For its founding generation, Canada was “the True North strong and free,” “the Northern kingdom,” the “Lady of the Snows” in Kipling’s phrase. Canada was imagined by its British patrons and colonist founders as the “Young Giant of the North.” Canada’s northerliness was central to its very identity. William Hales Hingston, a professor of medicine at McGill University, could see the virtues of living in the North even in death. “The visages of those frozen to death,” he observed, “display a look of contentment achieved only by successful religious mystics.”

Though later generations of Canadians who do not reside in Canada’s North are less seized with the joy of even a season of low temperatures, and do not flinch when those who inhabit Canada’s Northern reaches refer to them as “southerners,” they are still inclined to imagine the North in terms that reflect their interests and assumptions. From Diefenbaker onward, the “vision of the North” shared by most of Canada’s southerners is primarily wealth to be extracted from this cold, barren wasteland and the importance of telling the rest of the world that the Canadian state is “sovereign” up there.

The establishment of Northern Public Affairs is an important step towards reversing that process and ensuring that the voices of northerners are heard in defining Canada’s “North.” This will be a healthy corrective to the mythology of the North spun by southern Canadians. If I know anything about the Canadian North today, the one thing we can and should anticipate is it will be a plurality of voices that speak to us through NPA, reflecting the complexities of the Canadian North.

Not the least of those complexities are the diverse jurisdictions and constitutions of Northern Canada. Not only are there three territories but also large northerly sections of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador. I assume NPA will not

let the arbitrary lines drawn by imperial map-makers define the boundaries of its vision of the North. Spending some time with the Katł’Oodeche First Nation last winter near Hay River, NWT reminded me again of how arbitrary those boundaries drawn in Ottawa many years ago can be. Though the Katł’Oodeche people spend most of their time these days in the Northwest Territories, their traditional lands stretching southward into Alberta and Wood Buffalo National Park are a crucial part of their lives for both economic and recreational purposes.

The Katł’Oodeche, most of whom live on the only Indian Act reserve North of the 60th parallel, are at a crossroads in their nation’s history. They must decide whether to remain as a reserve taking advantage of whatever reforms may become available under the Indian Act, or as Treaty 8 people negotiate with Canada a renovation of their treaty relationship. Treaty changes would include recognizing their responsibility for governing their society, providing it with full access to its traditional territory, and establishing a fair partnership with Canada in controlling and enjoying its benefits. Within that second option a further choice would have to be made between proceeding to negotiate their own treaty arrangement with Canada, or to continue as part of the larger confederation of Dene, the Dehcho Dene, and be part of a more comprehensive negotiation. These challenges now facing the Katł’Oodeche are just one example of the constitutional complexity of Canada’s North.

The complexities of governmental powers and responsibilities across the three Northern territories are immense. First, at the western end, is the Yukon with a territorial government representing a predominantly non-Aboriginal population exercising powers devolved on it from the federal government, sharing governmental responsibilities with First Nations governments who draw their responsibilities from an “umbrella” agreement between First Nations and Canada. In the middle is the Northwest Territories also exercising powers devolved by Ottawa—though not yet over lands and resources—representing a population almost equally divided between natives and non-natives. In turn it devolves power on mostly non-native municipal governments, and shares jurisdiction with First Nations that have made treaties—one old, one new—with Canada. Finally in the east we have Nunavut, with an elected government exercising most of the responsibilities of a province. To the extent that Nunavut serves as the vehicle for giving effect to its Inuit people’s Indigenous right to self-government, some government responsibilities go beyond those of a province, many of which are devolved to villages and hamlets. The government shares power with an Inuit land commission, and all of this based on an Act of Parliament implementing a treaty between the Inuit people of the territory and Canada.

Now that is a pretty complicated picture even though, no doubt, my one paragraph summary gives a simplified account. I doubt if in any other region of the world, let alone one whose total population is smaller than that of Canada’s smallest province, can match this degree of complexity.

There can be no doubt that the jurisdic- tionality of the North complicates policy-making and policy-implementation in virtually every field of public policy. Faced with this, there is a tendency to look for changes that will simplify the processes of governing. That, I would warn, is an imperial response. Those with significantly more power than others usually hunger for more. They resent structural barriers that prevent them from achieving their ends, and invoke “efficiency” as the justification for top-down solutions that can cut through the jurisdictional jungle. Much can be done to establish a more cooperative environment and better communications among the governments, big and small, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, across the North. As I understand the North, the imposition of a centralized, streamlined decision-making process would be a denial of the North’s distinct style of democracy that finds expression in its complexities.

The most fundamental point is that we have surely reached a moment in Canada’s history at which decisions about the future of the North must be made primarily by northerners. No longer should Canadians look to Ottawa mandarins or southern Canadian myth-makers to determine the path of the political, economic, and social development of Canada’s North. It may very well be that to give reality to the North’s autonomy, constitutional changes will be required that can in effect “patriate” the Yukon and Northwest Territories constitutions. By “patriate,” I mean that legal authority to adopt and amend the constitutions of Yukon and the Northwest Territories would rest with the people of each territory or with territorial institutions responsible to the peoples of the territories.

I much look forward to following, through NPA, the path along which northerners travel in taking charge of the issues and fulfilling the promise of their part of our country.

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