

From the House

By Dennis Bevington MP Western Arctic

Canada's Arctic Choices

The Arctic environment is undergoing profound change. It is the new frontier in our modern age. We are witnessing the expansion of the activities of human interest over a shrinking natural environment. We are entering into a new climatic and geographic reality in the Arctic that is being pushed not only by the Nordic nations, but by countries far from the North Pole.

Regardless of the outcome of the hotly debated timetable for the disappearance of Arctic ice, one thing is for sure. Rising energy costs and declining global non-renewable resources are making the Arctic a happening place. The high cost of shipping global goods is bringing China, Korea and India to the shores of the northern ocean. They are building icebreakers, and making arrangements with Russia for passage through its North Sea Route to save 12,000 kilometers of distance over the conventional travel routes between Asia and Europe.

Added into the mix, is the increasing global appetite for non-renewable commodities which the Arctic holds as a speculative treasure trove with thirty percent of the remaining global fossil fuel supply and untouched mineral potential.

Canada has a major role to play in the unfolding of the Arctic's future. In the short term our two year chairmanship of the Arctic Council can either set the direction for international cooperation on research, environmental protection and globally accepted regulation or.... Push forward economic driven development and exploitation of resources. What will it be? Careful and considered action or a deregulated resource rush of immense proportions?

The Arctic Council, to its credit, in its brief history of seventeen years, has led in the direction of international cooperation, joint research and leading work on the impacts of climate change. Close cooperation with Indigenous Peoples of the

Arctic has been a hallmark of its formation. The Council has since its inception, been engaged in seeking multinational partnerships to protect the Arctic.

The Conservative Government has come out with an agenda for Canada's term as Chair of the Arctic Council that is heavily focused on resource development. Minister Aglukagq has indicated she wants to form a Business Forum to advise the Council.

Harper's summer tour has clearly linked resource exploitation as the way forward. Unfortunately this attitude likely means the Arctic Council agenda, developed since its inception, will be frustrated and delayed for the two year term of Canada's Chairmanship.

The Harper approach to the Arctic is premature. Before we can begin developing the Arctic we must have in place a clear framework of rules agreed to by all Arctic nations. This framework includes workable rules on Arctic Marine Transport, oil spill response and prevention, environmental protection, fisheries and the role of non-Arctic nations. By putting this framework in place before opening up the Arctic to resource development will allow us to avoid the mistakes of the past.

Achieving this framework will require international cooperation amongst the Arctic Nations. During the Swedish chairmanship of the Arctic Council important advances in international cooperation were achieved including an agreement on Search and Rescue coordination. The Harper Government "open for business" choice for the Arctic is counterproductive and wrong-headed.

It may be that our choices in the Arctic will turn out to be representative of our advancement as a species. In this age of global communication and shared knowledge, will this translate into a better vision and direction for the one region in the world that is so dramatically changing?

Can humanity, through its politicians and leaders, in this, the 21st century, recognise the importance of our collectivism on Earth and in this new challenge, proceed with shared knowledge, shared caution and act beyond simple self-interest?