

The Northern Ontario Party?

By Livio Di Matteo The decline of the regional economy of northwestern Ontario, its shrinking population and the lack of satisfaction from government in addressing regional concerns has rekindled the issue of separation from Ontario. There are periodic calls for the North's separation from Ontario, but they are rarely from mainstream politicians, despite the grievance that taxation and spending policies made in Toronto do not address Northern Ontario interests. In many respects, the region's political leadership has been timid because it is part of an established system of centralized governance from the south that depends on Queen's Park for favour.

A classic example is the current forest sector crisis.

Over the summer, hundreds of jobs have been lost in the energy-intensive forest industry due to the high cost of electricity. While the North's core economic problems are market driven, they have been aggravated by provincial government policies on electricity and resources.

Given the opportunity to meet Ontario's premier in Toronto and give him a very public "earful" before the southern Ontario media, the region's leaders backed down and remained content to again meekly accept that help was "on the way."

Over the last 15 years, with three different political parties in power at Queen's Park, Northern alienation and economic decline have continued. As a result, the nature of the institutions governing Northern Ontario must be called into question. Perhaps it is time to ask why Northern Ontario is part of a province that appears unable to deal with its socio-economic problems?

Ontario is a province experiencing shortfalls in energy supply, rising energy costs, anemic income growth and deteriorating urban infrastructure. It may be that southern elites see jettisoning the burden of its "declining" North by allowing the region to wither away to park status as a way to deal with their problems.

Indeed, Queen's Park is more preoccupied with Toronto and its own desires for greater autonomy.

Separatism is no longer a fringe movement in Northern Ontario, when Toronto can boast its own bush-league separatist "Province of Toronto" movement that if ultimately successful, would turn the morning commute from Oakville into inter-provincial migration. Why expect Queen's Park to deal with its North when they are busy planning to grant special powers to Toronto - a city that is already "special" given it is Canada's largest city, the financial capital of the country and governing capital of Ontario.

Why should only Toronto "exercise broad permissive governmental powers within its jurisdiction, subject only to specific exceptions in the provincial interest?" If Toronto can be granted special status in Ontario because the city government does not have the power that its citizens believe it needs to make the changes that Torontonians want, why can't Northern Ontario be granted the institutional tools that might help foster its economic development? Why should the North remain fiscally and politically dependent on a province that is not terribly interested in it? If Nunavut can be granted territorial

government and told that some day it might be a province, why cannot the federal government join Ontario in creating new institutions for Northern Ontario?

How about the rest of Ontario? Creating what amounts to regional government for Toronto without creating regional governments in the rest of the province is asymmetrical federalism at its worst.

Political imbalance brewing

The political imbalance that is about to be unleashed by giving Toronto special powers for itself while its residents dominate the provincial civil service and the levers of government is a serious concern for all Ontario.

The prospect of Torontonians having one set of rules for themselves and enforcing another set for the rest of the province should set the alarm bells ringing in Hamilton, Windsor, London and Ottawa.

If Northern Ontario wants a better deal, its residents must organize lobbying associations and political action groups separate from the established political parties rather than simply gripe.

Borrowing from Dave Robinson's recent Joseph and the Pharaoh analogy, any advisor to the MNM should also add that the province "should let my people go" on to develop new institutions to manage their own affairs. Rather than wailing that the North should separate and join Manitoba or Minnesota or Nunavut, a more constructive course of action would be to form a Northern political party, whose role would be to simply advocate and lobby on behalf of its region's citizens rather than separate.

Creating a Northern Ontario Region Party with the mandate of getting a better deal for the north would send a powerful message that the North is organized and is prepared to articulate its interests when it comes to energy costs, resource development, transportation and health care. Having a core of Northern Party members elected as MPPs continually raising Northern issues would create a regional political debate that has been lacking in Ontario with its increasing Toronto-centric issues and debates.

Such a debate can result in the creation of a set of regional governments in Ontario to which functions can be devolved from Queen's Park. A stronger voice for the North can ultimately mean a stronger voice for the rest of Ontario, too.

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