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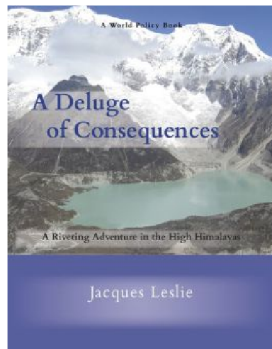
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Interview with Canada's MP Dennis Bevington

December 10, 2014 - 10:14am | admin



This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.

By Erica Dingman

Today we are speaking with Dennis Bevington, who is member of Canadian Parliament, representing the Northwest Territories (NWT). Bevington also serves as the official opposition critic for the Arctic Council as a member of the National Democratic Party (NDP). The NWT is an Arctic and sub-Arctic region of Canada so issues concerning that region hit particularly close to home for Bevington.

Erica Dingman: Mr. Bevington, thank you so much for speaking with me today. Canada has been the chair of the Arctic Council since 2013, led by the Honorable Leona Aglukkaq, an Inuk from Nunavut. The theme of Canada's tenure has been northern development. What are some of the benefits and challenges of development for Inuit and First Nations living in the Far North?

Dennis Bevington: To start with, development that takes place in the Far North is generally large-scale mining or oil and gas operations that are likely not next to the community where people live. They're located at a distance, so many people would have to leave their homes to work in these mines or locations, and return home on a regular basis. For traditional communities this can be a very difficult thing—not impossible, but difficult. There's a need for training. People's skills must be such that they can fit into these particular operations. As well, the mines and oil and gas operations have a finite lifespan.

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In many cases, we see a boom-bust scenario throughout the North with the type of development that occurs. There's a positive side and a negative side to this. If I look at the Northwest Territories over the last decade, I've seen a very large increase in the GDP due to the development of four diamond mines. During that time, in the smaller communities I actually saw an increase in the level of poverty using income tax returns to determine that. At the upper end of income, I saw an increase. So within the communities there's greater inequality of income, and actually more people are living in poverty. What this suggests is that unlike larger urban centers in the South, resource development and employment sometimes don't translate back into the community in terms of increased economic activity in the communities where people come from. That doesn't lead to the secondary type of economy that can come in other locations.

Dingman: Canada's chairmanship of the Arctic Council will end in May 2015, at which point the United States will chair the Council from 2015 to 2017. What measures do you think the U.S. needs to take into consideration when planning for development, while at the same time protecting a region that is warming at twice the rate of the rest of the world?

Bevington: I'd like to put the Canadian context of having a northern development agenda in with the other countries. Prior to that, the last three Scandinavian chairmanships [of the Arctic Council – Norway, Denmark and Sweden] were focused on the environment and climate change. Canada came in with an agenda on development. The U.S. has moved back to the agenda that existed before which was focused on global environmental issues, and I think that focus is very important. My understanding, as well as at my [Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region] meeting in Finland, the foreign minister in Finland indicated that the U.S. and Finland have been working on a combined agenda so they have a four-year coordination.

In some respects I think that Canada's agenda for the Arctic Council was an outlier. Most people think the job of the Arctic Council is to deal with the larger international issues that surround the opening up of the Arctic Ocean and the need to really understand the dynamics of the changing Arctic. Northern development to me has been a national issue. In Canada, development is mostly on land or within the territorial waters of Canada. So northern development is really a national issue. And I think that in some respects that applies to the United States as well.

But when it comes to fishing, shipping, the potential for far offshore oil and gas, those are issues that start to have this larger international context. When it comes to the environment, even when it's close to shore, there's no real national boundary when it comes to environmental issues. The Arctic Council has talked about that in terms of ecosystem management. They've set up 17-ecosystem management zones that they feel should be dealt with around the Circumpolar Arctic. The boundaries of nationality are not that important.

When we start to look at the issues that are going to affect us internationally, we really have to have a good understanding of the international context vis-à-vis the environment. I'm certainly glad to see that the U.S. is leading with that in its chairmanship, leading the Arctic countries back in that direction.



Dingman: As the incoming Chair of the Arctic Council, Secretary of State John Kerry appointed Admiral Robert Papp as the Special Representative for

the Arctic. He previously served as Commandant of the Coast Guard, and during his career spent a good deal of time in the Arctic so he has had the opportunity to observe the environmental changes that have occurred. As the spokesperson for the U.S. Arctic strategy he has said that climate change and reduction of pollutants, specifically black carbon, which is a powerful driver of climate change, will be central to the U.S. chairmanship. What initiatives might the U.S. take to engage Arctic nations and observers to encourage reductions in black carbon?

Bevington: There are a number of factors that come into black carbon in the Arctic. One of them is protonatural [the rapid profitability of the natural environment]. As an example, the huge forest fires that we had in the Northwest Territories this summer burned up to 3 1/2 million hectares of boreal forest, which is an incredible amount when you think that Canada on average over the last 10 years burned 2 million hectares of forest every year. The soot and the particulate from the fire had a huge impact on the Greenland ice cap this year. It relates back to climate change. We had the worst draught that we've had in recorded history in the Northwest Territories. That's what caused the fires last summer. We had an incredibly warm summer, and the result was perhaps the exacerbation of the melting of the Greenland cap through this deposit of soot from the forest fires.

The things that are human created, the flaring of gas, the use of diesel fuel throughout the Arctic, and the types of manmade pollutant points are all very big. Right now there's research going on about that subject at the Arctic Council. That's important. We know that we have to improve the burning of any of the fuels that we are using to ensure that we are not creating more of this particulate or soot that forms the basis of this black carbon. They're starting to see how significant this issue is. This year with what we saw with the Greenland icecap was truly amazing. There was a [CBC story](#) on TV with a scientist, and it was truly horrifying to see what has happened there.

When you looked at these ice fields, they were all black, and you know that they were going to melt at a much higher rate because of that. The other side of that issue is that it has not been addressed in the UN reports on climate change. It hasn't been factored in yet. We need to prioritize global understanding of the issue, and the U.S. has already made great strides in that direction.

Dingman: It is even more critical that Observer nations become more involved with the work of the Arctic Council. Is that correct? [Observer status in the Arctic Council is open to non-Arctic States, inter-governmental organization, inter-parliamentary organizations and non-governmental organizations that the Council determines can contribute to its work].

Bevington: The Observer states in many ways are going to be participants in the "opening" of the Arctic. China is building icebreakers. China put the Snow Dragon [icebreaker] right over the North Pole. Korea is doing the same thing. There's the potential for shipping. Two years ago China talked about 20 percent of its freight going through the Arctic, through the North Polar route. That may have changed slightly. There are geopolitical considerations that are going on now, but certainly the Observer states have an environmental role here. They need to be brought on side with the kinds of regulations and type of concern that we have for the environment. We need those countries to participate as well, and to understand what's going on, and the sensitivity of it. Once you're 12 miles off shore you're out of territorial waters, you can put anything you want out there. So a Polar Code [a proposed International Maritime Organization binding international framework to protect the Arctic and Antarctic], which the U.S. has identified as part of its Arctic Council agenda, is very important. And expanding that Polar Code to fit in with the number of environmental concerns we have around shipping as well is something that may necessitate a Polar Code two. So right after the first Polar Code agreement can be put in place, there's probably going to have to be another one.



Dingman: Another theme of the U.S. chairmanship is to come up with renewable energy strategies for the future. Your party, the NDP, and you as the former president of Stand Alone Energy Systems, an alternative energy company, have taken a strong stand on developing a green economy. How is Canada creating this economy? And what suggestions might you have for the U.S.?

Bevington: I've been a huge advocate of renewable energy here in Parliament. The present Canadian government—I don't consider that their performance has been up to where it should be. Their main focus is on oil and gas development, so they've left a number of things behind there. Anywhere in the Northern regions of our country, and [that of] any other country, when you get away from natural gas pipelines and electrical grid systems, you've got communities that are running on diesel fuel. And the cost of that is so prohibitive that renewable energy strategies make very good economic sense. They are also likely to be greenhouse gas friendly, and they're likely to be less carbon intensive in all aspects.

The government of the Northwest Territories has very aggressive renewable energy strategies. They've taken a lead in Canada on the conversion to biomass heating in their buildings. They have an advanced solar strategy in place that will see 20 percent solar energy in each Northern community. You may think, well, how does that work? Actually northern communities, on a yearly basis, emit a high output of solar radiation. Yellowknife gets about the same solar radiation that Toronto does. The resource is there, and people are going to use it because the alternatives are so expensive.

Interestingly, in Finland, where we had our meetings, they had a presentation on biomass energy. Finland was a leader 10 years ago but they have taken it up another very large notch. They're renewable strategy is about bio-energy. They've created a lot of biodiesel plants now. They are leading the way in that regard so there's a lot of work going on in Northern countries, especially those that have to deal with the high price of energy. The Scandinavian countries are very much that way as well. Unlike Northern Canada which is basically a semi-arid region, they don't get the sunshine we do. Did you know that Yellowknife is actually the sunniest place in Canada in the summer time? It's basically a cold desert. You don't think of it like that, but that's the case. I always tell people, you don't want to leave the North in the summer because it's so pleasant there.

Dingman: Mr. Bevington, thank you for joining us to day and taking time out from your busy schedule. You have given us a good deal to consider as the U.S. prepares for chairmanship of the Arctic Council.

Erica Dingman is a fellow at the World Policy Institute and the director of Arctic in Context.