

Canada's Arctic policy

Harper of the melting North

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The prime minister tries to marry defence and welfare

DESPITE never having commanded a parliamentary majority, Stephen Harper has managed to hang on to his job as prime minister since 2006 partly by imposing an iron grip on his Conservative government. So when he told the cabinet ministers joining him on a swing through Canada's northern territories earlier this month that they would have to eat seal meat, they dutifully tucked in, managing a smile for the cameras. The photos, circulated by the prime minister's office, were both a poke in the eye of the European Union, which recently banned the import of seal products, and a gesture of solidarity with Canada's Inuit, for whom the fishy-tasting meat is a staple.

The five-day trip through Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and the Yukon was designed to portray Mr Harper as a man who is both comfortable in, and in control of, the two-fifths of Canada that lies north of the 60th parallel. He posed with smiling Inuit children, took the controls of a submarine and stood on the deck of a frigate as three fighter aircraft roared over Frobisher Bay in a military exercise dubbed Operation Nanook. The spin was not wholly misleading. Mr Harper's government has paid more attention and allocated more funds to the Arctic territories than the two previous Liberal governments managed during a dozen years in power.



But is all this attention going to the right things? Canadians are starting to debate whether the main aim of policy towards the north should be the assertion of sovereignty, and thus spending big money on military kit, or trying to improve the dire social conditions in which people live there, as many northerners would like. There are not many of them—some 120,000, or less than half a percent of Canada's total population. But in Nunavut, for example, alcoholism and suicide rates are higher than the national average, life expectancy is lower and almost half of the population lives in overcrowded housing.

So far the government has tried to do both. In Nunavut new social housing is being built with federal money. "For a Conservative government to do this is quite remarkable," says Jim Bell, the editor of the *Nunatsiaq News*, the local newspaper, noting that its Liberal predecessor stopped all federal spending on social housing. Mr Harper repeated a previous promise to set up a development agency for the three northern territories, to be based in Iqaluit. But its budget of C\$50m (\$46m) over five years will not go far. Doing almost anything in the north is expensive. Bulky items must be shipped in during the brief period when the sea is free of ice.

When Canadians think of the north nowadays it is often to worry about the changing climate bringing interlopers. The melting ice cap looks almost certain to create a navigable Northwest Passage and unleash a scramble for undersea resources. Two years ago Russia planted its flag on the seabed in the waters beneath the north pole; it

has promised to land paratroopers there next year. The United States is one of many countries that reckon the Northwest Passage is an international waterway, rather than Canada's sovereign waters. In response the government has promised to beef up its military presence in the north.

Reuters



Stephen Harper's Cabinet savours seal meat in the cause of sovereignty

This remains tentative. On the bridge of *HMCS Toronto*, the frigate leading Operation Nanook, Commander Alex Grant points to a chart of Frobisher Bay that is largely blank except for the narrow shipping channel linking Iqaluit to the open sea. The Canadian navy's presence in the north is largely confined to the summer months. Its four submarines, bought second-hand from Britain, can operate under the ice cap only for short periods. The coast guard's two heavy icebreakers are ageing. Mr Harper promised three new ones: that has now been scaled back to one (costing C\$720m) and six ice-hardened patrol boats. A plan for a deepwater dock at Iqaluit has been replaced by a refuelling station at a refurbished harbour in the north of Baffin Island. When winter sets in, the main military presence comes not from the regular army but from the Canadian Rangers, a force of 4,400 locals who serve as part-time reservists.

Even on sovereignty there is a north-south divide. The Inuit, who make up 85% of Nunavut's population, are offended at the portrayal of the region as a wasteland that Canada needs to populate. John Amagoalik, an Inuit political leader who helped create Nunavut as a separate territory a decade ago, objects to Mr Harper's repeated comment that Canada's choice in the Arctic is to "use it or lose it". "We have occupied these lands for millennia. The prime minister is not giving us due credit," he says. Mary Simon, who heads the body representing Canada's 50,000 Inuit, says her people do not oppose a military presence in the north, but want the government's emphasis to be on improving the lives of those who have always lived there.

Yet the overwhelming majority of voters live in the south. So Mr Harper will surely continue to try to make a little money go a long way in the north.

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