

## The True North

Prime Minister Harper summed up Canada's stance on Arctic sovereignty in five words: "Use it or lose it." But what is the best use of Canada's North? The government's focus on exercising sovereignty in the Arctic reflects 19th century thinking. The concept arose from the rise of nationalism in that century (Anderson, 1989; Hobsbawm, 1990). Leaders sought to create a shared sense of destiny among their peoples through a variety of means that ranged from identifying external enemies and establishing standing armies to demanding visas to cross their national frontiers. In Western Europe, you can now travel freely across such boundaries.

It is impossible to protect sovereignty in Canada's North in traditional ways: this land is too large, too harsh, too demanding. One of the real perils of the North is boredom. If you do not learn to adapt to the Great Outdoors and the Little Indoors, you become prone to cabin fever. So there is no real point to stationing soldiers in the North with nothing to do but stand on guard for Canada.

Two myths cloud thinking about Canada's North. The accelerated melting of the ice cover of the Arctic Ocean has revived the ancient dream of a Northwest Passage to Asia. The passage will continue to lure adventurers and tourists, but insurers of shipping will decide if it can ever become a commercial waterway.

The Conservative government is playing up another northern myth, the belief that the region is a vast cornucopia of resources that will create jobs and wealth. Developing resources in Canada's North demands huge amounts of capital to make ventures like diamond mines and the Mary's River iron mine economically viable. The Faro lead-zinc mine in the Pelly Mountains of the Yukon involved a total capital cost of \$114 million, of which \$28 million came from government. In 1985, with the ore body exhausted, the mine owner declared bankruptcy, leaving behind a devastated landscape that will cost from \$100 million to \$1 billion dollars to return to its natural state (Ganley, 2009).

The emphasis on sovereignty in Canada's North and the myths about it obscure the profoundly spiritual nature of this part of the country. It offers a unique venue for human regeneration and scientific research. The real resources of the North are quiet, solitude, and refuge from the stresses and strains of a crowded, urbanizing world. Here, in the eternal silences, life is stripped down to its bare essentials. Here you learn to come to terms with your demons and those of others as you struggle to survive. The North confronts you with your own insignificance, while at the same time uplifting you with its beauty and sense of eternity.

Josef Svoboda, professor emeritus at the University of Toronto Mississauga, caught the essence of the spiritual nature of Canada's Arctic in words that resonate with anyone who has spent time in its splendid isolation: "The beauty and serenity hit you as soon as you get off the plane and it leaves you in awe. ... The Arctic provides the perfect opportunity for a person to know himself, his God and his creation" (Lotz, 2006:7). In the North you can write a new story about yourself and come to a new understanding of the nature of Canada. The artist Ted Harrison came to the Yukon with his head "filled with rules and prescriptions as to what I should and shouldn't do" (Gibson, 2009:125). He felt his spirit choking with what he had learned in art school. Harrison's paintings, in contrast to those of the Group of Seven, explode with colour, informed by the artist's cheerful nature and warm humanism. Harrison, like many other people, reinvented himself in the North. Europeans appreciate the healing power and the spiritual dimension of this region much more than Canadians do. Each year, hundreds of Germans fly into Whitehorse for a Yukon adventure to regenerate and revitalize themselves in the wilderness.

The Canadian North is an ideal site for basic research even as the government insists that research should be "useful." In 1957 and 1958 I served with Operation Hazen, a major part of Canada's contribution to the Third International Geophysical Year. This expedition generated an enormous quantity of scientific results, and the camaraderie among participants left a lifelong impression on them that informed their way of thinking and acting. In 1959, I took part in an exercise in applied research: the Canada–U.S. expedition to the ice shelf of northern Ellesmere Island. The expedition sought to determine whether bombers could land there, but produced little of scientific value. As missiles replaced the manned bomber threat, pieces of the shelf broke off and floated into the Arctic Ocean, a process that has accelerated in recent years.

Northern scientists have focused overmuch on their specialties, spending a lot of time demanding government funding for them. Until recently, they have done little to inform and involve northern residents, especially the indigenous peoples of the North, in their research. The lives of Native Northerners have been dominated in the past by representatives of distant, authoritarian, and hierarchical organizations: the RCMP, the Anglican and Catholic churches, and the Hudson's Bay Company. More recently, northern residents have been treated as bystanders or spectators while conservationists and developers promoted their conflicting ideologies on the best use of the North.

Science, at its best, is non-ideological. It is an effort to understand how the world works, to discover patterns in what appear to be random occurrences, to explore the unknown. This way of thinking is crucial to survival in a rapidly changing world. Scientists do not seek to control the world, but to explore its potential and that of those who inhabit it. It is the polar opposite of the modern tendency of bureaucracy to homogenize society, to make people conform to certain norms, to impose order. This mechanistic thinking kills creativity.

Ted Harrison, who taught Maori design in New Zealand, wrote: "I did not *appropriate* their culture. I just shone a light on it, reintroduced it" (Gibson, 2009:158). Harrison launched a similar program in Whitehorse, Yukon, teaching students to find inspiration in their culture and experience. As a First Nations student noted: "Sure he taught us technique, but he didn't control what we did" (Gibson, 2009:145).

If Canada's North is to be put to use, as the prime minister believes, then its attractions as a place for spiritual renewal and basic scientific research must be promoted. Scientists have a leading role to play in doing this. Some are involving local residents in their research, offering young people role models, and encouraging the spirit of scientific exploration. Tourist promotion in the territories still emphasizes activities and quaint customs. The Newfoundland and Labrador government has been very successful in luring tourists by emphasizing the beauty, tranquility, simplicity, and quiet of the province. Such initiatives offer models for the future development of Canada's North. They are a welcome relief from the fearful official concerns about sovereignty and unrealistic hopes that resource development will solve all the problems of the region and its peoples.

#### REFERENCES

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