About two decades ago, the renowned scholar of Asia, Owen Lattimore wrote: "It is rather generally taken for granted that evolutionary developments in the institutions of society begin in the heartland of a high civilization - Rome or China for example - and radiate outward to its frontiers, where they lag behind developments at the centre in retarded, provincial forms." In that article, Lattimore suggested that the frontier of the Great Wall of China was actually a centre of innovation. While some may debate whether Canada is a "high civilization," it is commonly assumed that all important social, economic, and political change occurs in the heartland. In fact, the opposite is true. The very nature of northern frontiers - the climatic extremes, challenging physical terrain, and cultural diversity - demands innovation on a daily basis. If we consider only the areas of direct democracy, aboriginal self-government, environment, and economic development, it is apparent the northern periphery is the centre of innovation.

We often assume that events occurring in northern communities have only local significance and, correspondingly, limited impact on the social and political institutions of the nation. Last year's recall campaign in two northern British Columbia ridings is a case in point. We read numerous editorials and articles in our local and community newspapers about the issues surrounding recall. Yet, the rest of Canada, too, attentively watched our experiment in direct democracy. In fact, CBC sent Rex Murphy to Prince George to host a national radio program on the issue of recall!

Aboriginal land claims and self-government have a direct impact both on the well-being of First Nations communities and on non-Native communities dependent upon resource industries such as forestry and mining. We should not be surprised that the first modern treaty in British Columbia - an innovative treaty that establishes a third order of
government and that eliminates tax exemptions for Nisga'a people - was forged in British
Columbia's north. However, what may come as a surprise to many is that the Nisga'a
Treaty is capturing international attention as an innovative model to address Aboriginal
land claims and self-government. International newspapers and journals such as the
Washington Post, New York Times and The Economist have all covered this historic
deal.

Innovations on northern peripheries receive global attention, but also have global
implications. The Northern Rockies is a good example. In 1998, the BC Government
acted upon the recommendations of residents in Fort Nelson and Fort St John and set
aside 4.4-million hectares in northeastern BC to preserve one of the most ecologically
significant areas in the world. The Muskwa-Kechika area is not simply a park, however.
Huge "special management zones" make up 75% of the total area. A management board,
made up of local First Nations, industry, and government representatives, works to ensure
that resource development recognizes the complex ecology of the area, as well as the
needs of other economic activities. The unique opportunity to manage such a large, intact
ecosystem will supply critical information for maintaining the integrity of wilderness
areas.

Despite the pioneering achievements on our northern periphery, most of Canada's
research and development agencies are located in the urban heartland. These agencies
must also be located in the north to aid in the diversification of local economies. The city
of Oulu, Finland, for example, which lies along the Arctic Circle, has established a
reputation for its ability to attract research-intensive, high-tech companies. Working with
the local university, this city of 100,000 people created the first commercial technology
park in Scandinavia. More than 100 businesses operate out of the technology park and
high-tech companies employ about 8,000 people in the Oulu region. Oulu's experience
illustrates that northern communities can seize opportunities to develop high-tech
industry.

Northern frontiers will remain at the cutting edge of innovation-socially, economically,
and politically. Even Canada's heartland looks to the North. University of Toronto
historian Michael Bliss takes exception with an old prediction by former Prime Minister
Sir Wilfred Laurier that the 20th century would belong to Canada. Bliss contends that
never happened. He believes the 21st century will belong to Canada's North.

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