

THE MACKENZIE



Even a cursory glance at a map of Canada shows the extent of our vast northern hinterland beyond the 60th parallel.

As a land mass it covers 40% of the country and contains 30% of the fresh water supply. This region is dominated by the Yukon and Mackenzie river systems—the latter alone draining almost a twelfth of the North American continent. The population of the Yukon and the Northwest Territories totals 54,000 of which approximately 10,000 are Indian and 13,000 are Inuit (Eskimo).

No other region of the country has spawned so many "visions," "dreams," and myths. It has conjured up romantic images for poets and politicians alike; it has helped to fulfill the Canadian psychological need for space to expand.

From all this, it would be natural to assume that all Canadians have a great interest in the North. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Few Canadians have anything more than a superficial awareness of both the scale and the nature of development now underway in the land of the Midnight Sun; even fewer (especially native northerners) have any control over these events or are likely to benefit from them.

There has been almost no public discussion of either the desirability or the timing of this northern programme. In the last few years crucial decisions have been made and resource exploitation of the North is now firmly under way.

The Canadian North provides an excellent example of the subordination of the hinterland to the metropolis. In this case, metropolitan Canada, or more appropriately the United States, injects all the capital and in return derives all the profit.

What is more important, the rate of return on such investments is the determining factor rather than economic or social benefit to native northerners. Dr. Peter Usher, in a report on the oil and gas development at Sachs Harbour, draws the following conclusion:

... where the hinterland population is engaged in activities profitable to the metropolis, it is encouraged or at least permitted to continue doing so. Where this is not the case, as in many parts of the Maritimes, the Prairies and the North, rationalization, reorganization and depopulation are brought about, usually on terms established by the metropolis yet having profound social as well as economic consequences for the hinterland.

The particular subordination of the North has been even more dramatic. The economic and social values of outsiders have become so pervasive as to undermine

completely the traditional societies and communities.

Recent events at Sachs Harbour on Banks Island shed light on a process that has taken place throughout the North. Sachs Harbour had been an independent and economically viable trapping community. It had avoided the usual structure of the northern colonial system, i.e., the creation of jobs, determination of job functions, and appointment of incumbents, all decided by outside interests.

Without prior consultation the government suddenly issued oil and gas exploration permits for the same area where Inuit trappers held exclusive trapping rights. In a manner typical of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, the government did not consult the local community on the desirability of the exploration or consider the possible effects upon the environment and ultimately the livelihood of the people.

Rather, the limited consultation took place after the government had made its decision and was confined to helping the community to adapt to the consequences of the new development.

The same process is presently taking place in the settlement of Tuktoyaktuk where the Department has permitted Elf Oil of Canada, a French-owned company, to undertake summer exploration on Cape Bathurst, one of the settlement's last great hunting areas. An Inuit delegate to the World Tundra Conference gave the following account of the impact of exploration work at Tuktoyaktuk:

In our area... it is practically impossible now to live off trapping only. That is the impact of all ways of transport in our area, plane, helicopter, cat-trains on the tundra, seismic blasting on land and sea. Is this not a sufficient factor to disturb animal life in land and sea? Trails are visible from aircraft, all around our trapping ground. One year we had to send a protest as creeks were dammed and no fish were caught in the harbour of Tuktoyaktuk. This summer (1969) no whale were caught in our waters. Is this due to blasting (seismic operations)? We believe this operation has something to do with it. It is the first time in the history of Tuktoyaktuk that we do not harvest whales.

Prime Minister Trudeau himself has been prepared to admit the gravity of the present problems in the arctic. In a speech delivered on 15 April 1970 he emphasized to his audience:

The arctic ice pack has been described as the most significant surface area of the globe, for it controls the temperature of much of the Northern Hemisphere. Its continued existence in unspoiled form is vital to all mankind.

The single most imminent threat to the arctic at this time is the threat of a large oil spill... oil would spread immediately beneath ice many feet thick; it would congeal and block the breathing holes of the peculiar species of mammals that frequent the region: It would destroy effectively the primary source of food for Eskimos and carnivorous wildlife throughout an area of thousands of square miles; it would foul and destroy the only known nesting area of several species of wild birds. Because of the minute rate of hydrocarbon decomposition in frigid areas, the presence of any such oil must be regarded as permanent. The disastrous consequences which the presence would have on marine plankton, upon the process of oxygenation in the arctic, and upon other natural and vital processes of the biosphere, are incalculable in their extent.

Trudeau went on to stress that the ecological problems of the arctic were of such magnitude that they affected the "quality, and perhaps the continued existence, of human and animal life in the vast regions of North America and elsewhere.

"These are issues of such immense importance that they demand prompt and effective action."

Now after saying these words why has the government continued to place first priority on economic development and exploitation when the dangers are so clear. There seems to be a tremendous credibility gap here between the words and the actions of this government. To quote from Dr. Peter Usher again:

It appears, then, that the government has already placed highest priority on oil and gas development in the North, and that local interests or the maintenance of the environment are to be sacrificed when they conflict with the first objective. If this is indeed government policy, it should be clearly stated and explained. To continue maintaining that there is no conflict and that all interests may be served simultaneously is to perpetuate a fraud on northerners and all other Canadians.

The proposed Mackenzie Valley oil and/or gas pipeline demonstrates the difficulty in achieving economic development with long-term job opportunities for native northerners. No one questions the fact that the oil companies and pipeline corporations will benefit from the construction of a 5 billion dollar pipeline.

However, consider the example of a gas pipeline; although it is estimated that 3,000 to 5,000 men will be employed in a three-year construction period, only 150 permanent jobs will be provided in the operation and maintenance of the system. Despite assurance from the government and industry that a substantial number of these jobs will be for native people, it will be a tremendous task to bridge successfully the gap between an economy of hunting and trapping and complex pipeline technology.

Also resource industries are capital rather than labour intensive. Therefore serious study should be made of

