

Weathering the Snowstorm: Representing Northern Ontario

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Introduction: The Region of Northern Ontario

At different times throughout Ontario's history, both northern constituents and their Members of Provincial Parliament have debated whether the North is truly getting its fair share. Northern Ontario is different from the rest of the province in terms of its geography, economy, and political culture. Feelings of existing on the proverbial periphery of political decision making are compounded with its literal distance from the provincial legislature. Distance has left the North operating under a shroud of mystery to many, with periodic interest into the politics of the region by province wide-media. Northerners have expressed feelings of being ignored by their provincial legislature since confederation, which has led to a lingering sentiment of alienation. These differences separate Northern Ontario from the rest of the province, and set a distinctive political climate. The politics of Northern Ontario are unique, and have been acknowledged differently by Ontario Provincial Parliaments, most recently in a minority setting.

This paper will explore the experience of Northern Members of Provincial Parliament in the Ontario legislature, and the unique trials and tribulations that come with representing the region. The research will explore the phenomenon of northern alienation through the region's history, and assess whether the experience of this group of 11 MPPs has changed in a Minority setting, or by an unexpected prorogation.

This paper is based on a review of the literature surrounding the politics of Northern Ontario, a review of relevant legislative records, information gained through first person interviews with Northern Ontario MPPs, and personal observations made over the course of a ten-month non-partisan internship at the Ontario Legislature.

The Geography of The Great White North

Ontario is often divided into five distinct regions, with Northern Ontario being the only region that is actually officially recognized by law.¹ This enormous region comprises 88.4 percent of the total area of the province, or 810,411 square kilometers.² To put this size into perspective, this region of the province is larger than any other Canadian province except Quebec and British Columbia. In fact the individual riding of Kenora-Rainy River is geographically larger than the entire United Kingdom. Thunderbay, the most populous city in Northwestern Ontario is almost 1,400 hundred kilometers from its provincial capital of Toronto. These residents can more easily visit the state legislature of Minnesota and save themselves 900 kilometers driving.

The region of Northern Ontario is generally considered to be all of the districts north of the French River, including Algoma, Cochrane, Kenora, Manitoulin, Nipissing, Parry Sound,

¹ R. H. MacDermid, "Regionalism in Ontario," *Canadian Politics: An Introduction to the Discipline*. Broadview Press (1990): 361.

² G.R Weller, "Politics and Policy in the North." *The Government and Politics in Ontario*. Graham White, ed. 5th ed. University of Toronto Press Inc, (1997): 286.

Rainy River, Sudbury, Thunder Bay and Temiskaming.³ The terrain of the region is comprised of the rocky areas of Canadian Shield and the peat bogs of the Hudson Bay Lowlands in the far north. Northern Ontario is indeed north of the golden horseshoe of Southern Ontario, but most of the region in actuality remains south of the southern boundaries of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia.⁴

The Economy of the Provincial Hinterland

The traditional economy of Northern Ontario is linked to natural resources with a large reliance on mining and forestry. There is a smaller reliance on manufacturing, agriculture and public sector industries.⁵ Primary industry sectors account for close to 6.3% of Northern Ontario's total employment in 2011, compared to only .5% for the province as a whole.⁶ This heavy reliance on natural resources makes this region sensitive to world commodity prices, government policy decisions, changes in the Canadian exchange rate, and the natural boom and bust cycles of resource industries.⁷

Unemployment in the region has greatly fluctuated over the last twenty years, but has remained on average two percentage points higher than the provincial average.⁸ There have been historic job losses in the primary industries and manufacturing sectors due to the increased use of technology and volatile international markets. Since reaching a high of 12.8% in 1992, Northern Ontario's unemployment rate dropped to a low of 6.6% in 2008.⁹ In recent years the gap between unemployment rates has been closing. According to Statistics Canada data, the unemployment rate for Northeastern Ontario was 7.3% in 2012, and 6.7% for Northwestern Ontario, with the provincial average being 7.1%.¹⁰

Changing Demographic Patterns

The success of each region's economy has a direct impact on population patterns.¹¹ With the unemployment rates being historically high, and employment patterns remaining unstable, the North's population continues to decline. From 2006 to 2011 Northern Ontario's total population decreased by 1.4%.

³ Charles Martin, "The politics of Northern Ontario: An analysis of the political divergences at the provincial periphery." Department of Political Science, McGill University (1999): 6

⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵ G.R Weller, "Resource Development in Northern Ontario: A Case Study in Hinterland Politics." *Resources and the Environment: Policy Perspectives for Canada*. McClelland and Stewart (1980): 243

⁶ Ministry of Northern Development and Mines, "Northern Ontario: A Profile" (November, 2012) http://www.mndm.gov.on.ca/sites/default/files/northern_ontario_profile_1.pdf

⁷ Chris Southcott, "Aging Population Trends in Northern Ontario: 2001 to 2006," *Census Research Paper Series* (September, 2007): 4.

⁸ Ministry of Northern Development and Mines, "Northern Ontario: A Profile" (November, 2012) http://www.mndm.gov.on.ca/sites/default/files/northern_ontario_profile_1.pdf

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Statistics Canada "Labour force characteristics, population 15 years and older, by economic region, by province" (2013) <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/labor36b-eng.htm>

¹¹ G.R Weller, "Resource Development in Northern Ontario: A Case Study in Hinterland Politics." *Resources and the Environment: Policy Perspectives for Canada*. McClelland and Stewart (1980): 244.

Not only is the population declining, but there have also been significant demographic changes in recent years. According to Statistics Canada data many Northern Ontario cities are aging at an accelerated rate compared to the rest of the province. Between 2001 and 2006 the portion of the population 65 and over grew by 5.4% in Ontario, and 10% in Northern Ontario.¹²

These changing demographics have an effect on local economies, community structure, and the labour force. This rapidly aging population can be attributed to slow population growth, a lack of new immigrants, and continued youth out-migration for both employment and educational opportunities.¹³

These characteristics set the unique political environment by which political representatives must operate within. Northern Ontario is a region distinct from the rest of the province, and its differences are apparent in its geography, economy, and demographics.

Northern Alienation in the Political Wilderness

Central to northern political culture is the phenomena of northern alienation. According to Scott the sentiment of alienation “isn’t just the rhetoric of disaffected politicians: it reflects a deep, feeling by most citizens of the north that they are being short-changed”¹⁴ This sense of grievance is rooted in a rich history which makes it often difficult for those outside of the political environment of Northern Ontario to fully comprehend.

Many who live in the North feel as though there is a general ignorance of the North by Queen’s Park, and the south in general.¹⁵ Weller hypothesized that this grievance is partly a result of awareness that the region is unable to do much about its own situation given its relatively small percentage of the total population of Ontario, and its lack of political influence.¹⁶ While the sentiment of northern alienation is based on geographic, economic and social differences, it manifests itself in the Ontario political sphere.¹⁷ According to the history of this region, feelings of frustration and manipulation by the south are over a century old.

In the 1870’s both Manitoba and Ontario were in dispute over who owned the land between Lake of the Woods and Port Arthur.¹⁸ In fact by the late 1800’s both Manitoba and Ontario had their own jailhouse in Rat Portage, now known as Kenora.¹⁹ In 1884 the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in Britain made final border decisions and granted Ontario’s

¹²Chris Southcott, “Aging Population Trends in Northern Ontario: 2001 to 2006,” *Census Research Paper Series* (September, 2007): 12.

¹³Ibid, 7.

¹⁴ Don Scott. “Northern Alienation”. *Government and Politics of Ontario*. Ed. Donald C. MacDonald. Macmillan of Canada. (1975): 235.

¹⁵G.R. Weller. “Politics and Policy in the North.” *The Government and Politics in Ontario*. Graham White, ed. 5th ed. University of Toronto Press Inc. (1997): 285.

¹⁶ Ibid, 285.

¹⁷ Ibid, 285.

¹⁸ Robert Sibley, “The Political Wilderness,” *The Ottawa Citizen* (October 6, 2012)

<http://www2.canada.com/ottawacitizen/features/ontariovotes2007/story.html?id=3da45f5c-0858-4cef-ae9b-1b7a60d08a12>

¹⁹ Ibid.

claim to the land.²⁰ When Ontario finally acquired this piece of land it wanted, not every resident felt satisfied with the decision, and secessionist movements began to arise.

In 1908 residents of Cobalt Ontario first met to protest decisions being made at Queens's Park specifically regarding the development of the region, and dissatisfaction with railway policy.²¹ Between 1871 and 1914 natural resource revenue from Northern Ontario, represented over 25 percent of total provincial revenue, which paid for infrastructure throughout the province, and even the construction of the Queen's Park buildings.²² Northerners felt that they were not getting their fair share of those revenues.

Secession movements felt a sense of renewed hope between 1900 and 1910 because of the creation of the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Many believed that the creation of these new provinces paved the way for the creation of the new Northern Ontario province.²³ When proposals for a new province failed a secessionist movement in the Kenora District campaigned for a union with Manitoba in 1911.²⁴ Secessionist movements have largely operated under the reoccurring theme that economic and social problems of the North were one way or another the fault of the provincial government. According to historian Kerry M. Abel, these issues of economic development, taxation, and social policy created an emotional response by just reciting a few catchwords, becoming the basis of alienation and a device for community action.²⁵

Later in the region's history The New Province League political party campaigned for the creation of a northern province again in the 1940s and 1950s. There was a twenty-year hiatus of coordinated independence movements until the 1970s when the Northern Ontario Heritage Party led by Ed Diebel caused a stir at Queens Park. For three days in 1974, Diebel pitched a tent at Queens Park, giving interviews to the media, and demanding to meet Premier Davis. Eventually Davis granted him an interview but the government did not entertain the party's demands, leading the party to disband. On August 6th, 2010 the Northern Ontario Heritage Party was re-registered by Elections Ontario, and the party received 683 votes in the 2011 Ontario election.²⁶ Diebel has since dropped the notion of Northern Ontario existing as a separate province, and instead his party policy focuses on having greater northern representation in the Ontario legislature.

²⁰ Robert Sibley, "The Political Wilderness," *The Ottawa Citizen* (October 6, 2012)

<http://www2.canada.com/ottawacitizen/features/ontariovotes2007/story.html?id=3da45f5c-0858-4cef-ae9b-1b7a60d08a12>.

²¹ Kerry M. Abel, "Changing Places, History, Community, and Identity in Northeastern Ontario" McGill-Queen's Press – MQUP (2006) 348

²² Livio Di Matteo, J.C. Herbert Emery, and Ryan English, "Is It Better to Live In A Basement, an Attic or to Get Your Own Place?" *Canadian Public Policy*, 32 (2006): 175.

²³ Livio Di Matteo, J.C. Herbert Emery, and Ryan English, "Is It Better to Live In A Basement, an Attic or to Get Your Own Place?" *Canadian Public Policy*, 32 (2006): 175.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 175.

²⁵ Kerry M. Abel, "Changing Places, History, Community, and Identity in Northeastern Ontario" McGill-Queen's Press – MQUP (2006): 348.

²⁶ Elections Ontario, "Registered Political Parties in Ontario" (2013) <http://www.elections.on.ca/en/CA/CandidatesAndParties/PoliticalParties/RegisteredPoliticalPartiesinOntario.htm>

According to the President of the Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities, Al Spacek, the sentiment of northern alienation continues to thrive in the region. Spacek believes that municipal politicians in the North do not feel as though they are being treated fairly, and do not feel as though they have solid representation at the provincial level.²⁷ It is not only municipal politicians that wonder if the Northern Ontario is getting a fair share in the current government structure, business leaders have expressed frustration as well. Michael Atkins, president of the Laurentian Media Group, which publishes the Northern Ontario Business monthly publication describes the situation in this way “We live in something of a Third World economy in Northern Ontario. We have very little official sovereignty over our community or regional affairs.”²⁸

Alienation and Northern Members of Provincial Parliament

All Northern Members of Parliament interviewed recognize that northern alienation continues to exist, although there are differences in opinion when it comes to its actual legitimacy. Northern MPPs are the ones on the ground level talking community members and listening to their concerns, which provides them valuable insight into the perspectives of their community and the region as a whole.

Sarah Campbell, NDP member for Kenora-Rainy River believes her constituents and the North in general remain very much alienated.²⁹ She believes that this alienation stems from government policy decisions that are made without consultation, imposing the will of the South on the North. This misunderstanding of Northern Ontario and lack of effort to consult is why she believes constituents in the North are becoming very cynical of politics. NDP MPP John Vanthof reiterates this concern, believing that feelings of alienation have caused northerners to become very cynical.³⁰ Vanthof insists that Northern Ontarians do not actually want to separate from the rest of the province in any way; they simply want a voice in decisions that affect their region of the province.³¹

PC member Norm Miller does not believe that his constituents of Muskoka feel very alienated, but from his travels as Northern Development and Mines travels he knows that the feelings of alienation are alive and well. On a tour he did through Northern Ontario to Kenora, he noticed that the single greatest complaint was perceived Toronto centric attitudes of politicians, and inconsiderate policy decisions coming out of Queen’s Park.³² Mr. Miller’s colleague Vic Fedeli who represents the riding of Nipissing, hypothesizes that the Toronto centric attitudes stem from a genuine lack of understanding.³³ “Most people in this legislature have never been

²⁷ CBC News, “Northerners ponder separating from Ontario” *CBC News Online* (September 24, 2012) <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/story/2012/09/24/sby-ontario-separation.html>

²⁸ Robert Sibley, “The Political Wilderness,” *The Ottawa Citizen* (October 6, 2012) <http://www2.canada.com/ottawacitizen/features/ontariovotes2007/story.html?id=3da45f5c-0858-4cef-ae9b-1b7a60d08a12>

²⁹ Campbell, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

³⁰ Vanthof, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

³¹ Vanthof, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

³² Miller, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

³³ Fedeli, *Interview*, March 28th 2013.

north of Vaughn, and even fewer have been North of the Muskokas, which makes it particularly difficult to understand regional differences”.

Many members made reference to specific unpopular policy decisions that increased dissatisfaction and feelings of alienation among northerners. These policy decisions are perceived to have been made without a full understanding of northern issues, and without the best interests of the North in mind. One such decision that almost all opposition members referenced was the recent divestment of the Ontario Northland Transportation Company (ONTC). The ONTC is a crown agency of the provincial government, which was established in 1902 to provide transportation services in Ontario’s North.³⁴ The company played a historical role in transportation and economic development in the Northeast, as it connected Northern cities to Toronto by rail for over 110 years.³⁵ In March of 2012 the government announced its decision to divest in ONTC.³⁶ This decision shocked many who relied on the service, and it was met with both political and public opposition. To date 20 municipalities have passed resolutions regarding the ONTC, and an action campaign has been started asking the government to pause the divestment process so that a compromise can be found.

Almost all northern opposition members cited this divestment initiative as a Toronto centric decision, which alienated many northern community members. One member of the opposition recounted a story in which he attended an event and began a conversation with a government cabinet minister. When the cabinet minister found out the opposition member was from Northern Ontario, the minister recounted a story about once taking a nice train ride there. The member regretted to inform the minister that the nice train was the one the government just cancelled, to which the minister seemed shocked. This story was used to explain to the author how policy decisions could be made from Toronto, without a full understanding of the consequences they will have on a region 800 kilometers away.

Vic Fedeli cited the decision as unfair, and believes that if the train were located in Southern Ontario the rail would have been called an investment, but because of its northern location, it was referred to as a subsidy.³⁷ Fedeli believes the decision should have never been made without consultation and conversation in the first place.

When specific policy decisions were discussed, almost all northern opposition members stressed the need for consultation with communities to properly inform policy making. According to Vanthof if the government is going to make decisions that negatively effect the North, they need to give people from that region a voice. He referenced the decision to close the gates of nine provincial parks in Northern Ontario in October of 2012.³⁸ In early 2013, after

³⁴ New Deal For Northern Ontario “ONTC Current Operations” Accessed April 20, 2013, <http://www.newdealnorth.ca/CurrentOperations.aspx>

³⁵ CBC News “Northlander Makes Historic Final Ride” *CBC News Online*, (September 28 2012) <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/story/2012/09/28/sby-last-northlander-ride.html>

³⁶ New Deal For Northern Ontario “ONTC Current Operations” Accessed April 20, 2013, <http://www.newdealnorth.ca/CurrentOperations.aspx>

³⁷ Fedeli, *Interview*, March 28th 2013.

³⁸ Northern Life Online, “Province axes maintenance at 9 northern parks” (October 3, 2012) <http://www.northernlife.ca/news/localNews/2012/10/03-provincial-parks-sudbury.aspx>

much protest from northern constituents, the government it announced it was working with local municipalities under a pilot project to operate three northern provincial parks.³⁹ The municipalities will be responsible for any financial losses, but it was an acceptable alternative to municipal leaders because it kept gates from shutting indefinitely. Vanthof hypothesized the Ministry of Natural Resources could have come to this same policy outcome without alienating communities. “They should have said we need to spend this much less money, and have thrown it open to say is there ways you think we can make it better”.⁴⁰ He acknowledges that there will be some crazy ideas, but there will be some great ones as well. Kenora Rainy-River MPP Sarah Campbell insists that wherever consultation has not been done it feels as though the will of one area has been imposed on another.

Gilles Bisson, house leader of the NDP and Member for Timmins-James Bay, described this need for discussion and consultation to be what sets the North apart in terms of alienation.⁴¹ Bisson believes that Southwestern Ontario, and other regions feel alienated as well, but in a different way than the North. Northerners expect discussion, and expect to be brought in on what is going on in the region. According to Bisson, there are many instances when northerners feel as though the government is not on their side, and are not taking Northern consequences into account. Much like Vanthof, he feels that if the government would just sit down and ask northerners would help. He also referenced the ONTC decision, stating that although the decision blindsided many, people did not just whine, they asked the government to pause the decision until they could present policy alternatives that would be a fair compromise.⁴² Bisson believes that a lack of discussion, leads to decision-making that does not reflect northern realities, which keeps alienation alive and well.

NDP member John Vantof, PC member Norm Miller and Liberal member Rick Bartolucci acknowledge that governments of all stripes have made policy decisions without consultation that alienated northerners. Miller says he still receives complaints from his constituents about the cancellation of the spring bear hunt. In 1999, the Harris Conservative government, cancelled the spring black bear hunt, a decision popular in southern Ontario, but overwhelmingly unpopular in Northern Ontario.⁴³ Since then the hunt has not been reinstated, and many groups with considerable membership in the North including the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters continue to blame that policy decision for negatively affecting northern tourism, while increasing the possibility of bears coming into contact with humans.⁴⁴

Government members tend to see the issue of northern alienation in a different light. Bill Mauro, MPP for Thunder Bay-Atikoken hears about alienation a lot, but believes the sentiment

³⁹ Ministry of Natural Resources, “Province Launches Pilot at Three Provincial Parks” January 16, 2013, <http://news.ontario.ca/mnr/en/2013/01/ontario-launches-pilot-at-three-provincial-parks.html>

⁴⁰ Vanthof, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

⁴¹ Bisson, *Interview*, April 29th 2013.

⁴² Bisson, *Interview*, April 29th 2013.

⁴³ Jim Lawrence, “How political pressure cancelled Ontario’s spring black bear hunt” *Canadian Outdoor Heritage Alliance*, <http://www.iwmc.org/IWMC-Forum/JamesLawrence/040209-01.htm>

⁴⁴ Terry Quinney “Why the bear hunt must be reinstated” *Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters*, Accessed April 20, 2013, <http://www.ofah.org/news/Why-the-spring-bear-hunt-must-be-reinstated>

has become mostly a political tool.⁴⁵ According to Mauro alienation is mainly a word that the opposition can use to “beat the drum on”. Using alienation to invoke a strong emotional feeling is part of being an opposition member, and a useful tool in their toolbox. Since Mauro was elected in 2003, he has noticed many positive changes for the North, especially the city of Thunder Bay, with a tremendous amount of investment in health care and education.⁴⁶ Government MPP and Former Minister of Northern Development and Mines Rick Bartolucci agrees with his colleague that northern alienation is more of a political tool than a reality.⁴⁷ Bartolucci confesses that using alienation as a tactic is something that he relied on as an opposition member. According to government members the sentiment of alienation has taken an overly political tone, without being grounded in any hard evidence. Bartolucci argues that there have been big changes for Sudbury from the Harris to the McGuinty years, with large investments that have put Northern Ontario on the funding map. The political overtones of alienation lead many positive government programs to go underappreciated.

The government members referenced other funding programs that, in their opinion, prove that the government realizes northern challenges and is committed to overcoming them. Former Minister Bartolucci recalls programs he administered at the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines including the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund. To promote northern development the ministry stations officers throughout the region, which aid in economic development by providing help for new businesses, and administering the Heritage Fund.⁴⁸ According to Bartolucci, the fund, which provides economic assistance municipalities, entrepreneurs, and businesses in the North, grew to 100 million dollars under his tenure. Another program Bartolucci referenced that was created under his tenure is the Northern Ontario Policy Institute. The institute will monitor the 25 year Growth Plan for Northern Ontario unveiled in 2012 that seeks to strengthen the Northern Economy, diversify traditional industries, stimulate investment, and nurture new sectors.⁴⁹ According to Bartolucci both of these programs are concrete examples that show the government is actively addressing northern issues and should make northerners proud.

Both government members interviewed admit that northern alienation will continue to be a political challenge, but it is not due to government ignorance. Bartolucci believes that alienation is part of human nature, and not unique to the North. Many in rural Ontario express the same sort of sentiment, but it is human nature for people to want more. According to the Minister when you look at how much money has been invested into economic development, how many doctors and nurses have been hired and how many development programs have been nurtured, it becomes clear the sentiment is based on emotion, not evidence.⁵⁰

The sentiment of northern alienation has lingered since Confederation, but it is clear that there are differences in opinion as to its legitimacy between municipal leaders, historians, and

⁴⁵ Mauro, *Interview*, March 25th 2013.

⁴⁶ Mauro, *Interview*, March 25th 2013.

⁴⁷ Bartolucci, *Interview*, March 19th 2013.

⁴⁸ Bartolucci, *Interview*, March 19th 2013.

⁴⁹ Ministry of Infrastructure “Growth Plan for Northern Ontario” Accessed April 24, 2013, https://www.placestogrow.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=53&Itemid=65

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Members of Provincial Parliament. If there is one thing that all members agree on, it is that northern alienation does exist within their communities, and it is an issue that they must face as representatives of that region. Opposition members appear to come to a consensus that that alienation stems from a lack of consultation, and subsequent decision-making. Government MPPs tend to believe that alienation is rooted in historic emotional and political rhetoric, and doesn't reflect the reality of actual policy decision, which can leave good policy to go unappreciated.

To Kenora ... and Beyond! The Challenges of Representing the North

Every northern member interviewed referenced the vast geography of the region as the single greatest difficulty they must deal with in their role as representatives of the North. With eleven MPPs responsible for 90% of Ontario's landmass, it is not surprising that distance is the most cited challenge.

Norm Miller, holds the southernmost riding in the Northern Ontario region, but still cites geography as his greatest hurdle. His riding of Parry Sound-Muskoka, covers 15,486 square kilometers, with many distinct communities. Getting around his riding requires a lot of driving, and it is difficult to visit many communities in one day. He hypothesizes that in a downtown Toronto riding, you could walk the entire riding, and it could not even have a single hospital in it.⁵¹ In Miller's riding there are many municipal representatives, 7 first nations groups, numerous unorganized townships, 3 hospitals, 6 nursing stations, highway projects, and many schools that each have diverse issues. Sarah Campbell, representative of Ontario's largest riding Kenora-Rainy River, shares this challenge in maintaining close relationships with far-flung and diverse communities. In her one riding alone she has 12 mayors, and 70 first nations groups she must remain in constant contact with.⁵² She believes that this geographic challenge makes Northern representation unique.

NDP Member John Vanthof echoes this difficulty in representing distinct communities within one riding. His riding of Timiskaming-Cochrane holds 5 regions, each with their own set of concerns and issues. According to Vanthof, this creates a serious challenge when it comes to mobilizing many people around a cause because a burning issue for one community may be irrelevant to others.⁵³ According to France Gelinias, NDP member for Nickel Belt, meeting the needs of many different communities in one riding creates a need for a lot of investment that must be done from the constituency office, instead of Queen's Park.⁵⁴ In a riding with a much smaller area, it is likely that community members living in a close proximity will face many of the same issues. In a riding such as Timmins-James Bay, where the city of Timmins is a 500-kilometer plane ride away from smaller communities, it becomes more likely that community issues will be more varied.

The geographic challenges Northern MPPs face were historically exasperated by the passage of the Bill 81: The Fewer Politicians Act in 1996. This bill decreased the number of

⁵¹ Miller, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

⁵² Campbell, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

⁵³ Vanthof, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

⁵⁴ Gelinias, *Interview*, March 18th 2013.

provincial electoral districts reducing the number of northern seats from 15 to 11.⁵⁵ In this reduction of 4 seats, the mixed ridings expanded the area the remaining 11 MPPs had to service. Although the boundaries have been frozen, and the North is to not go below 11 seats, Kenora Rainy-River representative Sarah Campbell wishes that the North had more representation.⁵⁶ She believes that even though there are fewer people living in the riding than many urban areas, the vastness of the riding as it stands makes proper access to democracy difficult.

Many members believe that the geographic size of the ridings and distance from the legislature make it difficult for southern members to conceptualize the challenges the North faces. Gilles Bisson describes this situation as always starting from a deficit position.⁵⁷ According to Bisson, northern members always start out from a deficit position because people just do not understand what is going on up there, be it the culture of challenges.⁵⁸ Government members Bartolucci, and Mauro agree that the biggest challenge they face as northern representatives is ignorance surrounding the complexities of northern issues. MPP Bartolucci states that he spends a good percentage of his time explaining these complexities to others, some of who honestly believe that the North starts on Jane Street and ends at Vaughn.⁵⁹

Michael Mantha, NDP representative for Algoma-Manitoulin mentions that another challenge created by geography is the pressure on an MPP's family life. He laments that the traveling his riding requires within the constituency, as well as between the legislature and the riding, create extended periods of time away from his family.⁶⁰ In areas where constituencies are smaller closer to the legislature, and more manageable it becomes easier to achieve a desirable work/life balance.

Can anyone hear me? Communicating from the Palace to Home

Northern Members also face a unique challenge in communicating the activities of the provincial legislative body to constituents who reside hundreds of kilometers away from the legislature itself. Communicating what a member does while at Queen's Park is vital but not always easy. Vic Fedeli recognizes that his constituents are very much interested in the legislative work that directly relates to the North, such as the ONTC. He realizes that his constituents are much less interested in the work he has done on the justice committee, looking into the government cancellation of gas plants.⁶¹ He finds most difficulty in communicating the work he does in the Pink Palace that has more of an indirect link to North Bay.

France Gelinat faces challenges in communicating to her constituents due to Northern infrastructure. Gelinat recognizes that she is not in the riding Monday to Thursday, but must find ways to keep connected to what is going on in Nickel Belt, while keeping constituents connected to what she is doing in Toronto. She hypothesizes that social media has in one way made this

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Campbell, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

⁵⁷ Bisson, *Interview*, April 29th 2013.

⁵⁸ Bisson, *Interview*, April 29th 2013.

⁵⁹ Bartolucci, *Interview*, March 19th 2013.

⁶⁰ Mantha, *Interview*, April 24th 2013.

⁶¹ Fedeli, *Interview*, March 28th 2013.

goal a lot easier, but many parts of her riding are not connected to the Internet, or have reliable cellular signals.⁶² Sarah Campbell the member for Kenora-Rainy River also faces this same problem, as many in areas of Northwestern Ontario are not connected to high-speed Internet, or covered by mobile signal. Campbell tries to promote participatory democracy and stay connected to the public by compiling Hansard transcripts and keeping hard copies available.⁶³

Many members recognize that their challenges in communication are much different than they would be in urban ridings. Bill Mauro believes that it is easier to be the subject of media articles and the big paper in Thunderbay-Atikokan than it would be in the Greater Toronto Area.⁶⁴ PC Member Norm Miller echoes this notion, stating that it is much easier for him to go to his local media and have a receptive ear than it would be for him to go to the Toronto Star.⁶⁵ This ability to easily attract local media helps members in their ridings, but there are challenges when it comes to getting northern issues carried in province wide media. Gelinas believes that the legislative work in the Pink Palace sometimes resonates in Northern Ontario, but specifically what it means to Northern Ontario seldom gets reported.⁶⁶ This makes it difficult to get province wide attention to issues that matter to northerners. In her opinion province-wide media is very Toronto Centric, and not only are they not interested, implications for the North often go right over their heads as if northern members are speaking a different language.⁶⁷

Overall geography, communication infrastructure, and media outlets create unique challenges and distinct advantages for northern members. Geography poses challenges in two ways, both in difficulties associated with traveling from Queen's Park to the riding, and travel from one point in the riding to another. The larger and farther the riding, the more intense these challenges can become, especially when it comes to maintaining strong relationships with each individual community. When it comes to communicating political messages from Queen's Park, Northern Members enjoy an advantage because they are competing with less news stories, but also face difficulty in reaching province-wide media outlets. These unique circumstances create a shared experience for many northern members that influence the way they represent their region.

The North in the House

Northern Members face unique difficulty in attracting the attention of province wide media, and amassing many northern communities in support of one issue. Members also face challenges in bringing action and attention to Northern issues in the legislature. Bartolucci, Mauro, Vanthof and Bisson all explained that a great challenge of theirs remains explaining northern complexities to others. With only 11 members, unevenly spread between 3 parties, in a legislature of 107, it is difficult to amass strength in numbers and Northern Members must sometimes get creative in the tactics used to influence policy outcomes.

⁶² Gelinas, *Interview*, March 18th 2013.

⁶³ Campbell, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

⁶⁴ Mauro, *Interview*, March 25th 2013.

⁶⁵ Miller, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

⁶⁶ Gelinas, *Interview*, March 18th 2013.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

In interviews conducted, all northern opposition members referenced the importance of personal relationships to achieve attention and results when it comes to northern issues. Sarah Campbell finds that walking across the aisle and talking to Ministers during question period is a vital resource to bring results to issues facing her riding.⁶⁸ She does not assume that members have a previous knowledge of the North, or the particular issue, but walking across the hall and having informal discussions can often lead to a resolution. France Gelinias describes this as starting with the carrot rather than the stick. She too values being able to directly speak with the minister and ministry staff as a first step, and when that doesn't work she then looks to other ways.⁶⁹ Progressive Conservative MPP Vic Fedeli referenced question period, member statements and petitions all as valuable tools, but placed high value on meetings with Ministers and Ministry staff.⁷⁰ According to Fedeli all Northern Members share something in common, and the relationships between them are important.

When informal discussions with ministers whom a member has a good working relationship fails, other tactics must be used. Veteran northern member Gilles Bisson finds the best way to tackle an issue if informal talks with ministers break down is to look to building a community movement. What works best for Bisson is when you bring together as many people as possible who are affected by the same situation, and have them together work together to present a strategy or an idea.⁷¹ Petitions and townhall meetings can be used to bring people together around a central region. Bisson emphasizes the importance of not only complaining, but also putting forward actual solutions. He insists that there are many instances in which northerners rather compromise and find a solution together when it comes to cutting costs, rather than be surprised by a complete halt to funding.

Government Members Mauro and Bartolucci are proud of the initiatives their government recently undertook recently to respond to calls for greater northern consideration. The members cited specific legislative and policy tools that address northern issues, and bring craft policies with the North in mind. Bartolucci, cited again the Growth Plan for Northern Ontario, which contains policy to strengthen the economy of the region. Recently the Ontario government created a new Northern Cabinet Committee to address northern issues. The Committee was formed at a cabinet meeting held in Sault. Ste. Marie, and will oversee the Growth Plan for Northern Ontario.⁷² Bill Mauro was named the chair of this committee, and he describes it as a nice piece to look at specifically northern issues. Bartolucci adds that a cabinet committee is not a new premise, but it is a great idea that will provide an added opportunity to examine northern issues.

All opposition members are more skeptical about how a northern cabinet committee will bring about results. PC member Fedeli predicts that this committee will be all talk, and no action.⁷³ His colleague Norm Miller believes the committee is nothing more than a necessity

⁶⁸ Campbell, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

⁶⁹ Gelinias, *Interview*, March 18th 2013.

⁷⁰ Fedeli, *Interview*, March 28th 2013.

⁷¹ Bisson, *Interview*, April 29th 2013.

⁷² Office of the Premier, "New government highlights the north" (March 1, 2013)

<http://news.ontario.ca/opo/en/2013/03/new-ontario-government-highlights-the-north.html>

⁷³ Fedeli, *Interview*, March 28th 2013.

because of the lip service provided to the issue during the liberal leadership race.⁷⁴ John Vanthof describes this as starting to realize that you can only ignore a region for so long.⁷⁵ Bisson sees this as a reaction to the tide turning in Northern Ontario, and claims the government is pushing a lot of the vote to the opposition in Northern Ontario.⁷⁶

NDP member John Vanthof believes he has a better idea to ensure a northern voice to policy. Vanthof does not like the exclusiveness of a cabinet committee focused on the North, and believes that it will only contain two or three Northern MPPs who will not speak for the entire North.⁷⁷ He introduced a motion in 2012 that called for the creation of an all-party northern committee with a mandate to examine all legislation that directly impacts the North. This committee would look at a piece of legislation between 2nd and 3rd reading, and would provide the opportunity to analyze the legislation from a northern perspective. The committee would not have veto power, but the power to amend. He believes that this would prevent bills with serious ramifications for the North would not be able to be passed without northern consideration. Vanthof believes that at the end of the day this committee would put pressure on northern members to represent the true voice of their constituents.⁷⁸

The Minority Situation

The Ontario Legislature finds itself in the first minority situation since Peterson's minority Liberal government from 1985 to 1987. A minority legislature is a volatile environment, where the government in power could fall on a matter of non-confidence before their four-year tenure is up. This volatile nature increases the role and importance of the opposition and makes the legislative process more inclusive, with the government needing some opposition support to pass any bill in the house. In a minority government, the legislature becomes more important, and more powerful.⁷⁹ On a whole, opposition and backbench amendments have more of a chance of being carried due to the need to seek another party's support.⁸⁰ A single member or opposition party cannot force the government to take action against its will, but their voice matters more than ever. A majority does not need to make concessions, but in a minority situation the opposition now can block or significantly amend bills, and even introduce alternative policies.⁸¹ According to Peter Russell compromise, bargaining, negotiation and accommodating differences are common fare of these governments.⁸² With seven of eleven northern members elected to opposition parties, a minority government provides a possible tool for these MPPs.

⁷⁴ Miller, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

⁷⁵ Vanthof, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

⁷⁶ Bisson, *Interview*, April 29th 2013.

⁷⁷ Vanthof, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Robert Hazell and Akash Paun, "Making minority government work" *Institute for Government*, (2009): 7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Peter Russell, "Two Cheers for Minority Government" Toronto: Edmond Montgomery Publications Limited (2008): 3.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 95

Minority government has presented unique challenges as well as opportunities for Northern members. Members have mixed feelings as to whether or not this Minority legislature has better allowed them to push for attention to northern issues. France Gelinas was first elected in 2007 as an opposition member in a McGuinty led Liberal majority. Having served the community of Nickel Belt in both a majority and minority situations, she sees distinct advantages to minority governments. She feels as though the government is willing to listen to opposition proposals now more than ever before.⁸³ She referenced her private members bill that was first introduced in 2008, which would make selling tanning services to youth illegal. The bill took five years to spark the government's interest, but she does not think they just saw the light on their own. She believes that the minority situation has created an opening that did not exist before, and this bill is living proof that the government is now open to listening.⁸⁴ Rookie MPP Michael Mantha has not experienced a majority government, but believes this minority government has presented many opportunities for opposition members. He believes that the opposition has significantly contributed to a lot of change, and has had the opportunity to have greater influence, especially when it comes to the budget.⁸⁵ According to Mantha one of the benefits of having a minority government is that they must continue to have discussions with the opposition parties, and cannot go it alone.

The other opposition members interviewed do not view this minority situation with such positivity. Veteran NDP member Gilles Bisson has represented Ontario's far north in the legislature since 1990, and does not see a minority government as much of an advantage. He found a minority legislature no easier to work with than a majority citing many major losses for northerners.⁸⁶ Although there were significant pushes from northern opposition MPPs, the government went through with their plans to divest ONTC, and closed many northern provincial parks. Vic Fedeli and his colleague Norm Miller both cited these specific policy decisions as reasons why a minority legislature has not been any more useful.⁸⁷

Prorogation

A unique feature of this minority government that members were forced to contend with was a surprise prorogation of the legislature. In October 2012, the premier asked the lieutenant governor to prorogue the legislature, ending all legislative business and house sittings. Prorogation is a legitimate and valuable function of a parliamentary system, but this unusual prorogation changed the typical experience for members. Earlier in this paper members recounted their most useful tactics to influence government decisions, and there was an overwhelming reliance upon informal conversations with Ministers. Although prorogation did not mean that Ministries ceased to function or Ministers to resign their posts, many opposition members faced challenges in communication. Campbell, Gelinas, Fedeli, Miller, Vanthof, Mantha, and Bisson all put emphasis on relationships with ministers to solve issues, each mentioned that without a sitting legislature bringing action to issues facing their constituency became more difficult. Gelinas describes prorogation as a lead wall falling on the legislature,

⁸³ Gelinas, *Interview*, March 18th 2013.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Mantha, *Interview*, April 24th 2013.

⁸⁶ Bisson, *Interview*, April 29th 2013.

⁸⁷ Fedeli, *Interview*, March 28th 2013.

and without x-ray vision, you would have no idea what was going on.⁸⁸ John Vanthof said that many constituents were confused by the whole process, and actually called to ask if his office was still open, and if MPPs were still getting paid.

The absence of a sitting legislature made using the default tools for bringing attention and action on issues more difficult for northern opposition members. Gelinias states that during question period she would have access to ministers daily, and take advantage of that.⁸⁹ Not having access to that tool during a regular legislative sitting was jarring for many, and suddenly there was no access. Finding Ministers across the floor is a lot easier than having to rely on email or phone calls, especially with hectic schedules. Question period presents a shared experience and routine for all members, and an easy place to track someone down. According to Gelinias to make matters worse, it was difficult to receive responses from ministries to letters she sent during this time as well.⁹⁰

John Vanthof believes that being able to have those daily informal discussions is one of the most important functions of the legislature, and when that ended, the whole structure broke down.⁹¹ Vanthof believes there are two different types of problems you could need solved, one where government policy is the main issue, and one where it is an issue where someone just fell through the cracks when it comes to accessing government services. The issues where people just fell through the cracks were issues that could be solved, but ones where government policy were the main problem were impossible to deal with during prorogation. Vic Fedeli echoed this belief that government policy was the hardest to effectively deal with during prorogation, but he did not focus on the inability to have informal conversations. Fedeli argued that prorogation gave the government the ability to forge ahead with issues that hurt Northern Ontario, like closing the Northlander, and took away the legislature as the venue in which members could complain.

According to former minister Bartolucci, the Ministry functioned as usual during prorogation, and was busy.⁹² There were extensive dealings going on with mining companies, the Northern Ontario Heritage Corporation met regularly, and the Minister visited municipalities. Bartolucci believes that when everything was said and done the people of Northern Ontario really appreciated the opportunity the government presented both bureaucratically, and politically.⁹³ The Ministry of Northern Development and Mines was able to meet on a regular basis with northern representatives, northern business, and northern supply and service sectors to aid them as much as possible.⁹⁴ From a Ministry perspective prorogation had no effect on public dealings, and they had an increased emphasis on working with communities.

Gilles Bisson realizes that there are benefits to being an opposition member in prorogation. With geography being the greatest challenge members face, prorogation allowed added time to spend time in the riding, and travel between communities. Although prorogation

⁸⁸ Gelinias, *Interview*, March 18th 2013.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Gelinias, *Interview*, March 18th 2013.

⁹¹ Vanthof, *Interview*, March 7th 2013.

⁹² Bartolucci, *Interview*, March 19th 2013.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

blocked off legislative channels, the attention of ministers, and the audience of the house, it provided time to reconnect with communities.

There are mixed feelings between members regarding the advantages and disadvantages that a minority situation and prorogation provided, but each provided a unique set of conditions a northern member had to adapt to. A minority situation promotes inclusiveness, and an opportunity for opposition members to have their voices and ideas considered. Some members such as France Gelinias, believe that their legislation would have never been picked up without the political environment shifting.

Most opposition members felt that as a whole a minority government did not allow opposition members to successfully influence government policy on a number of key issues affecting the North. An interesting point to note is that in the middle of May, at the Federation of Northern Municipalities Conference in Parry Sound, Northern Development and Mines minister Michael Gravelle hinted that divestment may not be the only option for the ONTC.⁹⁵ This was a dramatic shift from February, when Gravelle reaffirmed that the government would proceed with divestment plans. This possible shift could be a part of the pressure placed on the government from opposition parties in this tense minority government. If this new conversation surrounding the ONTC does lead to a policy shift, this will be the second time that the government changed a policy that was unfavorable to Northerners and Northern Opposition members during this minority government. After decided to close the doors of 9 northern provincial parks earlier in 2012, the government went back on their decision and allowed municipalities to open the parks, after agreeing to be financially responsible for the risks. Both of these conversations were started within the favorable climate of a minority government.

Although there were mixed opinions about the advantages of a minority government, most opposition members cited prorogation as a great barrier in their way to successfully influencing policy. Northern opposition members rely highly on the tools that a sitting house presents. Prorogation took away the tools of speaking to members in the house, asking questions, and making statements. It seems as though any advantages a minority situation afforded the opposition, were swiftly removed with prorogation. Prorogation did allow members the ability to spend more time in their communities, which is an advantage to a Northern member. Distance and geography is a great challenge of representing the North, and prorogation allowed a prolonged period in the riding. It has been expressed that northern constituents expect consultation, and are engaged in politics at a high level. Although prorogation made it difficult for opposition members to influence government policy, it allowed members opportunity to be touring communities and working on issues at the ground level

Conclusions

The sentiment of northern alienation has persisted since confederation, and has created a unique political climate that effects the way politics play out North of the French River. Regardless of the legitimacy of the claim that the North does not get its fair share from the provincial government, alienation is still a matter northern members must contend with regularly.

⁹⁵ Bruce Cowan, "Gravelle signals possible shift in direction," *The North Bay Nugget* (May 10, 2013) <http://www.nugget.ca/2013/05/10/gravelle-signals-possible-shift-in-direction>

Members on both the government and opposition side still hear from northerners that they feel they are ignored by a government that is Toronto-centric. Alienation and a unique political climate are challenges that northern members must face, along with a vast geography and infrastructure roadblocks. Although many regions have at times expressed alienation from the provincial core, northern alienation is unique because of its place in the region's history, and the expectations of both northerners and their members.

If there is a reoccurring theme in the responses from northern MPPs, it is the need of both northerners and their members of provincial parliament to maintain relationships with communities and each other. When these relationships break down, it leads to feelings of frustration and alienation from both communities, and opposition members. On the part of the government, it seems as though alienation has played such a large role in the region, that it becomes a great challenge for a government to change hearts and minds, leaving many policies underappreciated. The research this paper presents has its limitations, as due to availability, and the make up of the house, more opposition members were interviewed.

It is important to northerners that they have a voice in their own destiny, and in this paper it has become clear that consultation matters a great deal. Many members stated that their constituents desire a voice in decision-making that affects their region, and long for consultation. Northern residents have expressed displeasure with the idea that the will of one area being imposed on the North, and this displeasure has been expressed as far back as the granting of the region to the province of Ontario. Northern Ontario exists on the geographic periphery, but has an intense desire to be an "insider" when it comes to decision-making. Gilles Bisson, after all describes northerners as expecting discussion, and likely more engaged in provincial politics than the average.

This need for discussion and relationship with government does not just apply to constituents, but northern opposition members themselves. When describing what tactic they most often rely on to influence policy, all opposition members named informal talks with ministers during question period as their most relied upon tool. Naturally, when the house is not sitting, this tool is of little use. Some members described relationships with northern ministers as productive, because northern members at the end of the day have a lot in common, and share a mutual understanding. Much like the northern constituents have a desire to have a voice in their own destiny, northern opposition members also have a desire to have a voice in government policy and decision-making on behalf of their communities. When prorogation fell upon the legislature, northern opposition members longed for these conversations and were frustrated by their inability to consistently speak with ministers. Ministries still functioned at full capacity, but ministers could not longer consistently be accessed on a routine basis for opposition members.

It is possible that this minority situation has heightened this desire for consultation by northern opposition members. A minority government has left members desiring inclusiveness. Northern opposition members feel as though they should have a voice in northern policy, and this desire could be heightened because of a parliamentary situation where the government must accommodate policy perspectives from outside its own caucus. A majority government can easily get away with staying away from making any concessions to opposing points of view, but a minority needs collaboration.

It is interesting to note that northern alienation is believed to have manifested over dissatisfaction with the government's railway and natural resource policy in the late 1800's. Today northern alienation is alive and well, and continues to manifest itself over natural resource policy in the form of the ring of fire, and a railway, in the form of the Northlander train. It seems as though alienation persists and has many of the same original causes, despite government intervention. Since the first calls for succession, and mentions of alienation, northerners have been documented in asking for a role in decision-making. It is likely that without a real mechanism by which northerners can contribute to policy discussions that affect their region, alienation will continue to persist. The northern growth plan seeks to correct some of the economic differences, but does not address the need for consultation. The northern cabinet committee, although periodically meeting in Northern Ontario, does not routinely participate in northern consultation. The proposal for a northern cabinet committee would allow for the consultation with northern opposition members, but these northern opposition members would have to accurately represent the best interest of the community members to satisfy the need of these communities for consultation.

Northern Ontario has many unique geographical, demographic, and economic attributes that create challenges for Northern MPPs. These differences have contributed to feelings of political alienation that have been compounded by government decisions that are seen to have had unfair consequences on the region. Northern members have a difficult role in representing a complex, volatile and vast region, and face an equally daunting task in finding solutions to overcome a negative emotional response that has survived over 105 years of political history. It is likely that without an institutionalized mechanism to ensure consultation and relationship building between constituents and their members, and between northern members themselves, the sentiment will continue to live on.

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