern population in prioritizing health programs and designing delivery systems that are sensitive to non-urban conditions. At the present the provincial government is developing regional coordinating bodies to deliver services for children and families.

In all these cases the goal is the same: to have decisions about what services are offered and how they are delivered made as near the delivery point as possible. The hope is that since members of regional boards and their administrative staff live in the North and have high levels of local knowledge, their decisions will be more sensitive to northern needs than decisions made in Victoria. They will also be far more accessible to individuals and communities who are unhappy about government services. Finally, once such boards are established, they are quite durable; it is difficult for government to dismantle them and take away local governance once it has been granted.

Of course in many cases such regional bodies themselves become a target for discontent about government services. They have to work within the broad structures established by provincial ministries and have only the resources supplied by those ministries to get their jobs done. Line ministries have to insure that relatively equitable services are available to all British Columbians; their instinct is, therefore, to develop guidelines, directives, and procedures for regional boards that constrain their actions, often in ways that prevent them from being truly responsive to the needs of their communities. Sometimes those structures and those resources can unwittingly reflect a southern urban reality. These can range from the trivial—a college budget that does not reflect the need for snow clearing—to the catastrophic—northern Aboriginal populations are dealing with a near epidemic in adult diabetes, a problem not reflected in the province's population as a whole. It is also quite easy for a central ministry to download a problem to its regional boards without providing the resources to deal with it. Finally, a multiplicity of boards across the North—say in education or social services—can lead to much wasteful “reinventing the wheel” as each grapples with essentially the same problems.

Both of these options, in spite of their weaknesses, have some potential for making delivery of government services responsive to northern realities. However, they both lack the bureaucratic clout and political staying power of full-fledged ministries, which is why the most discussed agency option has always been the development of a “Ministry of the North.”

Such a ministry could take one of two basic forms: a full-service ministry responsible for delivering a wide range of services and programs in the provincial North or a coordinating ministry whose task would be to ensure that line ministries deliver their programs and services in ways that met

northern needs and expectations. The person-in-the-street conception of a northern ministry is apt to be of the first variety. The minister and ministry staff would be almost a mini-government. The ministry's responsibilities could be limited to a set of economic development and resource management programs, or it could be responsible for social programs as well, even overseeing the delivery of health and education services.

A ministry of this type would be an organization that researched northern problems and proposed comprehensive approaches to them. It would attract knowledgeable staff who wanted to focus on northern issues, and most of its activities could be situated in northern BC. It would have the ability to develop coordinated approaches across many program areas to tackle systemic problems in health or education or economic development. It would certainly be an organization with a full voice at the political level—in cabinet and elsewhere. And it would have an equal and respected voice at senior bureaucratic levels. In short, it would have both the clout and the staying power to make a difference to the North.

Such an approach has never been tried in British Columbia. And there are certainly a lot of concerns that would have to be addressed before it became a reality. Perhaps the biggest concern would be the duplication of effort it would represent. Would there be one ministry for education in the rest of the province and a separate part of this new ministry for education in the North? What about health, children's services, advanced education, human resources? Is the need for economic development and diversification unique to the North? Are the differences between North and South so dramatic as to require the use of scarce resources to duplicate ministry efforts? Another concern would be the demand, certain to arise, for similar regional ministries elsewhere in British Columbia—Vancouver Island for sure and possibly the Southern Interior. Voters and their representatives from those regions are certain to demand similar attention to their needs.

Primarily for those reasons, the second model for a northern ministry holds more appeal for me. Coordinating ministries are not new to British Columbia. Under the New Democratic administration, the Minister of Women's Equality and her staff had the responsibility of insuring that, in all that government did, the interests and unique needs of women were recognized and attended to. Under the current government, the Minister of State for Deregulation is responsible for eliminating unneeded paperwork and regulation wherever in government they may occur. Or, perhaps a better example, the Minister of Management Services has the job both of providing services to line ministries, and of insuring attention to common managerial goals.

A northern ministry could easily take this form. It would be the principal point of contact for northerners and northern issues—a symbol of

the provincial government's recognition of the unique needs of the North. It would have the same advantages as the comprehensive ministry in bureaucratic robustness and political durability. Once such a northern ministry was established it would take an exceedingly brave (perhaps foolhardy) government to abolish it. Its operations could easily be located primarily in the North. At its best it would become a force across government, fostering understanding of and attention to northern needs. And it could accomplish this without the duplication and divisiveness of a full-service ministry.

The political staying power and bureaucratic clout of such a coordinating northern ministry could and should be supplemented with increasing efforts at regionalization of program administration and development of units focusing on northern issues within the larger line ministries. If this occurred, I believe that real change in provincial government understanding of northern realities and attention to northern issues is possible. The only downside I can see is that, if it were to happen, northerners would have to find something other than government neglect to complain about. Maybe we would have to revert to griping about the weather.

### Why Isn't It Happening?

So what will it take for the provincial government to see the light and act? I suspect it may well take a deepening of the economic and social crisis now facing many northern communities. A common understanding must arise across the North that the next round of economic opportunity will not grow from accelerated extraction of resources and production of commodity products. The effects of a faltering economy on measures of health, social well being, and community cohesiveness will, regrettably, serve to drive home the point that a northern approach to a broad range of government services is required.

Until that or some other circumstance triggers both heightened awareness of the programmatic problems and concern about loss of political power in the North, I suspect that the current government is too much preoccupied with other issues to attend to the creation of a new agency or organization to address northern needs. At present the response to expressions of northern discontent is heavy on saccharine statements about how well the "heartland" is loved in Victoria rather than on substantial changes to how government formulates policy and delivers programs that address northern needs.

Other provinces in Canada and jurisdictions in other countries have acknowledged the unique needs of their own "Norths"—be they northern or not. There is no shortage of interesting models out there for consideration.

This paper has examined a few of them and, I am sure, revealed a few of my prejudices about what will and will not work in British Columbia. Any valuable insights I have conveyed were, I am sure, the ideas of others that I have adapted for my own uses; the errors and misjudgements are my own.

### About the Author

Paul Ramsey moved to Prince George in 1975 to teach at the then newly established College of New Caledonia. From 1991 to 2001 he was the MLA for Prince George North. During that time he held a variety of cabinet portfolios including Health; Education, Skills and Training; Environment, Lands and Parks; and Finance and Minister Responsible for Northern Development. He is now a Visiting Professor in the Political Science Program at University of Northern British Columbia.

### Endnotes

1. Geoffrey Weller, "Should British Columbia Create a Ministry of Northern Affairs?" *BC Studies: The British Columbian Quarterly*, No. 104 (Winter, 1994), 127-148.
2. The topography of the northern part of BC's central plateau reminded the explorer and Northwest Company factor Simon Fraser of his native Scotland. Therefore, he named the region "New Caledonia."