

“Getting their Story into the South”: Project North and the United Church of Canada, 1975-1987¹

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When he saw the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (hereafter CBC) television crew waiting at the door for him, Hugh McCullum knew he was not walking into a typical United Church of Canada committee meeting. The CBC was interested in controversy, and by inviting both the camera crew and McCullum of the Project North coalition to its 1977 Calgary meeting the Northern Coordinating Committee (hereafter NCC) of the national United Church was hoping to provide the CBC just what it wanted: Project North on the defensive, for all of Canada to see.

Those who have attended Canadian Society of Church History meetings over the years, will know that in-house church fights are nothing new. Papers have featured Quaker pamphleting wars, Church of England divines sniping at one another, and of course infamous inter-Methodist battles with guns drawn. However, in the late twentieth century, hostilities in United Church national committees tended to be more muted. In 1977 it was no secret that the NCC, under the auspices of the Division of Mission in Canada, was not sorry to be putting Project North, which also reported to the Division of Mission in Canada, on the spot. How it came to this impasse might be simply an amusing anecdote, lost in the minute books, except that it relates to the United Church's responses to indigenous issues. It gives a window, I believe, into an early moment on the path to “truth and reconciliation.” In this paper I explore the conflict between these two groups by describing the history of each and suggesting how recent discussions of settler/indigenous relations might help analyze the

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conflict.

The “Unjust Society” and Project North

Across Canada in the early 1970s aboriginal communities were organizing. As the brilliant young Cree leader Harold Cardinal declared at the time, “an angry, new” indigenous leadership was rising up against centuries of oppression.² This storm of protest helped force the federal Liberal government to rescind its “White Paper” proposals to abolish Indian treaties and the Indian Act, to the dismay of Pierre Trudeau, who apparently retorted: “Fine. We’ll keep them in the ghetto as long as they want.”³ A series of assertions of territorial rights and nationhood put Canada on notice that indigenous people intended to control their destiny in ways unimagined only a decade before.

Canada’s largest churches meanwhile had also slowly shifted their attitudes. By the late 1960s, they had begun to move away from their mid-century focus on social services and community development – an approach Hugh McCullum labeled “Christian hamper syndrome,” and had started to reckon with indigenous activism and the call for justice. In 1969 the Anglican General Synod pledged to engage in a partnership of solidarity and equality with its native constituency. In the United Church E.E. Joblin, responsible for the national oversight of “Indian Work,” noted in his 1969 report to the Board of Home Missions that the church’s contributions to Indian welfare had been at best “remedial,” and that compassion alone was not enough.⁴

By 1975 Canada’s Anglican, United, and Roman Catholic churches had all made formal statements that the rights of indigenous peoples “to participate as equals” took priority “over any development projects being planned for lands which had not been given up through treaties.”⁵ “Christian hamper syndrome” would not cut it any longer; the stage was set for a new approach. Hugh McCullum and Karmel Taylor McCullum were ready with a proposal. Hugh, a journalist, editor of the *Anglican Churchman*, had grown up in the Yukon, the son of an Anglican minister. He and Karmel had travelled extensively in the north, attending indigenous assemblies and resource development hearings. They had discussed indigenous issues with church leaders and were in the process of writing *This Land is Not for Sale*, a book explaining a variety of aboriginal justice issues, primarily for church audiences.⁶ In the summer of 1975 staff representatives of the United, Anglican, and Roman Catholic churches

agreed to form an “Interchurch Project on Northern Development” (ICPOND) with four national staff persons as the “administrative committee,” and the McCullums as the “coordinators.”⁷

Soon after, the name “Project North” emerged, mercifully, as the coalition’s shorthand title.⁸ The three denominations contributed equally to finance the project, which they intended to run for one year, but which in fact continued for twelve. The eagerness of Canada’s three largest churches to work together – including across the recently impenetrable Catholic/Protestant divide – bears witness to the strength of ecumenical enthusiasm in 1970s Canada. Other Christian denominations quickly climbed aboard. Lutheran, Mennonite, Quaker, Baptists, Disciples of Christ, and Christian Reformed Church representatives became involved over the years; some of them devoting substantial financial and personnel resources to the project. Thus, at least 95 percent of Canadians in the 1970s and 1980s were connected through their church affiliation to this shared endeavour in indigenous relations.⁹

While Project North’s work shifted over the twelve years of its existence, its commitments remained the same: to research and document issues facing northern indigenous people, as identified by aboriginal groups themselves; to communicate these issues to the “south,” through a monthly newsletter and the development of about sixty regional support groups – mostly in southern Canada; and to help the churches act in solidarity with indigenous communities. The coordinators and church staff, operating on a modest budget, maintained an astonishing pace. They spoke at denominational gatherings, public meetings and debates. They strategized with indigenous leaders, met with oil company executives, and – the litmus test for any activists worth their salt – were investigated by the RCMP internal security branch, which wished to determine if their support for the Dene nation was subversive. They traveled from small Arctic communities to Washington DC to discuss pipelines and energy issues.¹⁰

Project North was formed as the Berger Commission hearings of 1975-76, on a proposed natural gas pipeline through the Mackenzie Valley, was introducing the public to indigenous voices that most Canadians had never heard before.¹¹ In 1977 the Berger report¹² recommended a ten-year moratorium to settle indigenous land claims and to set aside conservation areas before commencing pipeline construction. This recommendation was precisely the outcome sought by the indigenous communities with whom Project North worked. The force of and reaction to this report was electric. Change was afoot, and the news media were

curious. Predictably, oil and gas exploration firms were loudly vocal in their opposition to the moratorium. They had found a treasure hidden in a field and were not about to let it escape their grasp. Industry supporters accused Project North of being southern do-gooders, unwilling to let northern aboriginal people develop their economies. More surprising, perhaps, was the hostility that emerged from within the head office of the United Church of Canada: the NCC.

“The Real North” – the Northern Coordinating Committee

The Division of Mission in Canada created the NCC – consisting of six members, none of whom were indigenous – just two months before the formation of Project North. Its goal was to support United Church ministries in communities across northern Canada, especially the many resource-based towns that had sprung up in the past decade. The group discussed ministry leadership options (such as fly-in clergy, or company chaplaincy), conferred with other denominations, and sent “deputations” to southern cities to describe the hopes and challenges of northern resource communities and to recruit clergy for northern towns.

The NCC was immediately suspicious of Project North, as they noted in their September 1975 minutes: “We are concerned that this project will produce biased information and information that will have the stamp of approval of the ‘United Church of Canada’ . . . We expect to be informed of the Committee, but we will watch it with grave concern.”¹³ The committee worried “that many in the ‘South’ do not understand the ‘real north’ and that many of them are listening to a few Native voices rather than coming to a broad understanding of the true Native concerns of the North and the concerns of the whites who are there.”¹⁴ The NCC refused to support the pipeline moratorium, even after their sponsoring body, the Division of Mission in Canada, had passed a motion endorsing the moratorium.¹⁵

Showdown in Calgary

Then came the 1977 Calgary meeting of the Northern Coordinating Committee, to which Hugh McCullum was invited. The NCC minute-taker spared no detail: “Hugh McCullum then arrived and was welcomed to the meeting by the Chairman. There was some hostility, at first, particularly over the presence of the CBC.” Why the CBC? Project North was closely

aligned with the Dene of the Northwest Territories, who were unable to convince the Métis Association to join their Brotherhood or to support the pipeline moratorium. The CBC saw a story: the churches' prized Project North doing battle with the beleaguered Métis. When the committee members suggested that once the media had left there could be "some honest discussion," McCullum indicated that "this might be a little difficult considering that we seem to have polarized our present situation."¹⁶ End of showdown. No guns, or even fists, admittedly, yet the fact that one national church committee was ready to throw *another* national church committee under the bus in such a public fashion does suggest an unusual pugnacity.

Shortly after this encounter, the United Church's national governing body, the General Council, voted to support the pipeline moratorium. Animosity continued, however. Project North complained that the NCC was receiving almost double Project North's annual funding from the national church.¹⁷ The Division of Mission in Canada, somewhat embarrassed by its renegade committee, renamed and re-mandated the NCC in 1980. It became the "Forum on the North," and church staff expressed the belief that the new group, focused on congregational support, was "trying to understand" the issues.¹⁸ However, the Forum continued to criticize Project North, claiming northern people's voices were not being heard.¹⁹ By 1986 the Forum on the North included two indigenous participants, and was able, grudgingly, to pass a motion asking Labrador Presbytery to consult with Project North regarding low level military flights – but adding in the minutes that Project North did not "know the issue of militarism well enough to be making statements."²⁰ In the early 1990s Forum on the North was gone, replaced with a general commitment to develop "strategies" for supporting northern congregations.²¹

By then, Project North was also gone. Pipeline issues had given way to a bevy of complex indigenous struggles, and it no longer made sense to focus solely on the "north." There was also the question of indigenous participation in the leadership of the group. As United Church minister Stan McKay put it, "We are asking if the drum has a place at the table."²² In early 1987 Project North itself proposed disbanding the coalition at the end of the year,²³ to be replaced by a new Aboriginal Rights Coalition.

Analysis: Unsettling the Settlers

Any assessment of the Project North/Northern Coordinating Committee conflict must begin with the acknowledgement that northern indigenous leaders utilized and appreciated Project North. Throughout its mandate, they sent requests for assistance in communicating their concerns to governments, church members, and the wider Canadian public. Occasionally they asked for help in preparing arguments and in educating their own people about complex land claims issues.²⁴ Often they expressed appreciation. Georges Erasmus, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, wrote to Karmel Taylor McCullum: "It's good to see the support and encouragement of Project North never diminishes. It makes our days a little easier."²⁵ At the 1987 conference to determine the future of the churches' indigenous work, it was secular indigenous leaders, from the Nisga'a in British Columbia to the Innu of Labrador, who expressed the gravest concerns about the potential loss that ending Project North would represent. Fred Lennarson of the Lubicon Lake Band relayed a message from Chief Bernard Ominayak: "I urge you not to go on retreat in the middle of a war."²⁶ For once, in their indigenous relations, the Canadian churches seemed to get it right. So, what went wrong in the United Church?

Church leaders assumed they could employ their liberal "everyone-has-a-valid-point" orientation towards an issue of colonial hegemony. A recent book on northern environmental historiography suggests that Canada's north is "not only a physical but an imagined space, with diverse ideas about where it is, who and what belongs there."²⁷ The Northern Coordinating Committee had also taken up the language of "many norths," and it was repeated by other church leaders.²⁸ *United Church Observer* articles tended to take a "Let's Listen to Both Sides" position, accusing Project North of failing "to talk to people in the oil and pipeline companies."²⁹ While the term "many norths" may be evocative, it can imply that all narratives – all diverse ideas about the north – have equal status.³⁰ Yet the narratives were not equal. The "north" of the settler United Church congregations in northern Canada was recognizable to southern Canadians in a way that the indigenous north was not. In 1974 Patricia Clarke described for *Observer* readers the burgeoning United Church in Yellowknife: "Here on the edge of civilization, the [United] church is crowded with capable, energetic young families." She introduced some of the parishioners – all white persons, including a nurse who traveled by plane

to “remote Arctic communities” where she would get “called out at three in the morning to take a loaded gun from a crazed person.”³¹ One can guess the implied race of the “crazed person.” The north of the 1970s Yellowknife United Church: growing, vibrant, populated largely with white transplants, was one that southern United Church readers could grasp. Such congregations were of special interest, in fact, as they represented hope and new life in a church that had begun its long and ongoing decline in membership and social importance.

United Church lay leaders in the settler north were often members of the managerial class in government or the resource industries. Chris Pearson, for example, was a member of the Northern Coordinating Committee³² and a sometime-elder in the Whitehorse United Church. He became the leader of the Yukon Progressive Conservative Party and then Premier of the Yukon. In that role he withdrew the Yukon from land claims discussions. A lawyer for the Council of Yukon Indians wrote to Clarke MacDonald, of the Division of Mission in Canada, “You may be assured that the Council for Yukon Indians has appreciated the assistance given to it by the various church organizations in Canada including the United Church through its central office. It is unfortunate the same cannot be said for the local church.”³³

By supporting a “many norths” narrative, church leaders and observers failed to distinguish race and class issues that privileged white settlers over the colonized indigenous population. Not surprisingly, those closest to Project North’s work had no time for such a narrative. In an address to a meeting of the British Columbia Conference of the United Church in 1977, Hugh McCullum said:

During the past two or three years the churches . . . have committed themselves . . . to see that [the] oppression [of native people] does not continue . . . And that, my brothers and sisters, has put us whether we like it or not clearly on one side of the issue. There are not two sides to the story. The prophet does not dialogue. We live the other side.³⁴

Where is a big-tent, liberal church to go from there? Recent scholarship on reconciliation and reparation suggests that settlers must live inside the paradox colonialism has constructed. Adam Barker states: “Settler people who hope to become effective allies must move past the desire to re-establish comfort and ask the question, ‘What do we do?’ from a profoundly uncomfortable place.”³⁵ Within a decade of the end of Project North and the Northern Coordinating Committee, the United Church –

along with other churches that had run Indian Residential Schools – would indeed be in an uncomfortable place regarding indigenous relationships. The CBC crews would again be waiting at the door, but this time they would not be waiting to confront Hugh McCullum. They would be waiting to confront a church denomination that had not been ready, in 1977, to embrace the discomfort of “living the other side.”

Endnotes

1. The faculty of St Andrew’s College, in partnership with indigenous scholars, is collectively authoring a book that intends to assist the United Church of Canada in honouring its Truth and Reconciliation Commission commitments. This paper forms part of the chapter I am contributing on the work of Project North. It focuses on the dispute between Project North and the United Church’s Northern Coordinating Committee.
2. Harold Cardinal, *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada’s Indians* (Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig, 1969), 117.
3. See <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/the-white-paper-1969>
4. “Indian Work – 1968: A Report to the Board of Home Missions – 1969,” in *Manual for those Representing The United Church of Canada Among the Indians of Canada*, vol. 3, 1-2.
5. Roger Hutchinson, *Prophets, Pastors and Public Choices: Canadian Churches and the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Debate* (Waterloo: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1992), 15.
6. Hugh and Karmel McCullum, *This Land is Not for Sale: Canada’s Original People and Their Land – A Saga of Neglect, Exploitation, and Conflict* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1975).
7. General Synod Archives, GS89-18, Box 2, Minutes Folder 1975-77, Interchurch Project on Northern Development (ICPOND), 31 August 1975.
8. General Synod Archives, GS89-18, Box 2, Minutes Folder 1975-77, Minutes, 16 October 1975.
9. Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 29, 34.
10. General Synod Archives, GS89-18, Box 2, Minutes Folder 1975-77, “Coordinators’ Report,” 8 April -12 May 1977.

11. See, for example, Patrick Scott, *Stories Told: Stories and Images of the Berger Inquiry* (Yellowknife: Edzo Institute, 2008), 53.
12. Thomas R. Berger, *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland: The Report of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry* (Canada, 1977).
13. United Church of Canada Archives, Acc. 95.030C Box 40-7, NCC Minutes, Yellowknife, 6-7 September 1975.
14. United Church of Canada Archives, NCC Committee Minutes, 15-17 October 1976.
15. General Synod Archives GS89-18, Box 2, Minutes Folder 1975-77, Meeting of 27 October 1976.
16. General Synod Archives GS89-18, Box 2, Minutes Folder 1975-77, Minutes, 18-21 August 1977.
17. Letter from Michael Lewis to Howard Brox, 1978. United Church of Canada Archives, Acc 95.030C Box 41-2 – correspondence relating to Forum on the North.
18. Project North Minutes Folder, 1981-85, Meeting of 18 February 1981.
19. Ac 95.030C Box 40-8, Forum on the North, Minutes 1980-85, Minutes of 8-9 February 1985.
20. Project North Minutes, Folder 1986-87, Minutes of 18-19 March 1987.
21. Ac 95.100C Box 3-8 – DMC Mandate for Forum on the North, January 1992.
22. General Synod Archives GS89-18, Box 1.5 – Remandating (File folder 1987-1), Meeting of 23 September 1987.
23. General Synod Archives GS89-18, Box 1.5, Minutes Folder 1986-87, Minutes, January 1987 Administration Committee Meeting-Personnel Committee.
24. Letter from Adeline Webber, President, Yukon Indian Women's Association to Hugh and Karmel McCullum, 19 May 1976. General Synod Archives, GS89-18, Box 14, File 4.
25. Letter from Georges Erasmus to Karmel Taylor-McCullum, 26 May 1987. General Synod Archives, GS89-18, Box 14, File 1.
26. General Synod Archives GS89-18, Box 1.5, Project North Meeting, 23 September 1987, Bond Place Hotel, Toronto.

27. Stephen Bocking, "Conclusion: Encounters in Northern Environmental History," in *Ice Blink: Navigating Northern Environmental History*, eds. S. Bocking and B. Martin (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2017), 511.
28. Northern Coordinating Committee Minutes, 15-17 October 1976. See also Hutchinson, *Prophets, Pastors and Public Choices*, 104, footnote 46.
29. James Taylor, "Let's Listen to Both Sides," *United Church Observer*, August 1976, 9; W. Clarke MacDonald, "Church Speaks: 'Firmly on the Side of the Poor,'" and Ronald G. Willoughby, "Business Replies: 'Using the Church to Promote a One-sided Economic View,'" *United Church Observer*, August 1978, 16-18, 19-21.
30. Hutchinson devotes a chapter of *Prophets, Pastors and Public Choices* to "Competing Rights and Conflicting Ways of Life," 89-110.
31. Patricia Clarke, "Yellowknife: The Suburban Church in Mukluks," *United Church Observer*, October 1974, 23.
32. GS89-18, Box 2, Minutes Folder, 1975-77, Minutes of 29 November 1976.
33. GC89-18 Box 14, File 3, Letter from Allen Lueck to Clarke MacDonald (Associate Secretary of the DMC), 18 November 1976.
34. Hugh McCullum, Speech Notes for the morning of BC Conference.
35. Adam Barker, "From Adversaries to Allies: Forging Respectful Alliances between Indigenous and Settler Peoples," in Lynne Davis, ed., *Alliances: Re/Envisioning Indigenous-Non-Indigenous Relationships* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 323.