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## OPINION

# Sudbury could lead 'Northern renaissance' — Robinson

By Star Staff

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Northern Ontario should have more control over its destiny and economic development according to Laurentian University economics professor David Robinson. John Lappa/Sudbury Star/Postmedia Network

Sudbury could be the centre of a "Northern renaissance," David Robinson believes, if Northern Ontario had more control over its destiny and its economic development.

Robinson, a Laurentian University economics professor, wrote a report entitled *Revolution or Devolution?: How Northern Ontario Should be Governed*, released last month by the Northern Policy Institute. The report calls for an alternative model of governance to give the region more control over its resource-based economy, which more than half of Northerners believe would be managed better locally than by a centralized Ontario government.

The process, called devolution, could include granting Northern Ontario legislative powers, creating an elected but advisory Northern Ontario assembly, and the creation of a semi-autonomous district with most of the powers of a province. A strong case can be made, Robinson says, that there would be significant economic advantages from devolution of powers.

Robinson had a chance to make that case when he took a time to participate in The Sudbury's Star's 10 Questions feature.

**1. You have called for a "devolution" of powers for the North. For those who don't know, what does the term mean and how would it work here?**

It's like giving your grown-up kids the right to decide not to eat spinach. Devolution means transferring power to a lower level. Normally, it means a central government hands some powers over to the local or regional administration.

Just about everyone who studies politics believes that the provinces have to devolve some of their power to lower levels.

The trick is to get the right powers at the right level.

**2. Do you see it as a step towards independence as a new province, and is that something you support?**

I don't support carving up the health-care system - in fact I would like to see a national health care system. One health care card for Canadians, one driver's licence, one passport. Free movement of beer and construction workers between provinces. Some provincial powers should be given to the federal government.

On the other hand, in Ontario, I do favour decentralizing other powers in Canada's monster province. Ontario is just too big and too diverse to govern well. If I were a southerner, I would want to secede from Northern Ontario so we could concentrate on building a world-beating city-state.

The north and the south are different economies, different biologies, different geologies and different cultures. Southern Ontario is an immigrant society, one of the most exciting cultural centres in the world. I support more power for Toronto and the GTA. I support creating a Quebec-Windsor regional government. It is an absolute joke that Ontario doesn't have a high-speed rail corridor for what is one of the richest and most productive regions in the entire world. If southern Ontario wants to be a province, I'd support them.

Northern Ontario is a stable, old society that is losing people. Most of Ontario's Cree and Ojibwa are here. Most of Ontario's francophones are here. This is a different society from southern Ontario. Different worlds need different policies.

Northern Ontario should have been a province like Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta, but instead it became a colony of Toronto. Toronto got to suck enormous wealth out of the North. It is not an arrangement that worked well for the north and it still doesn't.

Does that mean that the North should be separate? Only if Ontario can't live with much stronger regional governments. The province is like a big old gunnysack with three or four growing animals inside. It could burst and give birth to separate provinces. It could reorganize itself as a kind of high-powered confederation. That's probably the better solution.

I guess my position is separation if necessary, but not necessarily separation.

**3. You say the current way Northern Ontario is governed puts the region at a disadvantage. Under the current power structure, how are Northerners losing out?**

The list is pretty long. Lets start with forests. Northern Ontario produces lumber. Southern Ontario only recently allowed four-storey wooden buildings. Vic Fedeli, the MPP for North Bay had to fight for it. Why? Because the southern concrete and steel industries didn't want competition from Northern wood.

Wood is a fairly important product for us. We should have a timber engineering program and the industrial design school developing new value-added products for our wood industry. The Ministry of Education says you don't have a value-added wood industry, so we won't invest in building one.

The province is still supporting a Forestry Faculty at the U of T. Is it because of the vast commercial forestry industry in the cemeteries of the GTA? It's not because they have a forestry industry. It is all about keeping the money in the south.

Who is going to suffer when climate change brings massive forest fires to Ontario? Start in Kenora and work your way east. Who isn't paying for the research on adaptation? Visit Queen's Park.

Who gets the income from Northern hydro power? Queen's Park. Who pays southern prices for power? Timmins. If we controlled our own power we would sell it to the south at peak times and buy their excess power at cheap off-peak prices. We would sell power to Northern industries at a lower price, creating jobs. We might even import cheap power from Quebec and Manitoba to support Northern industry.

Where did the wealth from Northern Ontario's sliver mines end up, Toronto or Cobalt?

Do you have any idea why Northern Ontario with all its natural resource wealth has been stagnant for 40 years? Because the province set things up that way. When I was trying to get Sudbury's mining supply and service sector recognized as an industrial cluster, provincial bureaucrats told us there was no cluster in Sudbury. They didn't want to support industrial development in Sudbury. Later they admitted there was a "micro-cluster" here. The idea of a mining supply and service cluster in Sudbury had to be shoved down their throats.

And why do Toronto and Kingston still have mining engineering programs? The province can't really afford three good schools, but southern interests keep the province from shutting the creaky old schools down and making Laurentian the provincial centre for all mining programs. Who made up the curriculum that lets students graduate from high school without being able to name the trees on their school yard?

Why didn't the North get real universities until the 1960s? Every comparable region in Canada had a university at least 50 years earlier. Universities were a provincial responsibility. Northern cities have symphonies and art galleries because those are local responsibility. Why did it take a fight to get a Northern medical school? Because the southern institutions didn't want competition.

#### **4. How would Northern Ontario benefit?**

There is a general rule: Self-governing regions, countries and cities do better than jurisdictions governed from outside. It goes back to Adam Smith. Unless Northerners are particularly stupid, it probably holds for Northern Ontario.

Any Northern government would do things to build the economy. It would expand forestry research, aggressively support mining supply and services as an export industry, develop a transportation plan (Ontario still doesn't have one for Northern Ontario, does it, Northern Development and Mines Minister Michael Gravelle? Is that incompetence or intentional neglect?).

Northern Ontario would come up with an education system that helped young people stay in the North and create jobs if they want to, not just move south to fill Toronto's labour market needs. We would build a northern School of Industrial Design and work with the Scandinavians to develop high-value wood products. We would require public buildings to be primarily built using Northern wood.

The North would create a school of performing and creative arts aimed at developing the talents of Northern young people and helping northerners to see themselves in popular culture. The south doesn't believe Northern Ontario has any culture. Northern school books might include Northern poets and writers. Kids would learn to recognize other Northerners and as well as Northern trees and flowers. Our universities would get their fair share of graduate programs.

We would sell power to the south. We would probably have a building code designed for the Northern climate. We would have a pan-north renewable energy policy and move all the smaller communities toward district heating so we could keep the money we spend on natural gas in the north.

We would work with Northern Quebec and Northern Manitoba to develop the mid-Canada corridor, and lay the foundation for future prosperity.

We would already be working on policies to deal with the massive fires that climate change will bring.

We would deal with our first nations communities more effectively and they would have a significant role in governance. We would probably set up a francophone university.

We would also develop a tourism industry that was designed to suck money out of the huge Toronto market. That isn't a goal for Tourism Ontario.

#### **5. What obstacles, be they technical, economic or legal, to the devolution process?**

There are obstacles and there are technical problems. The big obstacles are mental. Southern Ontario politicians like seeing the province as a resource-rich region that is bigger than any of the Scandinavian countries. They like the sense of power. They imagine that hanging onto the North is good for the south. If they don't accept devolution, it probably won't happen.

I don't think Northerners believe the south will ever let the North make its own decisions, let alone allow the north to separate. Northerners don't believe other Northerners would fight for independence or devolution and are not going to waste energy on what they see as a losing cause.

The rest of the issues are just technical problems. If the north stays in OHIP, it has to pay for OHIP. Who pays for the highway between Parry Sound and the French River? Where do you set the boundary? Where is the legislature going to go? Do we divide the North into three or five districts?

None of these issue matter much to southern Ontario. The problem would be getting Northerners to agree with each other. I think Northerners are too afraid of making mistakes to make big decisions. A hundred and fifty years as a colony has trained Northerners to beg for scraps, fight with each other, and avoid responsibility for their own future.

**6. Northern Ontario is very large, with great distances between the large cities in the northeast and those in the northwest. How might that affect the feasibility of devolution?**

Canada is enormous too, with great distances between the large cities in the East and those in the West. Obviously, Canada should be run from New York.

This is a red herring. Are the distances shorter when you add in southern Ontario? If Northerners who live here can't govern because of the distances, obviously southerners who live in a different economy and climate can't either.

**7. How could the province be convinced to do this? Would Ontario not be giving up key sources of revenue from natural resources?**

That is two questions. Let's take them one at a time. The south should be eager to get rid of the North because it would be good for the south. Then they could concentrate on being what they really are - an economic and cultural powerhouse on the Northern edge of the biggest market in the world. The North is a distraction. They need to stop pretending they are a Northern culture just because some Toronto artists painted pictures of pine trees.

We can convince the south to loosen the apron strings by helping them see what they really are - a powerhouse without the North. Maybe we need to be more annoying and more demanding, too, so they really want to get rid of us.

Economically, there is not much at stake for the south. If you believe (former Sudbury MPP) Rick Bartolucci, the North is actually a financial burden. Rick and the provincial government wouldn't provide any real numbers, though, and I am pretty sure he is wrong. Either way, the net benefit or cost for the south are small - just a drop in a \$134-billion provincial budget bucket.

**8. Many people might say Northern Ontario couldn't go it alone, that an independent Northern Ontario would not be economically viable. What's your response to this?**

Nuts. There is simply no evidence at all. It amounts to saying that Northern Ontarians are a lot stupider than the people of Iceland, Luxembourg or Prince Edward Island.

The province basically gives away the mineral resources - Ontario has the lowest royalties in Canada - in the entire OECD, if I recall correctly. Forestry revenues are mostly spent on fire management and maintaining roads for the forestry companies.

**9. Where do political parties stand on this issue? You have run for the federal and provincial Green Party - do they approve?**

I think the Greens are willing to consider devolution. The Liberals, Conservatives and the NDP have a huge historic stake in the way things are. No nominee from those parties would be allowed to run if they mentioned devolution or secession. The parties have about as much political imagination and political courage as a piece of bannock bread.

The parties are one of the most effective forces suppressing discussion of how Northern Ontario should be run.

**10. Your report says that, had Northern Ontario become its own province at Confederation, Sault Ste. Marie would have been the capital, administrative and educational centre. As it stands now, Sudbury is the region's largest city and a hub for the region. How might devolution affect Sudbury?**

This is a terrific question. Tell me what powers you are willing our devolve and I'll give you a long list of ways Sudbury might be affected.

If the North got control of its natural resource revenues, Sudbury would soon Canada's centre for mining research and development. We would see more southern firms in this area moving to Sudbury and North Bay. We would have world-class university programs in mining and resources. There would be more consulting firms based in the city.

With more commercial activity in the North, Sudbury would see more traffic and have a bigger role as a regional centre. As the regional education centre, we would have more university programs and more students in the city. I would bet on having a school of industrial design, a school of fine arts and a veterinary college within two years.

Northern cities would collaborate more on economic development instead of going through provincial agencies. I would like to think we would see property tax reform, even a pure land-tax system. We would probably develop a deep-water port on Georgian Bay.

Sudbury would get a cross-laminated timber factory and begin building schools and other public buildings in wood and timber. The architecture school would get an international reputation for developing the new "boreal" style.

A Northern province would have a modern public sector financial structure. The city would have more powers and would have more dedicated revenues. City government would be more important. Sudbury would almost certainly become more business-friendly.

More young people would stay in Sudbury and the trickle of immigrations would increase. There would be a tremendous sense of possibility. Sudbury would be a very exciting place. It would be at the centre of a northern renaissance.

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