

CANADIAN PRIORITIES FOR THE ARCTIC COUNCIL

Action is urgently required to ensure that the Arctic Council gets off to the best start possible during the remainder of the period to fall 1998, when Canada hands over the chair of the Council to another state, possibly to the United States. Measures should also be taken now to impart greater strength to the Council and to Canadian participation in it over the long haul.

The Arctic Council was established in September 1996 without an agreed agenda, corresponding working groups, or terms of reference and rules of procedure. It had to be done that way, owing principally to the restrictive attitude of the United States to multilateral Arctic cooperation, or not be established at all. As of March 1997, terms of reference will not be set until the senior Arctic officials' meeting in September 1997, if then. As to an agenda and working groups, they are nowhere in sight. Indeed, it appears to be U.S. policy, set by lower-echelon officials, that no substantive action be considered by the Council until the Ministerial meeting and rotation of the chair in 1998. To get the Council moving and to hand it over as a going concern that cannot readily be constricted no matter which state next has the advantages of the chair, Canada has no choice but to act at the political level again.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs is to have bilaterals with his U.S. and Russian counterparts at the G-7 meeting in June, and with the Danish and Norwegian Foreign Ministers at the NATO summit in July. He is also in a position to meet with or write to the Finnish and Swedish Ministers, and to have discussions with the three permanent participants on the Council's work. Given his willingness to use these encounters to drive the Arctic Council forward into substantive activity, there is an opportunity to generate ministerial marching orders for the senior officials' meeting in September, instructing them to set up a series of Arctic Council working groups on priority themes which would also be open to discussion by permanent participants at the September gathering. If the Minister is to succeed in this, he will need to have in hand a strong set of proposals for priority action by the Arctic Council by the time of the G-7 meeting, if not earlier. In effect, we are talking about a circumpolar element in the preparations for Denver.

Recommendation 1: for the Circumpolar Ambassador and DFAIT to produce an Arctic Council Action Plan by the end of May 1997 for the use of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in upcoming bilaterals with his Arctic counterparts.

Recommendation 2: for the Action Plan to consist of scoping, knowledge-gathering, and priority-setting by Arctic Council working groups to be set up on some or all of the following themes, the results to be reviewed at the 1998 Ministerial meeting when the Council's sustainable development programme is formally to be launched.