

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

INFORMATION DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
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THE NEW IMPORTANCE OF THE CANADIAN ARCTIC

An address by Mr. Hume Wrong, Canadian Ambassador to the United States, at a dinner of the Arctic Institute of North America, New York City, May 7, 1948.

Long experience has led me to the conclusion that members of my profession in time learn a little about a great many things, but have no opportunity of learning a lot about any one thing. Sooner or later through the years problems touching on nearly every human activity, interest or folly cross one's desk. One copes with each as best one can, and passes to the next. Thus it is certainly in no capacity as an expert that I speak to you about the Canadian Arctic. The bits and pieces of miscellaneous knowledge about Arctic problems which I have acquired during the course of years certainly cannot be put together into a coherent whole. I therefore of necessity leave it to the other speakers this evening to talk with authority and learning. I must content myself with some not profound or original general observations on the new importance of the Arctic to the people of North America.

When I refer to the new importance of the Arctic to North America I mean only in a secondary sense the importance of the Arctic in the defences of this continent. A good deal of over-dramatic interest in the Arctic has been stimulated by people who look at a polar projection of the Northern Hemisphere, and see how the shortest routes to and from most of the land mass of Europe and Asia run across the Arctic regions. It is true, of course, that the vast territories of the Arctic can now be crossed by powerful aircraft. Communication by air for civil and for military purposes could and should use far northern routes; and installations for air navigation, refueling and so on in Arctic and Sub-Arctic latitudes are required. It is conceivable that some time in the future fleets of bombers may be built which would make possible the delivery of heavy attacks across the Arctic Ocean, and we certainly must not blind ourselves to this possibility.

Yet the heavy emphasis so often placed on military activities in the Far North is in fact misplaced. While the new importance of the Arctic does arise in considerable measure from the development of aviation, that is because at last a speedy and flexible method of transportation is available, which makes accessible within a few hours regions that previously could be reached only after weeks of preparation, followed by arduous months of difficult movement over land or sea.

I repeat that we must not, of course, neglect what ought to be done in the field of defence. But we must also avoid interpreting all the activities of men in uniform in these latitudes as preparations for war. In the conditions of the Far North civil and military governmental activities are interlocking and complementary. Mr. Mackenzie King last year said in the House of Commons: "Canada's northern programme is primarily a civilian one, to which contributions are made by the armed forces". He added that this had been the pattern for a long time, illustrating by reference to the installation and operation of communication systems in the Northwest Territories many years ago by the Canadian Army, which has recently undertaken responsibility for administering the Alaska Highway. Mr. King also pointed out the value to all who live in the North of the results achieved at the small winter experimental station at Churchill on Hudson Bay controlled by the armed forces. He referred