

## Decolonizing the North

Frequently maps of Saskatchewan cut off a portion of our province leading people to think that Meadow Lake and Prince Albert are in the north. If you are fortunate enough to locate a map that includes the northern half you will see that all roads lead south and with good reason. The infrastructure was built not to facilitate communication between northerners but to facilitate resource extraction for corporations based in the south. Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris, co-founders of the Metis associations in both Alberta and Saskatchewan, called this colonialism, and it is due to their legacy that the NDP enjoys bedrock support in northern Saskatchewan today.

Jobs as well as profits leave colonies and for a time northerners had to move to Saskatoon in order to work at most northern mines. Saskatoon was where the plane left. Successive NDP governments have ensured through contract compliance that mining companies hire northerners. The mandate of Northlands College with campuses in Creighton, La Ronge and Buffalo Narrows is to ensure that northerners have access to the training they need to obtain those and other skilled jobs.

Colonies are often ruled from afar and at one time most governmental decisions affecting the lives of northerners were made by bureaucrats located in either Regina or Ottawa. During the 1970s the province forced many programs providing services to northerners to relocate to the north, with some reluctant bureaucrats making unsavoury comparisons to forced moves in Siberia. I have never been to Siberia but I imagine that it is also a beautiful place with an indigenous population. La Ronge became an administrative “mini-capital” of this territory, and in the 1990s even our school division moved its administrative offices from Prince Albert to here. But because of the road system, it is still easier to organize a meeting of representatives from all northerner communities in Prince Albert than anywhere in the north.

While Norris and Brady would have welcomed the initiatives of the NDP in improving opportunities for northerners, they would have also pointed out that fundamentally the colonial relationship has remained. During the 1970s Metis from across the north organized a cooperative called “The Peoples’ Wood Producer’s Board” and demanded the right to harvest our timber. The provincial NDP government negotiated a deal whereby those working under the umbrella of this board could cut timber, but only if they hauled it to multinational corporations such as Simpson Timber and Macmillan-Bloedel. To many Metis this typified the social democratic approach of putting a more humane face on capitalism while leaving the basic colonial structure intact. Brady and Norris had advocated democratic socialism involving a change of fundamental power relationships to the people, the “99%.”

Our new leadership will be faced with many policy choices. Fundamentally, do we want to simply put a more humane face on capitalism or will we fundamentally change the structure of power in some ways. I am honoured to offer a northern perspective during these months of debate and change.

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