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Northern Ontario shortchanged when it comes to regional government

Jim Moodie / Postmedia Network

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A new policy report argues Northern Ontario deserves a better governance model, while stopping well short of suggesting complete autonomy for the region.

“I look at jurisdictions around the world, and the creation of new governments is always a process of division and rancour,” says David MacKinnon, author of *Governance in Northern Ontario: Taking Ownership of the Future*. “You can see that in Greenland and Scotland, the Faroe Islands, Wales, many northern jurisdictions. I do not think that is the future, or should it even be contemplated.”

The paper, published through the Northern Policy Institute, does contend, however, that “the Ontario and federal governments should treat Northern Ontario as though it were a separate province for the purposes of economic and statistical analysis.”

MacKinnon, who has travelled widely in the North, says the region has remained “essentially stagnant for the past 35 years.”

Meanwhile a lack — or poor reading — of statistical data has left too many people assuming that prosperity is dependent on primary sectors like mining and forestry.

“I’m not saying they’re not important; they are,” he says. “But they are not sufficient for the future of Northern Ontario. And with better data we might be able to deal with that widespread public misperception.”

The author says Northern Ontario “is a Nova Scotia in the north, in population terms,” yet hasn’t benefited from nearly the degree of statistical analysis that has occurred in other northern regions of the country.

The report looks at the governance models of comparable areas, from faraway Aland — a group of Baltic islands spanning Sweden and Finland — to nearby Quebec, the northern part of which has two regional administrations.

“I think we can learn from that,” says MacKinnon. “I wouldn’t say we could copy Quebec, because northern Quebec’s population is significantly less than Northern Ontario’s, but I think we should be worried that both northern Quebec and the rest of Ontario have significant regional governments that are not present in Northern Ontario. I think that’s a serious problem.”

His paper points out southern Ontario is divided into counties, which deliver functions like “arterial roads, health services and social services,” while the North only has districts, which “do not serve any municipal purpose.”

If the North could create county-like areas of governance patterned on existing district boundaries, this would eliminate many internal divisions, MacKinnon posits, and permit greater economies of scale in the delivery of existing municipal services.

“The regional governance experiment in southern Ontario has been very successful by most standards,” he says. “I can’t find any good reason why Northern Ontario has to have a fundamentally different structure of governance than southern Ontario.”

At present, MacKinnon says the City of Greater Sudbury is the nearest example to a regional governance model in the North. “It’s quite sophisticated and is large enough to be able to deliver most services effectively,” he says.

But vast stretches of the North are under-serviced and lack collaboration.

“What’s needed now is real leadership, by municipal associations and provincial legislators, to try to change that,” he says.

The report also urges Aboriginal leaders to “consider new strategic directions,” and recognize that “resource projects and primary industries are likely to be much less important as a source of growth in the future than in recent decades.”

MacKinnon says most First Nation communities are too small to deliver complex services or to “converge in economic terms with national or global economic welfare.”

He urges Aboriginal communities to “find ways to collaborate together to deliver more services, and diversify so they are less dependent upon traditional industries.”

Other recommendations of MacKinnon’s report include bolstering the Northern Development Ministers Forum and creating an economic planning body to “encourage increased self-reliance, private leadership, greater exposure to the global economy and on-the-ground exposure to the world’s most successful economic jurisdictions.”

Most strikingly, though, it calls for the creation of new governments within the region that would be comparable to southern Ontario counties or Quebec’s approach, with each including Aboriginal representation.

"I believe if municipal leaders and legislators got together in the North and said this is what thought would be a useful step, I don't think the province would have any reasonable objection," MacKinnon says. "I can't imagine what barriers there would be."

To read the full report, visit the Northern Policy Institute website at www.northernpolicy.ca.