

## Commentary: The Canadian Polar Commission

To properly understand the importance of the Canadian Polar Commission and its role in the polar regions of Canada and the world, it is best to look at the Arctic, its people and their communities in the broadest sense.

Northern observers are well aware of the tremendous changes taking place in northern Canada and the circumpolar regions of the world. The political change is the most evident and visible. The recent vote in the Northwest Territories approving the boundary line that may lead to the creation of two new territories is indeed an historic development in Canada and a step towards changing confederation itself. There is every possibility that a new territory will be established, called Nunavut, where Inuit make up more than 80 percent of the population and as a result may realize their dream of an Inuit homeland. The western territory, becoming more and more known by the name Denedeh, will have a much different makeup, an almost equal mixture of Dene, Metis and whites. In each, this is a time of change, challenge and excitement. It is not confined to the political development. Interwoven are the complex land claims negotiations and aboriginal self-government.

By every measure and standard, these developments should be seen as important steps in the growth and development not only of northern Canada, but of our country, and in the end we should all be richer for them.

However, what northerners and Canadians must now ask themselves is whether or not we are ready and capable to come to terms with the other pressing challenges facing the northern regions. Are we ready to address head-on the environmental questions? Are we ready to look at the social issues facing northern communities and northern people? And finally, can we overcome the tremendous economic obstacles that lie ahead? These are not simply the issues of self-government, they are the issues of the North and Canada and they are the concerns and challenges of the Canadian Polar Commission.

The Polar Commission was created by the federal government in September 1991. It was the result of two federal studies and much consultation with Canadian research institutions, universities and northern residents. Both reports were clear on the need for a Polar Commission. The mandate of the 12-member Board of Directors directs it to monitor and report on the state of knowledge in polar regions through a variety of means. The Commission also has the responsibility to help disseminate knowledge about polar regions, nationally and internationally, to work with northern and southern institutions fostering understanding about science and research in polar regions and to advise the federal government and others on northern issues.

To the Commission itself that means ensuring that the scientific research carried out in polar regions is of the highest possible standards and at all times takes into account the concerns and interests of the northern peoples.

Seven months into that mandate, it is clear that the need for research of the highest quality has never been greater and that the Polar Commission and indeed polar science cannot ignore the environmental, economic or social realities of the Arctic.

The scientific community, northerners and all Canadians are daily becoming more aware of the possible consequences of climate change and global warming. The need for knowledge and understanding of climate change is essential in the polar regions. Scientists have said that the impact of climate change may also be greater in northern regions. It will not happen overnight, but the need for study, knowledge and understanding is apparent and it appears that, to its credit, Canada is responding.

There is a concentrated national initiative under way to study and understand the effects of climate change, but there is also the need for extra initiatives to ensure that northern concerns and interests are addressed in the research. There is also the need to involve northerners in the science itself, to work closely with northern people to understand their particular concerns and to include in the science the traditional knowledge of the aboriginal people as that relates to climate and the environment.

The other major environmental concern is known in the Arctic by the simple term "the contaminants issue." It refers to the very high levels of toxins, heavy metals, chemicals and other compounds that have been detected in the northern food chain. There is again a growing national concern about these contaminants. There is also a growing body of scientific research developing to better understand the source of the contaminants, the extent of the problem and the effects on the northern environment and people. In the North today, understanding of this issue is most critical. What may be at stake in future years is the very substance of the arctic peoples. They fear that in years to come they may be faced with the difficult choices of substituting highly nutritional northern foods such as seal, fish and caribou with less nutritional and much more costly imported southern foods such as chicken, beef and pork. The issues are being addressed, but again, there is the need for northern understanding and input.

Much has been said and written in recent years about the social conditions of the Arctic and arctic peoples. Many have tried to explain why northern peoples suffer painfully from excessively high rates of suicide, alcoholism and family violence. The Polar Commission has taken the position that the social sciences in the Arctic should be put on an equal footing with the physical and natural sciences in terms of commitment and importance.

The Commission is clear that social studies in the North must begin to address the social conditions that now exist and the importance of the direct involvement of the northern peoples cannot be overstated. Southern-based social scientists working alone cannot and certainly have not been able to solve the "social ills" of the North. Indeed, for reasons few can explain, much of the social disintegration of the North happened over a period when there was a vast amount of study.

Economically, the northern regions are as delicate as the environment. There has been an unprecedented explosion in the birthrate in northern Canada in the past 30 years. Close to half of the population is under 25 years old. The question northerners are asking themselves is who will provide jobs for that growing population? The problem is not made easier by the fact that in many of these northern communities there are already staggering levels of unemployment.

For all of the apparent problems of the North, there is also growing optimism. Northern leaders have been telling members of the Board of Directors of the Polar Commission that appropriate community-based research is the best way to begin addressing many of the concerns. They add that there are a number of important initiatives in these areas now under way through some government departments, the Science Institute of the N.W.T. and the Science Institute of the Yukon, Yukon College, as well as a number of southern-based universities.

A priority of the Polar Commission will be to expand on those initiatives, provide some co-ordination where appropriate, and develop a plan to encourage northern involvement and participation in research activities in the northern regions.

Hand in hand with that, the Commission would like to see the use of traditional knowledge expanded. We believe that it is important that all Canadians and all northerners recognize the tremendous benefit indigenous knowledge can play in northern research in many areas, including health, social issues and justice. We also think that there should be initiatives with northern communities to develop methods for recording, disseminating and using traditional knowledge.

The Board of Directors also wants to enhance academic study on northern regions. We would like to see scholarly study on important northern issues in law, politics, economics and the natural and applied sciences increased. In addition, we see the need for more interdisciplinary study. We hope to either encourage institutions to develop journals to record and distribute this material or identify journals that are already in existence and encourage them to expand into broader areas of scholarly study. These two initiatives are given to show the breadth of what constitutes science in northern regions.

We have taken the advice of Dr. Tom Symons in the *Shield of Achilles* that recommended to the federal government the establishment of the Polar Commission. Symons said, "the Commission must be concerned with the full range of knowledge in and about the polar regions and not limited to the contemporary restrictive meaning of the word **science**." Symons encountered no member of the research community who disagreed with that approach.

Certainly no member of the Polar Commission disagrees with it, and northerners simply never looked at science or knowledge any other way. What the Commission strives for are ways to bring high-quality scientific research in all its forms and all its levels directly to bear on the critical issues now facing the northern regions and our country.

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