



Even if northern Ontario separation is 'nonsense,' it may still need a new deal

As the province sees a resurgence in calls for northern independence, a new report says what the north really needs is better regional governance

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Residents protest the closing of a pulp and paper mill in Fort Frances on Nov. 13, 2014. (Fred Lum/The Globe and Mail)

One thing David MacKinnon wants to be clear about: he doesn't want his work being used to fan the flames of separatism.

"I think it's nonsense, to be honest," MacKinnon, a former CEO of the Ontario Development Corporation, tells TVO.org.

MackKinnon is talking about northern Ontario — comprising 90 per cent of the province's land area while holding just six per cent of the population — which saw a resurgence of recurring political call for separatism this summer. Those calls came courtesy of the

Northern Ontario Party that wants to carve out a jurisdiction separate from the southern part of the province.

While he has no time for outright separatism, MacKinnon [lays out some real weaknesses](#) in how Ontario governs its vast north in a report produced for the Northern Policy Institute this week.

“Northern Ontario has been relatively stagnant for a very long time — more than 35 years — and it’s time to look beyond the business cycle to find out why,” he says. While one-industry towns live and die by the vagaries of global commodity prices, or the [details of a trade dispute with the United States](#), MacKinnon says the north’s real problem has been that its economy is poorly served by the structure of its government.

“If you don’t have modern, contemporary governance, your economic performance isn’t going to be as good as it could be.”

MacKinnon says local political leadership fragmented among dozens of towns and cities with no regional coordination, who too often focuses on the needs of the forestry and mining sectors, is one reason why the north has languished. Part of the solution is to bring in some of the forms of regional governance that are already common in the south, he argues.

For example, while southern Ontario is divided into counties and regional municipalities that can organize services among several different cities and towns, northern Ontario is primarily organized into [districts](#) that exist mostly as lines on a map and not as any kind of government—a legacy of the days when the province’s primary concern was extracting mineral and timber wealth from the north without much concern for how the small mining and lumber towns emerging there would organize themselves.

MacKinnon says that needs to change. He suggests reforming the districts as regional governments akin to their cousins in the south, which could at least begin to coordinate services between communities.

These reformed districts would necessarily also include elected members from First Nations and not just northern municipalities, MacKinnon says. Northern Ontario already has a higher proportion of Indigenous people than the province at large — a demographic trend that is expected to continue.

Discontent and alienation in Ontario’s north has been a perennial issue: northerners see issues like [the since-repealed prohibition on the spring bear hunt](#) as an example of policies meant to cater to urban environmental interests instead of recognizing northern economic needs. But despite the example of other provinces, Ontario has been reticent to take any substantial steps to change the governance of the north, with premiers traditionally appealing to provincial unity to dismiss fundamental changes.

In 2012, Timiskaming-Cochrane New Democrat John Vanthof presented a non-binding motion calling on the provincial legislature to establish a standing committee to deal with northern issues, composed exclusively of members from northern ridings. [The debate was awkward at times](#): a southern Liberal MPP forgot the names of the northern ridings her party held, and two Progressive Conservative members complained the wording of the motion unfairly excluded them. Nevertheless, the motion passed — but has never been followed up on. (Only cabinet ministers can introduce binding, substantial motions.) Vanthof told the Northern News earlier this year [he intended to reintroduce the motion and press the issue](#).

Later in 2012, Liberal leadership contender (and now Environment and Climate Change Minister) Glen Murray [called for regional powers for northern Ontario](#). He dropped out of the race and threw his support to Kathleen Wynne. Once she became premier, Wynne [created a cabinet committee to deal with northern issues](#) and promised to hold cabinet meetings in the north, something she has done every year since she became premier.

Wynne's northern tour this summer [happened to coincide](#) with the resurgence of the Northern Ontario Party, [whose aim is to implement regional governance](#) and eventually separate entirely. She told TVO's Steve Paikin at the time she believes in "one Ontario" and that northern views are fairly represented at her cabinet table.

Mackinnon argues that provincial leaders have opened the door to northern separatism by allowing "dangerous mythology" to fester — like the idea that southern Ontario takes more from the north in mineral and energy wealth than it returns in spending, for which he says there's no evidence. (TVO.org asked the Ministry of Finance if it had data on financial flows between north and south Ontario, and received no response.)

Mackinnon also says the north won't succeed until there's been a shift in both governance and culture. That needs to include a hard look at the region's reliance on "primary sector" industries such as mining and forestry, he argues.

"There are certainly some opportunities there, but they're not as important as they used to be and they're unlikely to be as important in the future as they are today," he says. Instead, leaders in the north should be looking to new, more advanced industry and, more painfully, reducing what Mackinnon sees as the overreliance on government spending in the economy.

"For a Maritimer," says the P.E.I.-born researcher, "it's all too familiar."

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