

A Time To Celebrate

On April 1, 1999 the map of Canada will change forever. The Northwest Territories will be divided to create Nunavut Territory and the new Northwest Territories in the west. The two new territories are the first new jurisdictions to be created in Canada since Newfoundland joined Confederation half a century ago—and they represent the first change to the map of Canada to result from Aboriginal peoples' political activism. It is a time for celebration and for earnest renewal of efforts to build democratic northern governments that truly reflect the best of the founding traditions of the region.

The political actions that led to the two new territories were peaceful and constructive, if often full of conflict, debate, uncertainty, and hard choices. The creation of the two new territories engaged a generation of Dene, Inuit and Metis, and the serious efforts of a great many non-Aboriginal citizens as well. Together all of these people are creating Nunavut: a homeland for Inuit, a public government, and an unusually internationalist part of Canada, with strong links to Greenland, Russia, and Alaska that will only grow in importance and sophistication.

Citizens are also creating the new western territory, where the basic political structures are still being debated and developed, and where, appropriately for the time being, the old name of "Northwest Territories" will survive. In the new Northwest Territories, a territorial government of as yet unknown powers will evolve, defined by its relationships with a heterogeneous array of regional governing structures. The forms of self-government in the new Northwest Territories will come to reflect the needs and purposes of the Inuvialuit, Dene, Metis, and non-Aboriginal people who live there.

For the moment, attention in each new territory is appropriately focused on innovation and institution-building. The forms and practices being put in place now can always be changed; nevertheless they will powerfully shape the opportunities available to public employees and politicians to meet the aspirations of residents. If the new territories are to reflect the particular cultures and norms of northern peoples, the new bureaucracies and legislative practices should do so as well.

Other very large challenges await. More than half of the population of each territory is under the age of fifteen. If the young people now growing toward adulthood are to have useful and meaningful lives, the last generation's experience in community development, economic decision making, and environmental stewardship will have to be applied with new skill and vigour. Enormous pressures on the new territories to seize nonrenewable resource development opportunities must be balanced with social development and preservation of the land. And for a considerable time, the whole world really will be watching. The new territories in Canada's North, precisely because they are an expression of peaceful negotiation of Aboriginal self-government, have caught the imaginations of people living in many less favourable constitutional situations.

The commodious, never-finished Canadian discussion about constitutional arrangements creates a climate that favours gradual innovation. The two new territories follow in the path of other subnational jurisdictions that have gradually gained power (such as the western provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan), and they are also part of a multifarious, Canada-wide process to settle outstanding land conflicts and to make concrete the right of Aboriginal peoples to self-determination. These fluid and fecund circumstances are a major advantage enjoyed by the new territories, for there is time and there is precedent for gradual, fundamental change. Despite the current climate of restraint, the new territories will be relatively well funded for some time to come. The celebrated pragmatism and determination of northern peoples, and their ability to take the interests of all into account while they take the long view, mean that they have every chance of succeeding, not only for themselves, but for us all.

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