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# It's Time to Give Back to Manitoba's North

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# It's Time to Give Back to Manitoba's North

This summer has not been kind to Manitoba's workers. First Omnitrax<sup>1</sup> announced the closure of the Port of Churchill, putting 65 people out of work. Then it reduced train service to the community from twice a week to once, reducing the lifeline that brings tourists and supplies to the town and grain and other commodities to the port. That lifeline connects<sup>2</sup> on the other end with The Pas which is now facing its own crisis. To date Omnitrax has refused to show its hand and it's not clear if it is holding out because it wants further subsidies or if it would be willing to sell the port and railway. It is likely that it is willing to sell for a hefty price, despite the fact that it bought the port for \$10.00 in 1997, and has received millions in subsidies from both provincial and federal governments to keep the port running.<sup>3</sup>

Then The Pas' largest employer, Tolko Industries, announced<sup>4</sup> it was shutting down its plant in December 2016. Around 330 employees will be out of work in a town of 5500. This will also impact the 250 mostly contract loggers who provide material to the plant, bumping the number of unemployed closer to 580. With a working population of approximately 3400,<sup>5</sup> the Tolko layoff will effect close to 10 per cent of the

community's workforce. The same proportion of Churchill's workforce will be affected.

The closure of Churchill's port had already reverberated in The Pas where grain is loaded onto the train as it takes the last leg of its trip north. Thirty five people lost that seasonal work, and dozens more are worried about their jobs, making the total job losses even higher. Just four days after Tolko's announcement, word came out that Aseneskak Casino may relocate to a more populous area. The casino, located on Opaskwayak Cree Nation next door to The Pas, employs 147 individuals.

The closure of the Tolko plant, with its attendant loss of demand for timber, reduced rail usage and potential closure of the Aseneskak Casino has delivered a triple blow to the local economy.

The absolute numbers of workers losing their jobs does not sound terribly high, but in relative terms the effect will be devastating. If Winnipeg were to lose 10 per cent of its jobs in one fell swoop, more than 42,500 people would be without work and, of course, income. Not only are workers and their families knocked off their feet, but the local economy suffers. From stores to car dealerships to travel agents to restaurants to baby sitters, all kinds of businesses and individuals

who rely on someone else's income to make their own living will feel the pinch. When ten per cent of the workforce becomes newly and suddenly unemployed, that pinch feels more like a punch.

This boom and bust scenario is common in our economic system. Private corporations that cannot make enough profit have no loyalty to the communities they are based in or to the workers they employ. History is strewn with towns that gave up the ghost when companies moved on. On the other hand, there are examples of government bailing companies out just to keep people employed and when corporations such as Chrysler are 'too big to fail' it is tax payers who foot the bill.

When ten per cent of the workforce becomes newly and suddenly unemployed, that pinch feels more like a punch.

What makes these recent situations doubly difficult is the geographic location in which they are occurring. Not only did the location make it difficult for non-local companies to operate in, but the smaller economic base makes it tougher for laid off workers to find new jobs. People are tempted to leave these remote communities, causing real estate prices to go down and further reducing the overall economic activity in the region. Eventually the tax base erodes, leaving municipalities with less money to provide services. In fact Tolko pays \$836,318 in property taxes to the Town of The Pas. Of this \$238,359 is forwarded to the Kelsey School Division and \$144,335 is for provincial school taxes. This leaves The Pas with \$453,620/year, roughly 7 per cent of The Pas' total municipal tax revenues. To put Tolko's contribution in perspective, The Pas' fire protection cost is \$409,877/year, and its garbage collection and landfill costs are \$423,309. The above figures demonstrate how a downward spiral can start that, if not stemmed, can cause permanent damage.

Once again, history is replete (Lynn Lake<sup>6</sup> being a Manitoba example) with stories of private corporations extracting what they can from remote communities then abandoning them — often with environmental problems<sup>7</sup> that the public needs to deal with.<sup>8</sup> "Easy come – easy go" seems to be the corporate *modus operandi* in Canada's North.

Certainly The Pas' fortunes have waxed and waned over the past 50 years. The Tolko Industries mill used to be owned by a provincial crown corporation called Manitoba Forestry Resources Ltd. The province had to take over the mill from scandal ridden Churchill Forest Industries,<sup>9</sup> a company brought in by Duff Roblin to spur economic development in The Pas.<sup>10</sup> Manitoba Forestry Resources was not able to run the mill without losing money and it was eventually sold to Repap Enterprises in 1989 who sold it 9 years later to Tolko.

At its height the mill employed over 1,000 workers and the local sawmill which provided wood chips to the mill had around 225 people on its pay roll (Tolko owned the sawmill too, but closed it down in 2006). It was hoped that the mill had stabilized its operations with the current 330 employees and that it would remain as The Pas' largest employer.

But Tolko too has had its problems. It received millions in subsidies from both governments in the early 2000s to help the company weather the softwood trade dispute with the US. Despite all the government help, the mill's days are now numbered.

Tolko claims that it is too difficult to transport raw materials to the mill and that its steam generator is too inefficient and expensive, making it difficult to keep costs at a competitive level. It is not known if the company ever approached the Province about converting to a more efficient and less polluting steam generator or if it would be willing to discuss some sort of government assistance at this point.

Should the government intervene in either Churchill or The Pas? The quick answer is 'yes',

but there are short and long-term issues to consider. Certainly there's an argument to be made for some government action in Churchill. With climate change opening up Canada's Arctic, it seems incredible that we do not have at least one operating port from which to access northern communities. What to do about the port and railway spans provincial and federal concerns, with long-term consequences to which we will return later, along with some thoughts about regional development that include communities like The Pas. But first there are some short-term issues to consider.

### Short-term Action

The Port of Churchill provides a much needed outlet for Saskatchewan and Manitoba farmers who need to get their grain to port, especially in years, like this one, with predicted bumper crops.

According to the Western Grain Elevators Association, the Canadian grain harvest this year could be as high as 74 million tonnes,<sup>11</sup> which would approach the 76.8-million-tonne record set in 2014. Bumper crop expectations have only served to heighten concerns over the Port of Churchill shutting down.

"This is a major blow to us," Dan Mazier, president of Keystone Agricultural Producers, said in a statement, "We've had so many issues shipping our grain east and west to port, and [the Port of Churchill] was an excellent option."

"If ever there was a case for government intervention, this is it."

The Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) shut down is at the heart of this crisis. The CWB was the port's biggest customer, and when the Federal Conservatives forced the Wheat Board's closure, it set off a chain of events that is clearly hitting the area hard. The handling of the CWB file is an example of how bad government policy can cripple a region.

In the event that this year's shipping potential cannot be salvaged, workers and their families

will need help. Unfortunately the Port of Churchill employees' work was seasonal and many will not have put in enough hours to qualify for Employment Insurance. Given that the wages of 65 people will be lost to the local economy, EI regulations need to be modified so these workers can collect benefits. A special EI zone should be established in the Churchill region so that anyone losing their job has a better chance of qualifying for EI. This sort of intervention will soften the impact of so many people losing their jobs and help keep the local economy on an even keel.

Luckily many of the The Pas workers are members of Unifor and are, therefore, subject to a collective agreement that will assure them a severance package. Once their severance pay runs out those people looking for work will qualify for Employment Insurance (EI), so EI needs to ensure that there is enough staff available to process claims and answer questions so that families don't face undue hardship and anxiety. Keeping income flowing into households also cushions the local economy, although workers' disposable income will be considerably lower.

### Long-term Action

Concerns about having an outlet to move grain are not just short-term. The port's closure puts more pressure on Canada's other deep-water ports to shoulder more of the grain export burden, though it is unclear how much more they will be able to handle. The Port of Vancouver, for example, has been operating near its capacity for the past several years and recently has been struggling<sup>12</sup> to implement a \$300-million expansion plan.

But Churchill's port could and arguably should be about more than moving grain. The Manitoba Chamber of Commerce<sup>13</sup> argues there is a need to:

- "Establish a Northern Commission to assess Manitoba's transportation infrastructure and its limitations on northern development. The Commission

should document and identify the current facilities, assess additional requirements and propose options for repayment of capital costs;

- The Province of Manitoba [should] develop a strategy and mobilize investment in the Port of Churchill as a strategic transportation hub for Northern resupply, Arctic sovereignty, and as an Arctic Gateway to international markets.”

In addition to access to international markets, the Port of Churchill will become more important as a launching off point to other Northern communities such as Hay River in the Northwest Territories and in Nunavut. As the sea ice melts, Churchill could be the gateway to the Central and Eastern Arctic. And its growing tourism sector requires a reliable means of transportation to deliver people and supplies.

Infrastructure is not just about helping private corporations make a profit; it is deeply connected to nation building.

Infrastructure is not just about helping private corporations make a profit; it is deeply connected to nation building. As the Arctic takes on more importance nationally and globally, some are suggesting that a Federal Port Authority needs to be established in Churchill, ideally with the collaboration of interested First Nations.

Churchill is but one community in an expansive northern region and, as the news from The Pas demonstrates, is not the only town that is vulnerable to the vagaries of corporate activity. We have made an argument for federal government control of the port in Churchill, but one might not see any value in intervention in places like The Pas. After all, if corporations like Tolko (or Vale in Thompson<sup>14</sup> — planning to close its smelter in 2018) can't make a go of it, some would argue that the north is doomed to remain un-

derdeveloped — its people cut off from services — like comprehensive healthcare and affordable food — that Southerners take for granted. But not everyone takes such a narrow view.

The Manitoba Chamber of Commerce is not the only entity to call for a strategy to develop Manitoba's north. The Winnipeg Free Press<sup>15</sup> also called on the Province to take action. But when private corporations like Omnitrac and Tolko fail despite receiving millions of dollars of government money, it becomes very difficult to make a case for further public support. There is a role for government to play in regional development and nation building, but it does not entail throwing public money at private corporations that do not and cannot have a meaningful commitment to the North's people and land.

#### Time to Give Back to the North

Billions of dollars of profit have been extracted from the North and enriched people and companies with little or no connection to the region. Whether it be through hydro, mining or logging, First Nations peoples have rarely benefitted from southern enterprise and, up until recently, were not even consulted when megaprojects were planned and implemented — even though the projects destroyed traditional lands and lives. According to a forthcoming report by the Thompson Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation, prior to 1962 in Thompson, “INCO's early hiring regulations displayed overtly discriminatory policies which expressly forbade the hiring of First Nations workers”.<sup>16</sup> This practice took place despite the fact that the company's operations were taking place on traditional Indigenous lands.

Thompson has evolved from a one-industry town — whose existence arose from a provincial government and INCO agreement in 1956<sup>17</sup> — to a regional hub providing administrative, health, educational and shopping services to tens of thousands of people living in communities through-

out the North, including Churchill (the Omnitrax line goes through Thompson). It is also a city that is becoming increasingly Indigenous, with fully 36 per cent of the population being Indigenous. Thompson has the largest Indigenous population of any city in Canada<sup>18</sup> and with so many First Nations in the area, its local business community is slowly starting to reflect that demographic composition (see discussion below on Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation). But as the forthcoming Manitoba Research Alliance report by Chartrand and Bignell explains, racism and discrimination are still huge problems in Thompson.

Fortunately, discriminatory labour practices are on the wane. Les Ellsworth, United Steel Workers Local 6166 President in Thompson, advises that he is starting to see far more Indigenous employees working at Vale. The union is very supportive of Vale's efforts to increase its Indigenous workforce. With Manitoba's Indigenous population growing as it is, these measures cannot be brought in fast enough. It will be doubly frustrating if Vale does close the smelter — as it is planning to do in 2018 — now that the industry is finally committing to training and hiring local Indigenous workers.

Manitoba's population is around 17 per cent Indigenous, and the median age in this group is 21 years, vs. 39 in the population as a whole. When we talk about the Northern economy, we should be putting it in the context of the predominately Indigenous population, keeping in mind that this population is diverse, young and growing faster than the non-Indigenous population. Because it is also a population that has not fared well under modern, colonial economic development it is now turning to its own resources and ideas to chart its own course.

In the case of Tolko, many contractors who provide its timber are First Nation and some own and operate First Nation enterprises like Moose Lake Logging Inc. Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson of the Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak

Inc. (MKO) wants local Indigenous enterprise to take over the Tolko mill.<sup>19</sup> There is a consortium of First Nations<sup>20</sup> interested in running the port at Churchill and taking over the railway. Churchill's population is more than half Indigenous, so First Nation involvement makes a lot of sense. There are compelling reasons for the Province and the Federal government to think about how to accommodate these ideas. The key would be to negotiate with First Nations to ensure that their concerns, best interests and aspirations are reflected in any development plans.

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The Pas' population is roughly half Indigenous, but many people who work and shop in The Pas live on Opaskwayak Cree Nation<sup>21</sup> (OCN), on the other side of the Saskatchewan River from The Pas. With a population of 4,500, OCN is an important economic hub in itself; according to its website:

OCN is a thriving community, which, since the 1960's, has pursued the road to autonomy through the development of strategies that enhanced its economic base while controlling its own commercial enterprises, education and health services, community works, and finances.

Indigenous communities like OCN are taking more control of their local economies. Another First Nation that is leading the way in local economic development is Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN), also known as Nelson House. Economist John Loxley reports that NCN has been able to benefit from development agreements with Manitoba Hydro and flood compensation funds from the Northern Flood Agreement. It has invested in community-based economic initiatives, some located in the newly formed Urban



ATEC students on the worksite in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation.

**PHOTO CREDIT:** Author's photo

Reserve in nearby Thompson, where it owns and runs the Mystery Lake Hotel.<sup>22</sup>

Now that the Urban Reserve has been officially approved, both NCN and the City of Thompson are optimistic about the opportunities available. According to the Thompson Citizen in an interview with NCN Chief Marcel Moody:

But while NCN's priority is to expand opportunities for its own nation (whose Thompson residents, according to Moody, number between 300–400), he stresses that the venture is a partnership with the city where both parties stand to benefit. "It's not all about us. We have a vested interest in maintaining the economic viability of Thompson. The more people we can attract to Thompson, the better it is for both NCN and for Thompson."<sup>23</sup>

NCN Development Corporation also owns a variety of businesses in NCN ranging from a building supplies store, food store, gas station, restaurant and even a radio and TV station. NCN has also used resources from its relationship with Manitoba Hydro to run the The Ataoskiwin Training and Employment Centre (ATEC) Inc. Housed in a new and state-of-the-art building in NCN (built as a training centre by Hydro when work was being done on the Wuskwatim Dam), ATEC provides specialized training to NCN residents, many of whom have dropped out of school and/or have

never held a job. The model used by ATEC has many of the features determined to be important for Indigenous jobseekers and employers who wish to hire them. It includes an extensive intake process to determine trainees' education and employment interests, education levels and upgrading needs, as well as other social and cultural needs. One of its most innovative programs trains NCN youth to build much-needed housing in NCN and puts them to work so they can earn their Red Seal accreditation.

Successful as NCN has been, Loxely notes that such examples are few and far between. He also believes, however, that NCN demonstrates that creative community development projects can flourish with government support. His research also highlights how important Manitoba Hydro's role is in Northern development and that when done properly, how it can leverage long-term funding for First Nations so they can take control of the local economy.<sup>24</sup>

A viable model to subsidize conversion to more affordable geo-thermal, while employing local workers, already exists with Manitoba Hydro and Fisher River Cree Nation; such a plan could be tailor-made to fit any number of business plans using biomass.

There is no shortage of similar ideas in Manitoba's North. MKO came up with a 10 point plan for Northern economic development<sup>25</sup> that both the federal and provincial governments should be looking at closely. The most important element of the plan is that it is *community driven*. Another important element is that the plan turns community challenges, such as the high diabetes rate and lack of affordable energy into job-creation schemes that will make First Nation communities self-sufficient. Such initiatives, spearheaded by Aki Energy<sup>26</sup> (an Indigenous owned and run social enterprise), have already taken shape in other First Nations such as Garden Hill and Fisher River Cree Nation.



Unifor's Paul McKie advised that the Tolko steam generator is fueled by waste oil, making it 33 percent more expensive to run than competitors' systems. As it turns out, the MCO's economic plan also embraces alternative green energy. If the current government were to modernize Manitoba Hydro to include biomass (woodchips) to heat new homes, and convert existing homes, it would open up opportunities. And where better to source this renewable fuel than in and around The Pas? European prices for biomass are commanding premium prices so product could also be shipped by rail through the Port of Churchill. Could government help with a plan to see an Indigenous enterprise provide woodchips to replace imported oil? This plan would create more jobs, be eligible for emission credits, and possibly be cost-competitive. A viable model to subsidize conversion to more affordable geo-thermal, while employing local workers, already exists with Manitoba Hydro and Fisher River Cree Nation;<sup>27</sup> such a plan could be tailor-made to fit any number of business plans using biomass.

Alternatively, maybe the infrastructure could be converted to meet a different need. There are many needs in the North (home construction for First Nations — including provision of construction materials) that can be turned into viable development initiatives with wide-reaching benefits. Loxley has done a great deal of research on the backward and forward linkages that could be built around the creation of basic goods industries that meet the needs of local communities and could culminate into a network of regional development.<sup>28</sup> Over time such development may even be able to feed into the Port of Churchill and keep the train running more often.

The Province's Minister Cliff Cullen is reported<sup>29</sup> to have visited Churchill with a group of business officials, and Federal Minister Navdeep Singh Bains is also monitoring the situation. It is not clear what sort of strategy, if any, they will be offering the community, but

hopefully it will be more thoughtful than just hoping that private business from the South is somehow going to come to the rescue. As per MCO's Community Economic Plan, social enterprises that are run by the community and give back to the community are much more likely to provide the goods and services people in the North actually need, and to provide jobs for the people who live there. NCN has shown how its partnership with Manitoba Hydro can result in creative and holistic development that folds in local supplies and job training for Northerners so they can fill the jobs created in the North. Both governments need to step up to ensure that Northerners have the skills they need to enter and stay in the labour market. The ATEC model needs to be expanded so that more Northerners have access to the kind of training they need.

NCN has shown how its partnership with Manitoba Hydro can result in creative and holistic development that folds in local supplies and job training for Northerners so they can fill the jobs created in the North.

On a final note, it would be a mistake for Manitobans who live in the South to think that what happens in the North does not affect them. Not only do we rely on the resources extracted from the North, but there are many connections between northern communities and cities in the South. There is a constant movement of peoples from northern urban centres and First Nations to southern cities, and back again. A stronger North would only benefit the rest of the province and country.

There is no need for an entire region to remain underdeveloped, but Northerners themselves need to drive the change.

As we enter a new era — one of truth and reconciliation, hopefully that's a message that Ministers Cullen and Bains and hear loud and clear.

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