

The incredible people and place in Canada's North

Dear editor:

Prime Minister Stephen Harper likes to portray the showcase Canada's North as a big empty place that we need to protect, but this place is filled with people who lived here for millennia and whose voices are not being heard in Ottawa.

To connect with Northerners, this winter I traveled to the Northwest Territories and Nunavut with my eldest son Xavier, like my father did with me thirty years ago. I wanted to experience the very real challenges Northerners face on a day-to-day basis and see for myself the tremendous opportunities for sustainable economic growth.

Achieving that potential depends on federal willingness to work collaboratively with the North. In the only part of the country where legislatures work by consensus, people here know better than most that problems aren't solved by pointing fingers and highlighting differences. They are solved by people working together.

The North needs a partner in Ottawa to invest in their people, infrastructure and research in order to ensure this growth is realized. Indigenous peoples and all Northerners support responsible development, but also know that it needs to be done right and that's where most Canadians are too. Unlike the past, we all now recognize that major developments need social license and environmental responsibility. Consultation and partnership, particularly with Indigenous people, must be at the centre of any plans.

In the North, the cost of many basic goods is staggering, compared to the South. I had honest conversations with folks at the Qayugtuvik Society soup kitchen in Iqaluit about the reality facing many Northerners who cannot access basic necessities. The failure of the federal government's Nutrition North Program to make nutritional food more accessible in these communities is simply unacceptable. It must be rebuilt.

As a Southerner, the first time you come to the North you're impressed with the weather, the land and the sheer scale. But more than that, you will be impressed by the people: their warmth, their strength and their resilience. That spirit was embodied in the Inuvik Sunrise Festival that Xav and I attended, which celebrates the return of sunrise after 30 days of mid-winter darkness.

Sovereignty in the North doesn't just come from defence spending and coast guard ships, it comes through the Canadians who live here, and who have always been here.

Justin Trudeau

Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada