

North has global peers: analyst

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Road to prosperity lies in 'collaboration'

Northern Ontario has more in common with other northern regions of the world than the rest of the province, but that doesn't mean it should try to become a stand-alone province, says an economic analyst.

In a report for the Northern Policy Institute think-tank, David MacKinnon notes the province's north and its 800,000 inhabitants represent the second-largest northern district in

the world after Siberia.

MacKinnon, a southern Ontario-based analyst, said the north should look to other northern regions, like Iceland, that have similar demo-

graphics and challenges but are managing to perform better economically.

• Continued on page A3

Northern economy will benefit in diverse economy: MacKinnon

• Continued from page A1

"The experiences of northern regions in Canada and elsewhere is needed, and can shed new insight into the economic prospects of the north and help manage the relationship between northern and southern Ontario," said MacKinnon, a former senior provincial bureaucrat.

Polls show that many northerners continue to blame Queen's Park for their problems, but separating from the south isn't the answer, said MacKinnon.

"You only have to look at Nova Scotia, which is not prospering," he said. "You don't want to do that."

The road to prosperity lies in "collaboration" with other jurisdictions, not separation, he said.

Though MacKinnon doesn't live in the North, he says he developed a passion for this region during regular canoe trips and wants to see it perform better economically.

"It is the bridge between eastern and western Canada."

The economy will improve through diversification, including new ways to create employment through the region's rich natural resources, he said.

Most of the population is in the northeast, with the shrinkage occurring mainly in Northwestern Ontario.

Some will be surprised to learn in MacKinnon's report that primary industries, like mining and sawmilling, account for only 6.5 percent of total Northern Ontario jobs.

"Economic strategy should not be based exclusively on primary industries," the report warns.

MacKinnon noted that aboriginals in Scandinavian countries are more involved in local economies and therefore enjoy incomes on par with non-aboriginals.

Northern Ontario's native population is expected to grow, which has prompted other experts and native leaders to push for increased education and training programs for aboriginals.

Because hard data about Northern Ontario is lacking, local officials should be demanding that Statistics Canada do a better job of compiling that information, MacKinnon added.