

First Plenary: Perspectives of Elected and Appointed Officials

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Summary

The Third Open Meeting of the Northern Research Forum began the morning of September 15, 2004. Meeting delegates assembled in the Territorial Legislative Assembly for opening ceremonies that consisted of welcoming addresses by local, regional, national, and international dignitaries and representatives. Dr. Steven Bigras, Executive Director of the Canadian Polar Commission, acted as master of ceremony. This was followed by the first plenary session of the meeting, entitled “Perspectives of Appointed and Elected Officials”. The session was chaired by Canada’s Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs, Jack Anawak, and consisted of speeches by four panelists: Gunnar Palsson (Chair of Senior Officials, Arctic Council, Iceland), Ethel Blondin-Andrew (Minister of State, Northern Development, Canada) (read *in absentia*), Atis Sjanits (Latvian Ambassador to Canada), and Julie Kitka (President, Alaska Federation of Natives). The session concluded with an inspiring keynote address by Her Excellency the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, Governor General of Canada.

Emergent Themes

Despite different purposes, there were clear similarities amongst each of the welcoming addresses, plenary speeches and the keynote address, and several themes emerged from the Forum’s first morning. These are summarized

under the one-word headings below and followed by a short discussion.

Change

Change was the dominant theme throughout the conference and the plenary session reflected this salience. Each panelist and each representative during the welcoming addresses spoke of widespread and rapid change in the North and the challenges that Northern peoples – indigenous and non-indigenous – face in addressing and adapting to this change. Examples could generally be placed into three categories: (i) *environmental change*, including the consequences of global climate change which are heightened in the north, (ii) *socio-cultural change*, such as the settlement of indigenous land claims and pursuit of self governance and regional autonomy, and (iii) *economic change* driven largely by increased resource development and improved access to more remote northern regions. Mention was made of both the benefits and problems instigated by these changes. For instance, speakers from Canada’s Northwest Territories – where resource development in the form of diamond mining and oil and gas development is proceeding at a phenomenal pace – seemed to agree that the fundamental challenge ahead is to exploit the benefits of this change while, at the same time, adequately addressing issues of environmental, social and economic sustainability.

Adaptability

Each plenary panelist spoke of the capacity of northern peoples to adapt to this widespread change, noting that they have adapted to environmental change for centuries. Indeed, in his welcoming address it was suggested by Chief Darrell Beaulieu (Ndilo Dene First Nation, Canada) that this adaptability is actually a defining characteristic of northern peoples. Jack Anawak was especially optimistic that northerners will adapt to this change. Like Beaulieu, he noted that indigenous peoples in the north have always dealt with environmental change and have been able to adapt to change for centuries. The caveat is that the change faced by northerners today is – and will continue to be – extreme; perhaps more extreme than ever. Because of this, Anawak asserted that there is a role for elected and appointed officials to influence institutions and help northern peoples adapt to change. He argued that progress is being made on this front, particularly in the form of international institutions like the Arctic Council and University of the Arctic.

Interconnectedness

The notion that the Arctic is a single, interconnected region was touched upon by several speakers. Gunnar Palsson explored this theme particularly well. He spoke of biophysical linkages among northern nations such as transboundary wildlife migrations and oceanic currents that influence climate across the North. These linkages are also illustrated through issues such as climate change and long-range atmospheric transport of pollutants which are ubiquitous environmental problems throughout the North. But Palsson extended the theme beyond biophysical commonalities and environmental connections to include the human dimension as well, referring to the Arctic as a community spanning borders and extending around the globe. Atis Sjanits also spoke of the North's interconnections, referring to the similarities of landscapes and peoples that exist across our northern "community of nations". Like Palsson, Sjanits recognized that the issues and challenges being faced by northern nations are very similar and argued that there is a real opportunity for increased international cooperation and partnerships to assist in addressing these issues. This was also explored briefly by Lassi Heininen (NRF Chair, Finland) in his welcoming address when he argued that improved cooperation and knowledge-sharing

at all levels is critical for successfully addressing the challenges and opportunities of globalization.

A subject that transpired from the discussion of interconnectedness was the notion of achieving and maintaining national identity, regional autonomy, and cultural integrity within the context of globalization and a smaller world. It was not explicitly addressed in the plenary session and therefore can not be considered an emergent theme, but it was evident enough that it was taken up for discussion in the second plenary session, "Governance, Resources and Co-management".

Geography

The interrelationships of people, culture, landscape, and sea in northern regions was highlighted throughout the first plenary session. This is geography at its most elemental level; not the old geography of maps and location, but the resurgent regional geography of people and place, landscape and culture, environment and society. Governor General Adrienne Clarkson featured this theme in her keynote address. She spoke of a "northern mystique" and a "magnetic attraction" in exploring what the North means to its inhabitants as well as to those that live beyond. She spoke of large natural areas where people are intimately tied to the land and, despite the large expanses, where they are closely tied to each other – perhaps a defining characteristic of northern geography. Similar sentiments were expressed by Gunnar Palsson and Atis Sjanits who both asserted that the Arctic is more than just a vast space, but a "community" extending around the globe.

Achievement

The strides taken to improve the lives of indigenous northern peoples, as well as the results attained to date, was a prominent theme of the opening morning, but it was the speeches of Blondin-Andrew and Kitka that contributed the most to this theme. Blondin-Andrew framed her statement within the context of the past half century of societal change in the Canadian North, citing the Berger inquiry of the mid-1970s as a watershed for change. The outcome of the inquiry was a vision of equality and sustainability and local and regional involvement and self determination. She argued that this has now largely been realized

and held great optimism for the future. Similarly, Kitka spoke of success that has been achieved in Alaska since the passing of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971. This has included a decline in poverty, increase in life expectancy and elevated levels of self sufficiency and cultural determination. In combination, Kitka and Blondin-Andrew departed markedly from the conventional approach of their contemporaries. Instead of stressing the problems faced by aboriginal peoples, they emphasized recent success and demonstrated a clear optimism for the future.

Discussion

Despite frequent mention of the challenges facing northern regions, the general tone of the opening session was one of optimism. There was optimism for the future of the north, confidence that challenges can be overcome, and a common belief that the north will emerge from this period of rapid change as a healthy, vibrant region that will achieve the elusive balance between ecological integrity, social equity, and economic sustainability. One would expect optimism on the first morning of an international gathering like the Northern Research Forum. But the optimism expressed in the welcoming addresses and plenary presentations was undoubtedly augmented by the fact that nearly all remarks were made by elected or appointed public officials. Few mayors would welcome conference delegates

by focusing on the troubles facing his or her municipality as a result of rapid growth. Territorial or national representatives are unlikely to address delegates from across the world by describing the historical mistreatment of indigenous peoples. Ambassadors from foreign countries are not going to detail trade disputes, stalled talks, broken treaties, or other international disagreements. Instead, it is the job of these individuals to highlight success and relay a sense of confidence; to emphasize the positive and circumvent the negative. In short, convention dictates that they be optimistic in these situations.

The representatives initiated discussion of several prominent issues that were discussed over the remaining days of the meeting. Yet there was little attempt during the plenary session to go beyond purely descriptive accounts of these issues. Their causes, and the complexities associated with resolving them, were not explored in any detail. The status quo was not challenged. Rather than addressing and mitigating the effects of rapid change, the common perspective of appointed and elected officials was one of adapting to it. In the same sense, there was little focus on risk, and great focus on opportunity. Still, this optimism set the tone for the rest of the NRF open meeting: one of collegiality, comradery and international cooperation. This was the real contribution of the opening morning's events and, in reality perhaps, all it could hope to achieve.