Universities, Politics and Development: The Case of Northern Ontario

Geoffrey R. Weller

INTRODUCTION: NORTHERN ONTARIO

The role that a university can play in development depends upon the nature of the region and the stage of its development as well as the government’s attitude toward the role of universities in the process of development. This article begins, therefore, with a brief description of the region of Northern Ontario and then proceeds to an analysis of political factors.

Northern Ontario is a huge area (370,000 square miles) that comprises roughly 90 per cent of the land mass of Ontario. The major cities and towns are located a long way from the provincial capital, Toronto, and the national capital, Ottawa. Most of the region is located on the Canadian Shield. This geological formation is rich in mineral resources but makes agriculture difficult on any significant scale as does the harsh mid-continenal climate. Most of the region is covered with coniferous forests but the northern third or so is above the tree line and consists of many swampy lowlands bordering on Hudson’s Bay.

The region’s population totals 805,000 out of a provincial total of 8.2 million. 580,000 live in Northeastern Ontario and 225,000 in Northwestern Ontario. This population is widely scattered and there are relatively few large population centers. The two biggest centers are Sudbury (150,000) and Thunder Bay (120,000). Some of the more northerly communities, especially the native communities, are very small and extremely remote. Northern Ontario is experiencing an out-migration of the population, especially the young. Moreover, the populations of many cities and town have gone up and down with the boom and bust cycle of the primary industries upon which most are dependent (see Chapter 16). The northern population is very mixed...
racially, ethnically and in terms of religious conviction. There is a significant Indian population throughout the region and roughly one-third of the population of Northeastern Ontario is French speaking. Otherwise, practically every conceivable ethnic group has some representation in the region.

The economy of the north is resource-based (Weller, 1980). There is, however, a deep division between the resource exploitation economy and the traditional economy. The resource exploitation economy is that of the relatively affluent white north of the larger communities in the southern half of the region. The major industries are mining (which is relatively more important in the Northeast), forestry (relatively more important in the Northwest) and tourism. The traditional economy is based on hunting, fishing and trapping. The north of the traditional economy is the north of the remote, tiny native communities which is relatively less affluent; in fact it is poverty stricken. Because of the need to export bulk commodities from the region the transportation industry is also of importance, especially in Northwestern Ontario because this part of the region straddles Canada's east–west transportation corridor and Thunder Bay is Canada's major grain exporting port.

The geography of the region and the nature of its economy have combined to create a lack of cohesiveness. Northern Ontario does not have an integrated, reasonably self-reliant, regional economy. The economy has been structured largely on the basis of the needs of other regions and this is clearly reflected in the transportation network which is structured to facilitate the movement of bulk commodities out of the region and not for the purpose of intra regional communication. The lack of integration in the regional economy is partly due to the fact that most of the major industries are owned and controlled by groups headquartered outside the region with, thereby, little interest in developing an integrated regional economy.

The nature of the economy of the region, its population characteristics and lack of regional cohesiveness all clearly indicate it is a hinterland region of southern Ontario (Scott, 1975; Miller, 1980). It is also indicated by the region’s lack of political influence. It returns only sixteen provincial MPs out of 125 and eleven federal MPs out of 282. Because of its hinterland status the local population of northern Ontario feels exploited, underprivileged, alienated and unable to control its own destiny or that of the region. This has led to political reactions of many different types ranging from voting for third parties to some support for separatist movement (Weller, 1977).