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NEWS LOCAL

A new lens needed for Northern Ontario, says report

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A new report suggests Northern Ontario could learn more by looking to regions outside of the province than comparing itself to its southern counterpart.

A New Northern Lens: Looking out is as important as looking in, researched and written by David MacKinnon of the Northern Policy Institute, explores how Northern Ontario could benefit from looking to other northern regions of the world, such as Nunavut, Alaska, Siberia, Scandinavia, and Iceland.

In his report, MacKinnon outlined 10 recommendations for how Northern Ontario could use the lessons of these regions to move towards economic success, social stability and better resource management.

In terms of geological and industrial structure, Northern Ontario is much more similar to other northern jurisdictions in Canada and internationally that it is to Southern Ontario, MacKinnon said.

"For that reason alone, it makes sense to pay attention to what's going on," MacKinnon said.

In his report, MacKinnon writes that comparisons between Northern and Southern Ontario are therefore "virtually meaningless" because of the disparity in population between the two regions, and the fundamental differences in geography and industrial structure.

MacKinnon argues that years and years of a perceived divide between Northern and Southern Ontario have only become a distraction.

"If you're attacking the wrong problem, you're not going to solve anything," he said.

His report shows that Northern Ontario is bigger population wise than all other northern regions in the country, and is the second largest northern region in the world in terms of population.

Because of its size population-wise, the future of Northern Ontario matters substantially on a national and global scale, and warrants a higher profile, MacKinnon said.

"When it performs poorly, that really matters because of its size. Northern Ontario matters more than many people think it does," he said.

"One of the things that really needs to happen is a greater recognition of just how significant it is."

MacKinnon also argues that primary industries, while important, do not make up as much of the economy in the region as many assume, representing only about 6.5% of total employment.

For this reason, the region should see the resource sector as a piece of the puzzle, rather than the be all end all of economic success, he said.

"What we said is not that [Northern Ontario] should move away, but it should recognize that a strategy that deals exclusively or relies largely on the primary sectors will not do what needs to be done in terms of northern economic development," he said.

"The reasons is partly mathematical. You have 6.5% of the labour force is employed directly by primary industries, probably at least that many again indirectly. You're still talking about 10-15% of the labour force employed directly or indirectly in primary sectors. That's not going to be enough to generate the employment and the possibilities that are needed for the future."

MacKinnon is a frequent commentator on fiscal issues in Canada. He has served in several senior capacities in the Ontario Ministry of Finance, the Bank of Montreal and as CEO of the Ontario Hospital Association from 1996 to 2003. He was also CEO of the Ontario Development Corporation, Ontario's major economic development agency, from 1986 to 1993.

As someone who has been working within the region for close to 40 years, MacKinnon said he feels it's time for new direction and new ideas to move the region's economic development forward.

"I've been hearing essentially the same stuff... people mad at the south, people over-stressing the dependency on primary industries and a society that has too many internal divisions and isn't working hard enough to heal them... I've hearing that for 40 years," he said. "And it is time, I think, to get some new ideas for economic development in place."

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