

OPINION

COVID-19 has made the North's quest for equality a steeper climb

By N.W.T. PREMIER CAROLINE COCHRANE Hill Times JUNE 10, 2020

"We owe it to the people of the NWT to make sure we don't lose the gains we have made in the past three months. We also owe it to them to build on these gains together."

Even before COVID-19, Canada's northern territories faced significant social, economic, and environmental challenges that create persistent gaps and inequalities between northerners and their fellow Canadians. Most troubling, are those challenges that keep our residents from truly thriving as people, like a critical lack of affordable housing, access to health care and education, and limited opportunities for meaningful work and good incomes due to our small economy.

These issues were also flagged by the Special Senate Committee on the Arctic and the House Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development in separate studies published last year, and I know that the Government of Canada is as concerned for the welfare of northerners as I am.

Prior to COVID-19, the Government of Canada made a commitment to addressing the challenges facing the North in its Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (ANPF). This comprehensive commitment to strategic investment in the North and enhanced policy development is a great step welcomed by all northerners. The appointment of the Hon. Dan Vandal as minister of northern affairs was another positive step, and I certainly have enjoyed his partnership and support in helping to address longstanding northern needs.

If northerners were looking up a steep hill before COVID-19, though, the climb to get on an equal footing with the rest of the country is now even more daunting.

We have enhanced our health and enforcement measures to manage the pandemic, resulting in significant costs to our government and economy. We have secured our borders, established isolation centres to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to small communities with limited health-

care capacity, and recommended or directed the closure of many businesses that couldn't meet necessary public health requirements.

Current projections will see our government spending at least \$40-million to fund its own COVID-19 operations. We have also provided targeted assistance to NWT residents and businesses worth an estimated \$30-million. People are being laid off and we expect some businesses will fold or be scaled down, while many more will have increased debt. Tourism—a significant growth sector and source of opportunities for Indigenous businesses and communities—has been all but shut down, and the airlines that are a critical lifeline for our territories are struggling.

Like all governments, the GNWT has moved rapidly to provide COVID-19 relief and support to NWT residents. Given the wide-ranging social and economic dimensions of the pandemic, many of these investments and measures have helped us make some major advances in improving the health, housing, and other social supports our people have so urgently needed.

With assistance from the Government of Canada, we have been able to add critically needed units to our housing stock across the territory, implement new child-care supports and subsidies for parents required to work, provide wage top-ups for essential workers, and economic relief to people who have lost jobs as a result of the pandemic.

This is real progress for NWT residents. It is also an example of how quickly and concretely our governments can achieve the goals of the ANPF when the need is so urgent.

We owe it to the people of the NWT to make sure we don't lose the gains we have made in the past three months. We also owe it to them to build on these gains together, and find ways to use them as opportunities to address remaining ANPF goals, including the right infrastructure and economic investments for our unique circumstances. We also need to do this in the unique context of the NWT, as a public government respecting the self-determination of Indigenous governments with self-government and land claims agreement.

As we begin to plan for the national social and economic recovery from COVID-19, northerners need the Government of Canada to make sure that it continues to consider the persistent and unique socio-economic and environmental challenges that have affected our territories since well before the pandemic, as well as our limited capacity to participate in and benefit from programs designed primarily for southern Canada typically based on per capita funding and cost-sharing arrangements.

Canada has stepped up and is providing supports to northerners as part of its pandemic response that have been desperately needed for a long time. The end of COVID-19 can't mean an end to these critical supports. I look forward to continued partnership with the federal government as we work together in a coordinated fashion with territorial leaders to make permanent gains and strengthen Canada's North for the benefit of all Canadians.

Caroline Cochrane is premier of the Northwest Territories.

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