



Prime Minister Stephen Harper participates in OP NANOOK 13 in Gjoa Haven, Nunavut, with members of the Canadian Rangers August 21, 2013.
Photo: PMO, Jason Ransom

Nation-Building on Permafrost: Three Prime Ministers

Geoff Norquay

From the infrastructure ambitions of John Diefenbaker to the governance breakthroughs of Brian Mulroney to the resource development dreams of Stephen Harper, the North has enthralled and sometimes confounded Canada's political leadership. Longtime political strategist and former prime ministerial aide Geoff Norquay traces half a century of policy trials and triumphs in a part of the world where change comes slowly.

John Diefenbaker, Brian Mulroney and Stephen Harper are united by more than the fact that they were all Conservative prime ministers and politically dominant in their respective eras. For all three, northern Canada held a special place in their national policy agenda, they each had their “northern visions” and they took significant steps to advance the economic and constitutional development of that region.

In the case of Diefenbaker, it was his “Northern Vision” and “Roads



John Diefenbaker's northern vision was Roads to Resources, while Brian Mulroney created the third northern territory of Nunavut in the eastern Arctic. Photos: Library of Parliament and *Policy*

to Resources" programs; for Mulroney, it was the commitment and negotiations that led to the creation of Canada's third territory, Nunavut; and for Harper, it has been asserting Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic and the successful negotiation of a devolution agreement with the Northwest Territories.

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On February 12, 1958, John Diefenbaker kicked off the election campaign and launched his northern vision with a direct link to the nation-building legacy of his hero, Sir John A. Macdonald: "He opened the west. He saw Canada from east to west. I see a new Canada—a Canada of the North.... We will open that northland for development by improving transportation and communication and by the

development of power, by the building of access roads."

Diefenbaker's northern vision was a product of the late-1950s, about securing Canada's economic independence in an increasingly integrated North American economy, as well as addressing the threat posed by communism. It was also the result of two key advisers, Dr. Merrill Menzies, the PM's key economic adviser and Alvin Hamilton, the key Diefenbaker caucus confidant and minister of northern development. As Menzies described the challenge in 1956:

"What is lacking is a national policy and the realization that without one we must inevitably drift into economic continentalism in which we can have little economic independence or effective sovereignty. The regional north—south pull of the American industrial colossus is such that only by the most determined and ceaseless efforts can we hope to maintain our integrated national economy."

The "Roads to Resources" element of the National Development Policy, (on which Hamilton was a major influence) contained this striking piece of Cold War rhetoric:

"The challenge of communism now and in the years ahead demands that our vast northern resources be made accessible and available to industry, for vast resources undeveloped and hidden in the earth will not fashion or forge the shield of freedom or contribute to the survival of the Free World."

As a pan-Canadian program, Roads to Resources was available to both provinces and the territories. The theory, as described by Philip Isard in his 2010 Masters thesis, (*Northern Vision: Northern Development during the Diefenbaker Era*), was that transportation infrastructure was the key, and that "northern development would stimulate economic activity nationwide, expand the domestic processing of oil, ore and mineral resources, and encourage the financial participation of Canadians in their own economy."

In Yukon and the Northwest Territories, the initial 1958 plans were ambitious, including over 1,200 miles of roads and six major bridges at an estimated cost of more than \$31 million. The Alaska Highway would be connected to the Arctic coast, and a 500-mile road would be built between Fort Rae and Coppermine. Site-specific feeder roads would stimulate resource development and mining activity. All in, these projects would require a federal investment of \$100 million in the two territories, and the completion target for this first phase was only five to seven years.

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vin Hamilton, had woefully misunderstood the delays and costs involved in northern construction, and as a result, expenses were escalating and progress was slow. Only 110 km of the Dempster Highway extension had been completed by 1960; it was finally completed in 1979, and at a cost more than 12 times the original estimate. The railroad from northern Alberta to the Pine Point mine was ultimately completed, but not until 1964.

Diefenbaker faced other challenges. While it was clearly far-reaching and aspirational, his northern vision was the subject of relentless questioning and criticism by the media, the public and opposition politicians. Liberal leader Lester Pearson accused Diefenbaker of building highways “from igloo to igloo.” The time-frame was much too ambitious and the benefits of the program slow to arrive. And by the early 1960s, the prime minister was losing interest and beset by other issues—continental economic disputes, a testy relationship with US President John F. Kennedy, debilitating defence issues and challenges to his own leadership. When the Liberals came to office in 1963, they effectively killed both Northern Vision and Roads to Resources and reoriented their northern programs towards social welfare and aboriginal affairs.

The idea of splitting the Northwest Territories into two territories first emerged in the 1950s when the non-aboriginal population of the Mackenzie Valley argued that the move would hasten the development of responsible government and spur the economy in the western part of the region. John Diefenbaker’s government actually proposed such legislation in 1963, but it subsequently died on the order paper.

The more modern story of Nunavut began in 1976, when the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada proposed the creation of a new territory in northern Canada as a means of resolving two huge issues—settlement of Inuit land claims and the future of political development in the eastern Arctic. To reflect their majority status in the eastern Arctic, the Inuit asserted the bold ob-

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jective of securing both land rights and a public government through the division of the Northwest Territories.

While the federal Liberal government of the day accepted the land claim for negotiation, for several years they resisted the idea of dividing the existing Northwest Territories to create a new territory. By the early 1980s, however, the federal government relaxed its opposition to partition of the NWT and in April of 1982, 56.5 per cent of its residents voted in a plebiscite to divide the territory. In November of that year, federal Indian Affairs and Northern Development Minister John Munro told the House of Commons that the federal government agreed in principle to the division of the Northwest Territories and the creation of Nunavut.

The Tungavik Federation of Nunavut was created in 1982, assuming the role of negotiating a modern treaty with the Government of Canada, and the 13-year long negotiating process began in earnest. It was slow and painstaking work, with a lot of moving parts. A major breakthrough was the Mulroney government’s 1986 decision to adopt a Comprehensive Land Claims Policy that narrowed the requirement to give up aboriginal title through negotiations, while broadening potential rights and benefits. In 1992, a plebiscite throughout the Northwest Territories supported the proposed boundary line between the NWT and Nunavut.

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The federal government would pay more than \$1 billion to Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., the organization created to ensure that the promises

made to Inuit beneficiaries of the land claims were kept, and the new territory of Nunavut would come into existence on April 1, 1999.

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As Terry Fenge and Paul Quassa describe in their 2009 Policy Options article (*Negotiating and Implementing the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement*), the successful land claims agreement and the launch of Nunavut were the product of three critical factors:

- Inuit negotiators and politicians were consistent in their vision, patient and tenacious, remained united and were willing to compromise;
- The Government of Canada’s negotiators were professional, diligent and creative, “providing continuity and corporate memory that spanned the governments of different political persuasions”; and
- The Mulroney government stayed with the Nunavut project through the many long years of negotiations. As Fenge and Quassa point out, three federal ministers of Indian and Northern Affairs over the period—David Crombie, Bill McKnight and Tom Siddon—provided support and encouragement throughout, with Siddon personally calling Prime Minister Mulroney in 1993 to recommend both the land rights and political development provisions of the final agreement.

If change in Canada comes slowly, change in the North takes even longer. Much of the promise contained in the Nunavut Agreement remains to be fulfilled, and perhaps it created expectations that were too great, given challenges and capacities. But the creation of Nunavut shows that people of goodwill, gifted negotiators and a prime minister and government with an enduring commitment, can beat the odds and collectively accomplish much. These are lessons that could profitably be applied today in First Nations-federal government relations South of 60.

When Stephen Harper spoke in Inuvik on January 8 this year to mark the beginning of construction of the all-season road to Tuktoyaktuk on the Arctic Ocean, John Diefenbaker was very much on his mind:

“Prime Minister Diefenbaker knew then what our government is undertaking today: construction of a highway will improve the lives of people living in the North for generations to come, facilitating economic development, creating jobs and enabling cost-effective, safe and reliable transportation of goods to and from northern communities.”

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Fifty years after Diefenbaker’s Roads to Resources ran out of gas, some northern issues have evolved, but many remain the same. Transportation infrastructure is even more important to the future of the North than it was five decades ago, but the

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development of hydro-electric capacity and transmission lines to potential mining development sites are now becoming urgent.

The difference today is that we now know the resources are there and they are there in abundance. There are 10 major mining developments in various states of planning in the NWT alone, and a recent Conference Board report estimated that the value of mineral production in the territory could grow from \$732 million in 2011 to \$1.3 billion by 2020.

With the devolution agreement signed in 2013 between Ottawa and Yellowknife and ratified by Parliament in 2014, all of these developments are now firmly in the hands of the territorial government. Devolution provides the people of the NWT a greater voice in decisions about how public land, water and resources are managed, how the economy will be developed, and how the environment will be protected.

Additional challenges remain. As the prime minister told the *Globe and Mail* in a January interview, the North “requires better levels of social development and obviously we all know about the challenges that exist in terms of education, housing and other living standards issues.” The environment will be another issue of concern, as climate change raises the possibility of increased shipping through the Northwest Passage. Resource development raises the possibility of oil and tailing spills that will be much more difficult to manage in the harsh northern climate, both on- and offshore. And thawing permafrost raises the possibility of damage to infrastructure: roads, airport runways and water and sewage systems.

Stephen Harper’s northern vision remains a work in progress and has attracted some criticism. The promised Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships have fallen victim to the normal delays of

military procurement and development of the Arctic port of Nanisivik has been put off until the ships are at least on the horizon. The promised icebreaker John G. Diefenbaker remains a distant hope. There are still no Fixed Wing Search and Rescue aircraft based in the north. Huge basic capacity and social development challenges remain in Nunavut.

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On the other hand, construction on the road to Tuktoyaktuk is underway. The \$188 million Canadian High Arctic Research Station slated for Cambridge Bay is on schedule and will open in 2017. The geomapping that is so critical to both mineral development and asserting Arctic sovereignty has been renewed with a \$100 million commitment. And Environment Minister Leona Aglukkaq is in the middle of a two-year term as chair of the Arctic Council.

As with many things in the North, progress takes time. **P**

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