

Pyroclasts: Science + Politics = Fiasco

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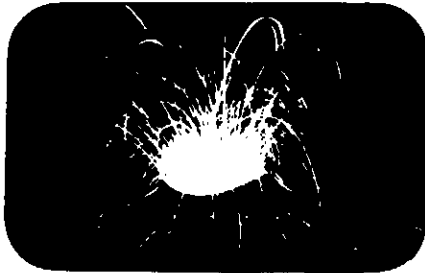
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Features



Pyroclasts

Science + Politics = Fiasco

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Well, another bunch of politicians has gone and done it again: treated a carefully nurtured centre of scientific excellence, built up to serve the needs of industry and the scientific community, as just another political football to be kicked around in the endless quest for regional votes. A few years ago, we were all treated to the federal battle over the proposed move of the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) Precambrian Geology Division to Thunder Bay, a move prompted by the unstated objective of ensuring the re-election of the then Liberal minister Robert Andras. Most of us (except Ward Neale) breathed a sigh of relief when that one was cancelled, as a cost-cutting measure.

The latest event of this kind is the recently announced move of the entire Ontario Geological Survey (OGS) from its head office in Toronto, to Sudbury. The reason, of course, is that the Liberals, the current governing party in Ontario, have weak representation in northern Ontario. The only sitting member from this area, René Fontaine, has been agitating furiously for the government to "do something" to help the north. And, I'm afraid, the Ontario Geological Survey was a sitting duck, as most of the mining activity in Ontario is in the northern part of the Province.

It is pure coincidence that these two head office transfers were both proposed by Liberal

governments. I have no doubt that, if the federal or provincial Conservatives ever lost significant support in southern Alberta, they would consider moving the Institute of Sedimentary and Petroleum Geology or the Core Storage Laboratory, respectively, to Lethbridge. After all, there are sedimentary rocks there aren't there? And oil and gas fields?

Moving publicly supported institutions, such as tax processing centres and jails to remote places is one of the well-known vote buying tactics of all governments, for two obvious reasons. There are the beneficial effects the large new labour force has on the local economy, and there is the provision of a batch of new jobs, albeit mostly at low skill levels and therefore at modest salary scales. Why is this wrong for geological surveys? It is because the moves are made for entirely the wrong reasons. The move of OGS to Sudbury will undoubtedly have a thoroughly detrimental effect on the services the OGS was established to provide, both to the public and to industry. The OGS exists primarily to offer long-term technical and background support to the mining industry. It provides sophisticated laboratory services, the advice of scientific experts, a library, and data files, to one of the world's largest and most successful concentrations of industry earth scientists, the Toronto mining company community. The OGS also maintains very close informal working relations with university geology and geophysics departments in Ontario, all but two of which are located in the southern part of the province, and the largest and most prestigious of which are within a 1-2 hour drive of OGS head office. There is no question that the Geology Department at Laurentian University would benefit from the move, but they are a small group, and the benefits to them must be balanced by the negative consequences noted here.

The synergistic effect of the interaction between scientists in the OGS, in industry, and in the universities, coupled with the presence there of all the financial muscle and the myriad necessary support services, has made Toronto one of the great world centres for mining geology, just as Calgary is one of the half dozen world-class centres of excellence in the field of petroleum geology because of the same type of industry-government-university co-operation.

It is really quite absurd that one of the stated aims of the Peterson government in Ontario is to create world-class centres of excellence in scientific and high-technology activities. Yet when such a centre already exists (despite, rather than because of, government assistance - see Ed Pye's history of the OGS in GEOLOG) the government of the day has no hesitation whatever in dispersing it to serve immediate political interests.

The government claims, of course, to be acting in the larger interest. Remarks made by the Premier at a news conference in Sudbury when announcing the move (30 July 1986) state that the "restructuring is needed to ensure the competitiveness of our resource industries in the international market place". How does dispersal help competitiveness? Did California's Silicon Valley ensure the leadership of the world's computer industry by the United States by being spread over two, or five, or twenty-five states? On the contrary, the close working relations, the healthy competition, and the sharing of ideas through workshops, informal seminars, lunch meetings, and chats between rivals going home on the bus together, are all part of the dynamic behind successful scientific and technical development.

Peterson stated that the "initiatives" are being undertaken "to offset to some extent the north's dependence on the resource industries". How this can be achieved by moving to the north the government's principal agent of support for the resource industry is not made clear. Perhaps he is trying to make the life of mining geologists more difficult so that they will be encouraged to go into something else.

Peterson also stated that he has recognized "the benefits of proximity in research", by which we are given to understand that he thinks the geologists should be near their rocks. Would the Arctic Islands section of the GSC please pack up and move to Resolute? Would the East Coast petroleum people please dig out their real estate guides for Sable Island? The fact is, of course, that proximity to the field area is of minor importance, as we only spend a few weeks, or a month or two there each year. Far more critical factors are proximity to laboratories, to colleagues, to data depositories, and to the client population. If the argument is made that it is only logical to move elements of the

Ministry of Northern Development and Mines to the north, then I would suggest that OGS is in the wrong ministry (where it was moved only recently, no doubt in preparation for this latest interference).

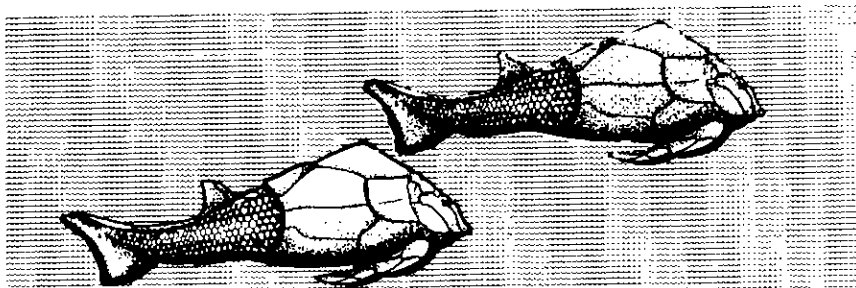
It certainly makes some sense to locate centres of mining technology in the north, close to the mines where such problems as rock mechanics and mine drainage can be examined on the spot, although even here a case can be made that such research should be carried out close to academic and decision-making centres (that is, in the south). As for OGS, their actual client population in the north is quite small, limited to those actually engaged in on-the-spot exploration work (prospecting, drilling, etc), and is already well served by the system of district mining offices and resident geologists in a number of northern communities.

In Peterson's remarks there followed an interesting comment that "important linkages have developed over the years, especially in Toronto. One of the most important issues for us, as we plan the move, is maintaining these necessary linkages. We will be looking to industry for guidance in this regard". In other words, "help us guys! How are we going to get out of this mess?"

As long as big science is dependent on government this type of fiasco will keep recurring. Government research laboratories are totally dependent on such support, and universities in Canada are at very nearly the same level of helplessness. For example here at the University of Toronto we have been told that we must develop all kinds of institutional linkages with Laurentian and Lakehead Universities in order to further the government's northern initiatives program. Whether those universities want big brother from Toronto breathing down their necks is not a question that seems to have occurred to the government although, of course, linkages at a grass roots level between our institutions have existed for many years, and will continue with or without the government bulldozer so long as there are good scientific reasons for them. The autonomy of universities (relative to each other and to the government) is rapidly being eroded because of this near-total dependence on public financial support.

I trust readers of *Geoscience Canada* beyond the Ontario borders will not dismiss this as a local problem of no concern to them. Like the question of accreditation and registration, which was aired in this column in an earlier issue, the events I have described are of national importance and have a distinctly Canadian flavour. The same thing could happen in any province. I would urge GAC

members everywhere, particularly industry leaders, to write to Premier David Peterson at the Ontario Legislature, to protest this ill-considered move. They may also be interested to read a guest editorial in *The Northern Miner* of 8 September 1986, written by the former OGS Director Dr. E. G. Pye, which makes a strong case against the move along lines similar to those argued here.



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