

**Good Stewardship at the Top of the World:
The Canadian way
by Tim Lynch**

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COMMENTARY

Good Stewardship at the Top of the World: The Canadian way

Tim Lynch*

There is general agreement that the Arctic is one of the most critical geopolitical areas of the world that is in need of special attention. Its pristine environment is the 'canary in the coal mine' for warning all coastal communities how global warming will affect them. It holds potential for industrial development of energy resources that are in high demand and if global warming continues to take its toll on sea ice, the Arctic is likely to offer increased efficiency in global maritime transportation between Europe and Asia as well as open up to Arctic tourism.

These trends in exploitation of the Arctic will inevitably place considerable strain on the environment, the way of life of its indigenous residents, and present high risk situations for those working in such a merciless and unpredictable terrain. In addition its full potential will only be possible in a politically stable environment where sovereignty of coastal states is agreed and there is international respect for the seasons and the terrain from industrialists exploiting its resource potential and inter-continental shipping using the facilities. Therefore, it is critical that some recognised governance structure be put in place that clearly delineates how all nations should play by the rules when accessing and exploiting Arctic resources.

Canada has traditionally taken a leadership role in the governance of the Arctic. *The Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council* in Ottawa on 19 September 1996 created the Arctic Council comprised of eight states: United States, Canada, Russia, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Iceland and Finland.¹ This organisation included a unique legal status in international councils for recognition of indigenous organisations from each country. Observer status was given to some Asian and European countries. Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika movement in the Soviet Union lent support to the creation of a circumpolar organisation designed to protect the environment and the traditional life style of indigenous peoples in the region. Canada wanted to see the region declared a

nuclear free zone. US participation in the Council required any reference to security arrangements being removed from its charter. The Scandinavian countries were more concerned about the need to better understand the science of the area.

The present Canadian government, which sees itself as a champion for Arctic advancement and recognition in Canadian foreign policy, hosted a conference in May 2008 which included the five coastal members of the original Arctic Council: the United States, Canada, Russia, Norway and Denmark but with no representation of indigenous populations or observers participating. This fragmentation of the Council's membership is raising concerns among interests who want to see a legal framework for the Arctic that is similar to what exists for the Antarctic Treaty System.²

In 2013 Canada resumes its role as Chair of the Arctic Council. To provide some depth of understanding of the issues involved, the Canada Centre for Global Security Studies at the Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto, and the Walter & Duncan Gordon Foundation have partnered for a four-year multi-dimensional international program to improve public policy in the Circumpolar Arctic.³ To initiate this event the Gordon Foundation (a charity that has a history of supporting Arctic research), commissioned Ekos Research to conduct a public opinion survey on attitudes towards the Arctic in each member state of the Council. The results of this survey were presented at a forum held in the Munk School on 25 January 2011.⁴

In order to drill down to specific choices the methodology of the survey called on respondents to choose how money should be allocated among the different policy fields such as environment, education, health, transportation, military, etc. It was noted that the United States approach in promoting policy formulation would be to arrange incentives for markets to be created for the private sector

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investors to fill, the presumption being that some form of safety net will evolve with the market.

The Ekos study reports that Canadians – both north and south – see environmental security and social security as key elements in protecting the Canadian Arctic. National security, while still seen as important, does not seem to be a leading priority. Nevertheless, Canadians from all regions say that the Arctic should be the primary focus of Canada's military and foreign policy. Therefore, while Arctic security is an issue that respondents believe needs to be addressed, they do not want it to be done at the expense of these other priorities.

During the January workshop session it was acknowledged that Canadians have traditionally focused on east-west relationships in the building of their country generally regarding north-south as relating to themselves and their American neighbours. The survey clearly shows there is a new interest in Canadian Arctic sovereignty; among Canadians the perception is that the Arctic belongs to Canada, practically all the way to the North Pole. In keeping with the Canadian preference for seeking consensus, a circumpolar community is recognised and supported. The overall message from Canadians, particularly with respect to negotiating with the Americans around such matters as maritime borders for the Beaufort Sea, was summed up by the phrase 'cooperation if necessary but not necessary co-operation'. A seasoned Canadian diplomat participating in the process lamented that there is a need to come to terms with the real politics of what is possible in such negotiations.

This consensus building philosophy was accepted in discussions about the organisation of an entity that may offer some governance and oversight of the region. The indication is that circumpolar countries would agree to various forms of multilateral and bilateral arrangements in the governance of international trade and commercial exploitation of the Arctic. But it was recognised that the United States is somewhat of an impediment in promoting policy from an international entity because such policies may be interpreted as impacting on US sovereignty or impeding their maritime rights to go where they define international waters to exist. To address these kinds of difficulties the recognition of some new form of international stewardship was seen as being desirable.

The survey asked questions about preferences among countries for choosing partners with whom they would prefer to work together. Everyone likes

working with the Scandinavian countries first with the exception of the United States who chose Canada. When asked which country they were least comfortable dealing with on Arctic matters the results overwhelmingly pointed to China as the least desirable partner, even though China was mostly considered in the context of an observer. On this scale Russian public opinion responses indicated that the United States was the least comfortable country for them to negotiate with.

With memories of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil tanker running aground and spilling 10.8 million gallons of unrefined crude on the coast of Alaska, the impact of the Alberta oil sands on the environment and reputation of Canada, and the more recent BP oil rig blow-out in the Gulf of Mexico, managing environmental development and catastrophe is a top priority. The Munk School session stressed the need for good stewardship that protects the indigenous way of life and establishes resourced protocols that can be executed immediately in the event of any such disasters that were considered to be inevitable.

Preparations have to be made for environmental cleanup with an understanding of who is responsible for paying when such incidents occur or the collection of levies in support of such purposes. Inevitably there will be situations when people have to be rescued in what can be an unforgiving climate, be they tourist or workers. Search and rescue arrangements have to be in place. Such arrangements are only possible in the Arctic if there is good participatory stewardship among all nations involved. Such governance mechanisms demand that there is an understanding of how these preparations are organised, financed and who is responsible for deciding to initiate action when required.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For a copy of the declaration see <http://arctic-council.org/filearchive/ottawa_decl_1996-3..pdf> (9 February 2011).
- ² For more information on the Antarctic Treaty System, see the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat website <www.ats.aq/index_e.htm> (9 February 2011).
- ³ See the Walter & Duncan Gordon Foundation website <www.wdgm.ca/event/263> (9 February 2011).
- ⁴ Ekos Research Associates, *Rethinking the Top of the World: Arctic Security Public Opinion Survey – Final Report*, Toronto, 2011, <<http://munkschool.utoronto.ca/files/downloads/FINAL%20Survey%20Report.pdf>> (9 February 2011).