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THE AMERICAS**The Canadian Arctic****Anxiously watching a different world**

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**Climate and other changes draw new interest and new misunderstandings to the Canadian north**

THE first thing a visitor notices on entering the office of Nunavut's premier, Paul Okalik, is the polar-bear rug. A vast pelt of glossy white fur with head intact and fangs bared in a frozen snarl, it dominates the room. Mr Okalik has led Nunavut since the territory, encompassing most of Canada's Arctic archipelago, was created in 1999 to settle a land claim by the Inuit (once known as Eskimos). The rug is a gift he is proud to display. It is a jolting reminder that the polar bear, which many southerners view as an iconic victim of climate change, is seen in its natural habitat as a predator and a source of meat.

The jolts continue in the legislative chamber one floor below, where the upholstery is of seal skin. The shaft of the ceremonial mace is the whorled tusk of a narwhal, a small Arctic whale. The door handles are of walrus tusk. Mr Okalik says that he is well aware how the outside world views the hunting of these animals, especially the polar bear, which the United States Fish and Wildlife Service may place on its list of endangered species. He thinks these views ignore the reality of his inhospitable territory of treeless tundra, rock and ice. He gestures towards the window and its view of Frobisher Bay, still solidly iced over in early May. "It's not as if we can take up farming."

Until recently, Canada paid little attention to its northern region. After Britain ceded control in 1880, federal officials in Ottawa treated their Arctic territories—the Yukon, the site of the Klondike gold rush, and the Northwest Territories (from which Nunavut was split)—as internal colonies.

Nomadic hunters were forced off the land into settlements. Children were sent to residential schools in the south. Tongue-twisting names in native languages were discarded in favour of numbers. Social problems, such as rampant alcoholism and drug use and a high suicide rate, were rife in the settlements. When Canada felt the need to assert its sovereignty in the 1950s, Inuit families from northern Quebec were relocated to unfamiliar terrain in the high Arctic. Many of these "human flagpoles" sickened and died.

While the great white north is central to Canada's identity myth, only 104,000 of the country's 33m people

live north of the 60th parallel. Most Canadians live huddled up against the southern border with the United States; they have more in common with Americans than with their Arctic compatriots. Two things are now forcing them to pay attention to the north.

The first is climate change. This has focused world attention on the polar regions, whose ice is melting at an alarming rate. The warming climate has made accessible minerals once locked in the ice, just when their prices are high, unleashing an exploration boom. It has also reawakened an old debate over who owns the Northwest Passage sea route.

Second, the people who live in the north are demanding and getting more of a say in their future. Since 1975, aboriginal groups in the north—the Inuit in Nunavut and Indian bands in the Northwest Territories and the Yukon—have negotiated 21 land claims, giving them more control over development in a vast stretch of territory. “Land claims have transformed power relations in the north,” says Tony Penikett, a former Yukon premier. “The people have gone from being have-nots in their own land to being landowners.”



At the same time, the three territorial governments have sought more powers, though they do not yet have all those enjoyed by Canada's ten provinces. Only the Yukon has full control of its onshore natural resources, something the other two territories are still negotiating with the federal government.

All three still depend on federal subsidies, totalling C\$2 billion (\$1.8 billion) this fiscal year. Subsidy accounts for 60% of budget revenues in the Yukon and Northwest Territories and more than 80% in Nunavut. In addition, aboriginal groups in the Arctic, as elsewhere in Canada, benefit from special federal programmes; most do not pay taxes (the Inuit do). All three territorial governments hope that developing their natural resources will lessen their financial dependency.

So as southern Canada looks with new interest at the Arctic, it finds that northerners are becoming increasingly assertive. The result is widening disagreements about issues ranging from the environment to development and defence.

There is no dispute that the Arctic is warming. Arctic temperatures have increased at almost twice the global

average rate in the last 100 years; 70,000 square kilometres of sea ice (an area about the size of Ireland) is disappearing annually. Differences start over who are the main victims. "It's not about polar bears," says Mary Simon, head of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, which represents Canada's 45,000 Inuit. "It's about people."

Polar bears are threatened because they use sea ice as a platform from which to hunt seals. But a warming climate brings many problems for the Inuit. Unpredictable sea ice can be fatal. Life is becoming more expensive: snowmobiles must take longer routes, buildings are weakened by melting permafrost and, unthinkably, the local council in Kuujuaq felt obliged to buy ten air-conditioners last summer after temperatures reached 31°C.

People, not polar bears

Having agitated about global warming for decades, northerners now find the focus is not on them but on wildlife. So while they welcome celebrities who drop by to publicise climate change—a British businessman, Sir Richard Branson, travelled across Baffin Island by dogsled this spring, while Jake Gyllenhaal, an American actor, visited Iqaluit in 2005—they have little time for those who equate saving the environment with animal rights.

What really worries some northerners is that the concomitants of climate change—more shipping, mining, and oil and gas exploration—may threaten the environment and with it the Inuit's traditional life, based on hunting and fishing. "We're more hardcore than Greenpeace because we know what nature is," says Nick Illauq, a youth leader from Clyde River in Nunavut.

Others want development—but on their terms. Last year Nunavut's economy grew by 5.8%, second only to that of oil-rich Alberta. Much of the boost came from the opening of the territory's first diamond mine. "There has always been a sense that the northern ice desert of Canada was a treasure trove," says Peter Gillin of Tahera, the mining company involved. Spending on mineral exploration in the three northern territories has almost tripled in the past five years. Of the 130 companies exploring in Nunavut this year, 32 are looking for uranium. Others are seeking gold, diamonds, silver, zinc, nickel, copper, iron ore and sapphires. Guy d'Argencourt, who supervises mining claims for Nunavut's government, recalls the old joke that a typical Inuit family consisted of father, mother, two children and an anthropologist. Now it is geologists who are ubiquitous, he says.

But the companies are not getting everything their own way. A recent attempt to revive plans dating from the 1970s for a pipeline to take natural gas from the Arctic along the Mackenzie Valley to Alberta has been delayed yet again after an aboriginal group complained it had not been consulted. An application to explore for uranium near the Thelon river in the Northwest Territories was rejected because the Lutselk'e Dene, an aboriginal group, refused to allow any activity on land it considered sacred.

Such a display of local power is new, says Mr Penikett. "When I was a kid in the Yukon and a mine opened, the profits went to New York, the jobs went to Edmonton, the taxes went to Ottawa and all we got was a hole in the ground, which we could use as a garbage dump—if the federal government gave us permission." Nowadays proposed developments must respect local culture and safeguard the environment as well as generate jobs.

It is not just mining companies who are showing more interest in the north. Stephen Harper, Canada's Conservative prime minister, is keen to assert the country's sovereignty over the Northwest Passage, the potential shortcut to the Orient that first brought European explorers to Arctic waters almost 500 years ago. Canada considers all five routes through its Arctic archipelago to be internal, not international, waters; the United States and others disagree. In last year's election campaign, Mr Harper promised to back that claim with three new icebreakers, capable of year-round operation (the United States and Russia have such ships, but Canada does not). He also wants to build Canada's first deepwater Arctic port near Iqaluit and install a surveillance system to detect submarines under the ice cap, all at a cost of C\$5.3 billion over five years.

Two budgets later, these projects have not materialised. That may not matter much. Scientists say that ice movement will keep the Northwest Passage clogged for decades, whereas the Northeast Passage around Russia has been open to shipping for part of the year since 1991.

Canada's defences in the north remain tenuous. A joint-service task force of 150 soldiers and civilians flies

surveillance missions and co-ordinates ground patrols across the three territories. They are backed up by the Canadian Rangers, 4,000 part-time reservists based in 165 remote communities. Armed with rifles from the second world war and riding snowmobiles, the Rangers are Canada's eyes and ears in the north.

Northern sensitivities

Several federal attempts to assert sovereignty have trampled on northern sensitivities. Operation Narwhal, a training exercise that brought 300 troops to the Mackenzie Valley last month, prompted complaints of intimidation by Herb Norwegian, grand chief of the Dehcho First Nation. While residents of Iqaluit welcome the idea of a deepwater port, they wonder how a town of 6,000 with a housing shortage can accommodate the 500 military personnel that would come with it. "People here were upset," says Nancy Karetak-Lindell, the Liberal MP for the area. By announcing this plan without any consultation, the federal government was acting "like it was still the 1960s," she says.

Underlying many of these tensions is a demand that southern Canadians acknowledge that life in the north is different. Jim Prentice, the federal minister of Indian affairs and northern development, recognises that but adds: "There is nothing that cannot be accommodated within the Canadian federation." He is drawing up a new policy document for the north.

It is not always easy for southerners to get it right. Organisers of the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver made sure they had the blessing of the Inuit before they announced that the symbol of the games would be a traditional landmark known as an *inunnguaq*. Southerners have taken to erecting these cairns to adorn their gardens. Northerners grumble that this is an abuse of their traditional culture. "Are they lost?" says Saila Kipanek, a stone carver in Iqaluit. Not completely, perhaps, but Canada is still disoriented by changes in its great white north.

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