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Northern voices can indeed be heard

By: Charles Cirtwill

The Mowat Centre, a research institute associated with the University of Toronto, released a "Federal Economic Agenda for Ontario". The document asks, and answers, two questions: What are the primary challenges facing Ontario? And, what does the evidence tell us about the best possible responses to those challenges?



Charles Cirtwill, President & CEO, Northern Policy Institute.

For Northerners, the importance of this document isn't just in the policy recommendations provided within it (policy recommendations free for the taking by any political party or candidate, regardless of their geographic location or philosophical bent). The real significance for the North is demonstrated in the difference between the Mowat Centre's original discussion paper, released last fall, and the final document, released this spring.

In the original paper, there was very little about First Nations and Aboriginal peoples. In the original paper, there were mentions of the differences between regions, but little sense of how vast those differences really are. Particularly as they relate to infrastructure, mass transit, housing, investment attraction, and labour. In the original paper, there was no mention of FedNor whatsoever. A program so central to Ottawa's presence and activities in the North that the mere public mention of it raises hackles on all sides.

In the original paper, there was mention of the Ring of Fire and a call for Ottawa to match the provincial commitment of spending a billion dollars to kickstart development. But there was no discussion of what to spend the money on.

No consideration of who should guide the spending. No exploration of how (or indeed even if) the affected communities should be involved in making those decisions. All of those points are covered in the final document.

These Northern issues and perspectives are included in a document written by experts living in the "Greater Toronto Area" because the people of the North took the time to inform those experts.

Between November and March, students, academics, entrepreneurs, activists, business people, elected and non-elected officials, First Nations, Metis, young and old alike shared their ideas about the issues holding us back and how to solve them.



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Not just offering opinion, but evidence. Providing real-life examples about how they or others had faced similar challenges and overcome them. Or, attempted to overcome them and failed.

Recognizing that as a community we could not just offer a laundry list of grievances, the discussions were focused on solutions.

To pick the things they would do today, and the things that could be fixed tomorrow or at some further point down the road.

It worked. Clear priorities emerged and practical, evidence-based solutions were offered, and accepted. The Toronto experts listened. Any document seeking to put forward a coherent plan for a province as geographically, economically and ethnically diverse as Ontario is going to include some compromises, and avoid other issues entirely. But the difference between what the experts were prepared to say last fall and what they could say this spring is there for all to see.

We need to see more of this model. Northerners working together, talking to each other, across regional and cultural and generational boundaries. Being willing, with one voice, to explain what we want, why we want it, and to provide a basis for why we believe it will work.

That collaboration needs to become more habit than exception. When our largest municipal advocacy groups have joint meetings it should not be subject of a major media release and surprised public commentary. That level of communication and co-operation should be a given.

So we, the people of the North, are not done yet. We need to take the lessons of how we successfully educated the experts at the Mowat Centre and apply that to all of our interactions with those not from the North. For that matter, we should apply those lessons to how we deal with each other. But first, let's see if we can keep our streak going. We have a federal election on the horizon. Bend the candidates' ears when they come to your door this fall. Northern voices can indeed be heard in Toronto. The next question is: can they be heard in Ottawa?

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