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NPI: a small miracle for Northern Ontario

By: Michael Atkins

My love affair with Northern Ontario started in a small dingy office in the Port Arthur Post Office next door to Michael Gravelle, our current minister of Northern Development and Mines.



Michael Atkins, President, Northern Ontario Business, matkins@laurentianmedia.com

It was 1971. He was a constituency man for Rob Andras, an important federal Liberal cabinet minister, and I was a contract worker for the federal Secretary of State. Michael, then, as now, was a local superstar with his infectious enthusiasm and good cheer and I, true to form, was fired unceremoniously five months after arriving for writing a less than enthused report about the federal government program I had been hired to assess.

I needed a job and found one at the Fort William Times Journal as a cub reporter. I knew in my first week I had found my calling, although it needs to be pointed out I got fired from there as well for what I choose to interpret as too much enthusiasm.

In any event, I've been doing business in the North ever since and I love it. That doesn't mean it has been easy.

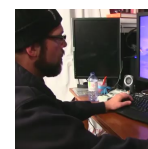
The mid-north suffers. It suffers from exposure to the cyclical commodities market, it suffers from over dependence on one-industry towns (usually a pulp or a softwood lumber mill), it suffers from a lack of scale to compete in the global economy, it suffers from a smallish and declining population over a huge land mass, high electricity prices, spotty cell phone service (a utility elsewhere) high gas prices, and so on.

Northern Ontario is an island of riches and complexities with distant and frequently disinterested political oversight. We are left to the municipalities, often competitive with one another, to make the case for policies that intelligently consider the economic reality of our resource economy.

What is beautiful is that the North — with the heart of a lion and the tenacity of a



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bulldog — often achieves results that are amazing given the circumstances, although often it is more reactive (responding to a crisis) than proactive (strategic plan for growth).

There are exceptions and, to be fair, many of them do get provincial support: the universities (including the exceptional Northern Ontario School of Medicine), innovation centres, some development corporations, some politicians, some municipalities and community action groups. But it is difficult to bring synergy without political structure, the power to act and a policy framework that makes sense.

Help is on the way. The Northern Policy Institute.

A child of the province's Growth Strategy for the North, this institute can be a game changer. It is a truly independent think tank with enlightened leadership.

In its first year of operation it has visited 52 communities, commissioned 42 pieces of work, developed a five-year business plan approved by the province, set up two offices at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay and Laurentian University in Sudbury, fully staffed up, and thus far published three documents on important issues including the Ring of Fire, Aboriginal education and the minimum wage. None parrot current government policy.

This is revolutionary. This moves the conversation from emotional political jockeying to evidence-based, purpose-driven policy options. This gives the North the power to consider choices, recommend policy and be taken seriously.

Although Charles Cirtwill, the bright, experienced, and opinionated leader, deserves credit for moving at light speed to establish his institute, the real credit goes to Michael Gravelle, the minister of Northern Development and Mines.

Michael has kept his promise of independence, which is extraordinary in these times.

Of course, I have a bias. I've watched the North grab defeat from the jaws of victory too often for the last 40 years, and as chair of the Laurentian University Board of Governors, I have an inside view of the institute's progress but I can tell you this is different.

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The Gadfly · 8 days ago

Hope you're right Mike, but the real test will come when the messenger delivers a message that strikes at the core ideology of the paymaster...if history is a reliable indicator (and it generally is), the messenger will be shot, regardless of the merit of the communication. Honest brokers are short-lived creatures in political environments.

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