

My Canada includes the North

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I've been in Pond Inlet for the past three weeks -- 1,000 kilometres north of Iqaluit, near the top of Baffin Island. The peculiar coincidence of writing from here about myths born in south-central Canada imposes its own logic. After all, this is a Canadian reality -- 1,400 citizens in a high-Arctic town, working to fit Inuit culture together with that of the South. The challenge is obvious, even though Pond Inlet is both a successful community and, it must be said, one of the most beautiful in the country.

What about LaFontaine and Baldwin? Well, it strikes me that the territory of Nunavut is a perfect extension to their 1848 idea, which was to create the first intentionally non-monolithic, democratic nation-state. I sometimes think of Canada as the first postmodern nation-state, invented 150 years before the idea of postmodernity.

During the three years in office, from 1848 to 1851, of the great coalition of Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin, the basic shape and direction of our society were set: the foundations of our democracy (including democratic municipal government), much of our legal system, a professional bureaucracy, the beginnings of public education and public universities, and the beginnings of a railway system. And, of course, the concept of two official languages and cultures was formalized.

Perhaps most important, through the government's understated reaction to the burning of Parliament, it was demonstrated that restraint by those with power was the key to a successful society built upon complexity.

The originality of these reforms can partly be seen in how they were brought about. After all, the 1840 Constitution had attempted to wrench us out of our complexity, to shove us into the standard Euro-American, 19th-century nation-state mould of one myth, one language, one government. Not only did the coalition reject that mould, it also managed to do so in spite of the laws and Constitution that were in place. It rejected the rational, linear nation-state in favour of something you could almost describe as spatial. LaFontaine and Baldwin discovered that overlapping responsibilities and ambiguity regarding power could actually be advantageous if you wished to embrace complexity. The great reformers had invented an almost virtual model of competing powers.

And what did that mean? What does it still mean?

Apparently Canadians still see themselves as a society of minorities. They are constantly balancing the centre, the regions, the language groups, and even the importance of the population versus the land. It seems they believe that taking responsibility for minorities is one of government's principal jobs. The reality of population density is obviously important, but it is only one of the elements in shaping and running our democracy.

Which brings me back to Nunavut -- 20 per cent of our land mass, with just under 30,000 people. A small population is perfectly appropriate to this enormous region. These numbers only represent a problem if our few, densely populated areas -- especially our big cities -- see the country purely in population terms. If they do, well then, Canada no longer makes sense.

I'm not suggesting that our cities don't have enormous strengths, needs and problems. The list of what is proper to cities -- positive and negative -- is long. It stretches from intense, highly sophisticated transportation and communication needs to intense but very basic problems of poverty. And it is clear that many of these cities are at a delicate, difficult transition point.

But, if we aren't careful, we can slip into destructive Manichaeian arguments. For example, the cities generate a great deal of wealth, but the commodities that come out of the rest of the country still make up a large percentage of our shared wealth.

Put aside these utilitarian factors. Look at Canada as a whole. Its central, defining characteristic in global terms is to be the most important northern democracy. It is, or can be, the great northern nation.

Increasingly, I hear urban friends take a skeptical, sarcastic urban view: that we are no longer woodsmen; that it is romantic nationalism to think of ourselves in other than city terms. These attitudes betray the urban crisis many feel, as well as the apparent enormity of the cleavage between life in the bigger cities and life elsewhere.

But think of our situation the other way around. Nothing could be more narrowly romantic than to believe that the second-largest nation-state in the world could function by focusing principally on where its population lives. This would miss the eternal truth of geopolitics: There are no vacuums. If we cannot imagine ourselves as what we are -- population and place -- and so effectively do not include the whole country, including the North, well then, we will create a vacuum which, history tells us, others will fill.

The challenge for our cities -- caught up in the midst of all their problems -- is to imagine themselves not simply as themselves, but as the great cities of the whole country; that is to say, of the great northern democracy. The place of Nordicity. To anyone who would say they have other, more pressing problems, I would suggest they examine their argument in a mirror. Those who live elsewhere -- as far away as Pond Inlet -- work to imagine themselves as themselves, but also have no choice but to imagine the great southern cities as their cities. Why? Because that is where the population and power lie. So the Northerners must make the effort. In other words, the challenge for our cities is somehow to find ways to respond; that is, to respond to the imaginative, mythological and real shape of the whole country; to imagine themselves not as places set apart, but as the great cities in and of the whole country.

What does this have to do with LaFontaine and Baldwin? Well, remember that in the 19th century, when every other nation-state was gathering power at the centre and doing it by force, by legislation, by aggressive mythology, in order to reduce their national existence to a monolithic concept and reality, LaFontaine and Baldwin were leading us in the opposite direction. Their approach involved more than one language, a multiplication of power sources and an embracing of multiheaded mythologies. But it also involved moving real power out of the population centres -- away from the Family Compact/Château Clique -- into the small towns and communities that constituted the North of their day. It is important for us to remember the comfort they and the population felt with the whole idea of non-linear, overlapping structures.

What was fascinating about the creation of Nunavut was the extent to which it captured attention around the country. Why were our imaginations so engaged? Because the formalization of a big slice of our North into a new, clearly Arctic body to be run by Northerners was a very positive expression of Canada as a whole. Of Canada as a northern nation.

It reaffirmed the central idea that here, "place" must be balanced with "population" in our concept of ourselves. They are two parts of a whole. It also reaffirmed the idea of a nation-state that continues to embrace complexity.

You can see citizens in Pond Inlet working with our original idea of a multicentred nation. Some of the questions the Inuit and other Northerners are asking themselves about education feed into those of French immersion and second-language education. In Nunavut, they are experimenting with local power and decentralization in ways that may turn out to be useful for all of us.

I suppose what strikes me is that the ability of a community like Pond Inlet to succeed is an affirmation of our existence as a northern nation. Of Nordicity as a concept. But it is also an affirmation of our continuing ability to look beyond the idea of power as the simple expression of majorities. *John Ralston Saul is chair of the advisory board of the LaFontaine-Baldwin Symposium.*