



## A Discussion Paper

A 100 years ago this summer the Klondike gold fields swarmed with thousands of (mostly American) prospectors. For a brief, shining moment, Dawson City was the biggest metropolis West of St. Louis and North of San Francisco. The glamour and the excitement of the North gripped Canadian imaginations. Ottawa, fearing the rush of foreigners would undermine its shaky hold on the vast, and hitherto, largely ignored North, dispatched that most Canadian of icons, the Mounties, to maintain order and good government.

Since then, but only occasionally, there have been similar arousals of our Northern passions; usually inspired by equally romantic events or some sudden sense of wronged violation. Soviet satellites spewing radioactive debris across the North West Territories, the plucky voyage of the *St. Roch*, the Berger Inquiry, the Northwest Passage transits of the U.S. vessels *Manhattan* and the *Polar Sea*.

In between times, the North has been largely ignored, even as it has remained essential.

A sense of "Northern-ness" has long been central to Canadian identity. The North stirs our collective soul. It seems almost elemental to our "Canadian-ness", even for the vast majority huddled along the U.S. border, who never have, nor likely ever will venture far from the growing, multi-ethnic, urban sprawls that are homes to most Canadians. For them, Muskoka is North, and the Arctic a place from whence the worst of the winter weather comes.

Not that there is anything wrong with that. Identity isn't undermined by absence of direct experience. And, indeed, our North wouldn't be

the same, nor would most Canadians have the same emotional attachment to it if they lived there. Because it would then no longer be that romantic, special vastness which is mostly ignored but, episodically, inspires great passion in us.

In fact, perhaps alone among countries for whom a sense of "Northern-ness" is fundamental to their sense of identity, the North plays a relatively small, in some aspects, minute role in Canadian lifestyles. The political, economic, cultural centres of gravity are far to the South. If anything, that non-Northern reality is growing, even in terms of romantic identity. New Canadians, preponderantly not like their predecessors from Europe, will perhaps be less stirred by romantic tales of the North, of French and British explorers or the Company of Gentlemen Adventurers. Equally the ever-growing preponderance of trade and commerce flowing South seems to run counter to the often-voiced but rarely acted on visions of "opening up the North".

Any consideration of a "Northern" or "Circumpolar" dimension to Canadian foreign policy cannot proceed just because a small minority believes it should. Nor will romantic attachment suffice to support any lasting policy. For foreign policy, unlike sense of self, is rarely driven by sentimentality. Instead, "interests", political realities, the pursuit of prosperity, fear of threat, and even public outrage or public enthusiasm impels governments to act, to respond, and sometimes to lead.

Consider, the remarkable, successful, and largely Canadian-led effort to ban anti-personnel land mines, the growing succession of free trade agreements, Ottawa's longstanding dispute with