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YUKON EMERGES AS POTENTIAL NEW MUNICIPAL/FIRST NATIONS MODEL

One of the more challenging files for the new federal government will be that of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett.

I have just returned from five days in the Yukon, where I was the keynote speaker for the Association of Yukon Communities (AYC) for two days of new councillor training. The chilly weather was supplanted by the warmth of my welcome, and I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know the councillors, mayors and CAOs from across the territory. We talked in detail about serving their local community as well as larger issues such as municipal governance and financing.

Yukon has a very progressive relationship with its municipalities, some aspects of which could serve as an interesting model as other provinces and territories contemplate the shifting relationships between themselves and their towns and cities.

In speaking with Premier Darrell Pasloski and Community Services Minister Currie Dixon, it became obvious to me that there is a close working relationship between YG (the government of Yukon) and its municipalities. I was impressed with the time and commitment they both made to attend part of the AYC conference, and the openness to new thinking about that relationship. In fact the government is currently undergoing a review of its Municipal Act. Both the Premier and the Minister graciously spent a considerable amount of time with me, talking about issues and opportunities.

Yukon still provides Community grants directly to its municipalities, and also offers considerable assistance in other municipal areas. This is partially in recognition of the small size of most communities in the territory. There are about 37,000 people in Yukon, about 25,000 who live in the capital of Whitehorse. This provides badly-needed non-property tax funding for these smaller communities that understand they are very limited in their ability to raise a lot of new revenue from the property tax.

We had a provocative discussion about other potential funding sources, including introducing consumption taxes (as have Saskatchewan and Manitoba) being shared with municipalities. The Yukon local government leaders were clear when they informed me that Yukoners don't like taxes very much, leading to further discussions about user fees and more fee-for-service plans.

First Nations are predominately self-governing in Yukon, and not burdened with the old treaty system under the Indian Act that has proven to be so problematic in so many other parts of our country.

Substantial land holdings, including both inside municipalities and surrounding municipal jurisdictions, has meant a close working relationship has evolved between local governments and indigenous governments throughout Yukon.

Both groups speak with pride about the positive and constructive relationship they enjoy. It is this model of local cooperation that shows great promise for other towns and cities in the rest of Canada.

The funding of First Nations communities is complex, bureaucratic and often inefficient and frustrating for community leaders. There is growing interest in extending full property rights to on-reserve First Nations citizens. While this is controversial for some, it certainly is deserving of full exploration as it could help to build wealth for families and create economic opportunities.

It is long past time for our country to resolve issues of water quality, housing, health care and economic opportunities for many First Nations people and families. While the funding and jurisdictional leads must come from federal, territorial and provincial governments, there is no question that municipal governments across the country are becoming more engaged with First Nations issues and opportunities.

There are other emerging issues for Indigenous and municipal leaders, including the creation of urban reserves, tapping into the substantial under or non-employed young First Nations demographic, improving education, and supporting small business opportunities. As more aboriginal people move into urban areas, municipalities are going to face new challenges within their own local municipalities.

That is why it was so refreshing to see and hear about the close and respectful relationship that Yukon municipalities enjoy with their First Nations neighbours.

And this is also why it was exciting to see in action the interest and involvement of senior territorial leaders with their municipalities.

Yukon may be on the verge of showing the rest of Canada that there are new, better ways of territorial/provincial governments dealing with their municipal and First Nations communities, and of how municipal and First Nations communities can work together better to build stronger, healthier and more prosperous communities.

It will be important and interesting to watch the new relationships develop between and amongst these four orders of government in the years ahead.