

Guest Editorial: Canada's Commitment to Northern Science?

News from the University of Alberta that the Boreal Institute for Northern Studies will either be closed or dramatically scaled down has shocked most everyone with an interest in the Canadian North. And for this there is good reason. Only last autumn, there was talk of a new multimillion-dollar building and a more concerted effort to enhance the Boreal's status as a world-class research library and a centre for collaborative northern research education. But, alas, it was not meant to be. "The university is bleeding," said the university's associate vice-president of research. "We just can't afford it any longer."

There is much to condemn the decision, even if the provincial government of Alberta is largely to blame for the financial nightmares that forced the university's administrators to take such drastic action. The Boreal is among the last and most important northern studies centres of its kind in Canada. After a shaky move from Montreal in 1975, the Arctic Institute of North America at the University of Calgary has over the past decade expanded its operations and programs with funding from multiple sources, including industry, government and charitable foundations. Nevertheless, with the demise of the University of Saskatchewan's Institute for Northern Studies in 1982 and the disintegration of polar research programs at McGill, the overall future of northern research in Canada does not look hopeful. Eventually, more and more graduate students may be forced to go abroad to pursue their academic goals in polar studies, just as many of them did in earlier years.

Frankly, one would have expected more from the university's administrators. The University of Alberta has traditionally taken pride in its geographical and scholastic connection to Canada's North. The Boreal's budget of about \$750 000 is hardly a guarantee to the security of other university programs. The way the decision was made is also disillusioning. Neither the director of the Boreal nor most of the advisory board members were consulted about the closing or asked to suggest alternative solutions prior to the announcement of closure. What is really disappointing, however, is the apparent absence of foresight in closing an institute like the Boreal. Political scientist Gurston Dacks said it best when he pointed out that the University of Alberta has no inherent advantage over any other university in the world when it comes to research in the natural sciences, the social sciences or any other intellectual and scholastic disciplines. With the Boreal, however, it has a resource base for northern studies that is unique and irreplaceable.

Canadians should not be fooled into believing that this is simply an Alberta issue somehow connected to the collapse of oil prices and the impoverishment of the government. The problem is really a national one that has its roots in the country's long-standing inability to take the bull by the horns and do something about our inherent northerness. Back in the Laurier years, for example, it was left for the most part to outsiders like Vilhjalmur Stefansson and Roald Amundsen to remind us of what we had in the North and what was potentially at stake. Occasionally, our government listened, but mostly it vacillated, as it did when the activities of the arctic whalers got out of hand and negatively affected the Inuit societies and the whale populations at the turn of the century. Laurier and his Cabinet understood the need to monitor their activities, to collect tariffs and to look after the welfare of the Inuit. But at the same time, they fretted that foreign whalers and explorers might take offence if they pushed too hard. So in the end, very little got accomplished.

The more recent voyages of the U.S. ships *Manhattan* and the *Polar Sea* through our Northwest Passage have produced much the same kind of response. To appease Canadian concerns about the threats to sovereignty that these voyages posed, the federal government promised a Polar 8 icebreaker, more northern national parks, including one in Lancaster Sound, and a resolution with the United States over the disputed waters. Today, we have no Polar 8, no immediate prospects for a national park in Lancaster Sound and only an agreement with the United States to disagree over the sovereignty of the Northwest Passage. External Affairs Minister Joe Clark seems grateful that at least the Americans have agreed to inform us next time they decide to do the same thing.

One need only to look at other countries such as Great Britain, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany and the United States, to name but a few — countries with a lot less at stake in the Arctic than we have — to see that somewhere we've gone terribly wrong in managing our arctic interests. Each one of those countries has established viable polar institutes that have paved the way for world-class research. In Canada, however, we seem content to sputter along, patting ourselves on the back when we've salvaged something like the Boreal from the ashes.

If those analogies seem unfair given the paucity of our resources and our relative youth as a nation,

then perhaps we should compare ourselves with another country more like ourselves. Australia is a good example. Like Canada, Australia has evolved under the imperial shadow of Great Britain. With a relatively small population, it has had limited resources to manage a huge, environmentally hostile countryside like our own. Yet Australia has somehow made commitments to scientific research in the Antarctic that make our efforts in the Arctic appear pale in comparison. Historically, the parallels between "us and them" are astonishing. Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic expedition of 1911-14 and the establishment of bases at Commonwealth Bay and King George V Land uncannily resemble Stefansson's Canadian Arctic Expedition in the Western Arctic between 1913 and 1918. But in fact, the similarities end there. Mawson's expedition was followed by the Antarctic Treaty in 1959, research centres at Davis Station and Casey Station and four summer bases in the Larsemann Hills, the Bunger Hills, Heard Island and at Commonwealth Bay. A new summer field camp was established at the Prince Charles Mountain in 1989. In the wake of Stefansson, on the other hand, Canadians increasingly turned to the United States to look after our interests in the Arctic. Granted, this arose out of legitimate concerns about military security, but at the same time, one might question whether too much power and initiative was allowed to the United States. We can only be thankful that the Polar Continental Shelf Project has not fallen by the wayside.

Canadian polar research never seemed to fully recover from the so-called glory years of the Stefansson era, as the decline of the Canadian Wildlife Service, the Arctic Biological Station and the various polar research institutes attest. The Australians, on the other hand, knew what they wanted and went out and got it — control of 42 percent of Antarctica. In a speech in Washington last year, the Australian Prime Minister, Mr. Bob Hawke, called upon other nations to participate in the development of a comprehensive environment protection convention for the Antarctic. The Australians' idea of the plan contains a ban on mining, a means of determining whether sufficient knowledge exists to enable adequate impact assessment, an agreement to protect the wilderness qualities of the region, an agreement not to undertake activities where there is insufficient knowledge to judge whether they are environmentally sound, and criteria and standards to enable those judgements to be made. Recognizing that consensus with other countries would not come easy, Australia has decided to lead by example. It is exploring the prospects for an "Antarctic wilderness park" within the context of the convention and initiating new scientific research projects in the Antarctic this year.

Is there really anyone to blame for Canadian External Affairs Minister Joe Clark's failure to respond more enthusiastically to similar initiatives proposed for the arctic region by the Soviets? Or is it simply a symptom of the paradox in our national psyche? Canadians get all fired up when the United States or anyone else intrudes on our northern territory, ostensibly because they believe that the North is the key to our national identity — the one thing that truly distinguishes us from our neighbours to the south. Yet when the opportunity arises to really do something about it, to protect the North from foreign intrusion, to preserve the environment from industrial development, to exploit its resources responsibly, to better understand the North and the people who inhabit it, the enthusiasm wanes.

Perhaps Canadians sense that northern myth is preferable to northern reality, that the Inuit hunter of old is a lot more charismatic than the unemployed one struggling to come to terms with the modern world. Maybe Farley Mowat's black and white vision of man and wildlife in *Never Cry Wolf* paints a more acceptable picture than any hard-core debate over predator control. Quite possibly, the image of the world's largest free-roaming bison herd kicking up dust in Wood Buffalo National Park is more appealing than the image of a diseased herd dying on a delta that is drying up because of construction of hydro-electric dams in British Columbia.

If that is the case, then maybe we should continue shrugging our shoulders when institutes such as the Boreal and the Institute for Northern Studies in Saskatchewan are threatened. Let events take their own course. But the reality of the situation is that events are rapidly overtaking our ability to continue living in this fantasy world. The Arctic has, as American polar expert Oran Young recently stated, emerged as a region of major significance. No longer a wasteland of interest only to explorers, traders, missionaries, scientists and indigenous people, it today offers military, economic and environmental benefits to the whole world. We can, as Young suggests, gain from cooperating to devise ways of exploiting northern resources while protecting the region's ecosystems and cultures. But there is no way we can do it without scientific expertise. With the decline of the Boreal, Canada moves one step farther away from being able to shape the course of developments in the North in a way that is most beneficial and in tune with the aspirations of the nation.

Ed Struzik
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada