

## Briefing Note

# Revisiting the Northern Forum: Lessons from Alaska's Involvement

Emily Tsui

At the 2015 General Assembly of the Northern Forum (NF or Forum) in Yakutia, Craig Fleener, on behalf of Governor Bill Walker, declared Alaska's intention to rejoin the Forum. Four years before at the Gangwon General Assembly, Alaska withdrew from the NF, despite having been one of the principal architects of the organization in 1991. What were the motivations behind Alaska's initial commitment, withdrawal, and now move to rejoin?

As the Northern Forum celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year and is undertaking a renewal of its activities, understanding why one of its key members has had a fickle relationship with the organization sheds light on why the NF has not risen in prominence in comparison with other Arctic governing bodies, such as for example, the Arctic Council. Over the years, the NF has seen its membership rise to a height of 25 subnational governments from 10 countries between 2001 and 2003, and fall to a low of 7 governments across 5 countries between 2013 and 2014.<sup>1</sup> This decline is especially problematic given recent findings by the 2015 Gordon Foundation public opinion survey, which found that the plurality of Northern respondents in Canada and the United States indicated they feel that governments closer to them best represents them, whether at the territorial/state level or municipal/local level (EKOS, 2015: 20). Since the NF's goal is to facilitate relations between subnational governments, what does its decline in membership say about the need for inter-subnational co-operation in the Arctic region?

---

Emily Tsui completed her Honours Bachelor of Arts from the University of Toronto in international relations (2016).

This briefing note presents an overview of Alaska's involvement with the Forum and assesses the broader implications of this for inter-subnational co-operation in the Arctic. It suggests that inherent structural deficiencies of the Forum harmed its ability to attract sustained interest from Northern regions, including and especially Alaska. While Alaska's move to rejoin suggests that there is still a role for the Forum to play in promoting inter-subnational co-operation as it exists globally throughout the entire Arctic, reforms to the organization should be made to promote greater membership and to increase its effectiveness.

### **1991-2011: Alaskan involvement in the Forum**

The creation of the NF was in recognition of the fact that grand challenges facing the Arctic and its inhabitants, growing starker with every year, require more than any one government to properly develop solutions to address it. The founders believed that sustained meetings between its membership (defined simply as Northern regions self-identifying as sharing the majority of similar traits of "climatic conditions, demographic attributes, resource-based economies, environmental vulnerability, subsistence-reliant populations, political vulnerability, and infrastructure, transportation, communications limitations") (Northern Forum, 1991) would "offer opportunities to exchange ideas, solve common problems, and plan cooperative initiatives regarding issues that are unique to the North or take on special significance for the northern regions" (Third Northern Regions Conference Staff, 1990: 10).

Building off three international conferences on Northern Regions (1974, 1979, and 1990), the Northern Forum Agreement was signed in 1991 that laid out in greater detail the basic principles of the Forum's mission and how it might operate.<sup>2</sup> It is significant to note that its charter and bylaws were written in accordance to American corporate law for non-profits since the secretariat was to be incorporated in Alaska. In doing so, the NF gained access to American grants from organizations such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID), but this also meant that some of these groups like USAID stipulated that funding could only be administered by Americans.<sup>3</sup> Governor Steve Cowper, chair of the Third Conference, offered the resources of the Office of the Governor of the State of Alaska to begin work on this new "permanent organization." As such from the beginning, there was a strong connection between the Forum and the State of Alaska, specifically in the Governor's office (Third Northern Regions Conference Staff, 1990).

Following Governor Cowper's leadership, Governor Walter Hickel (1991-1994) was similarly, or perhaps even more, an enthusiastic supporter of the Forum. Both strongly believed in the importance of Alaska's engagement in international relations, further demonstrated by Governor Hickel's establishment of the Institute of the North, which he hoped would serve as the educational arm of the NF.<sup>4</sup> He also personally attended meetings of the Forum, and worked with former executive director John Doyle (1998-2001) to secure a 500,000 USD grant from Senator Ted Stevens for the Forum's operations.<sup>5</sup> After leaving office, Governor Hickel continued his participation by serving as "Secretary-General for life" of the NF, thereby continuing to influence the organization's activities until his death in 2010.

Contrary to Governor Hickel's hands-on involvement, Governor Tony Knowles (1994-2002) was not as engaged with the NF and the origins of Alaskan disinterest in the Forum can be seen here. For example, instead of directly attending meetings of the Forum, Knowles sent his

assistant David Ramseur to participate in its meetings. Despite some being held in Alaska, he only stopped by one of the meetings for a few hours.<sup>6</sup> Knowles belonged to an opposing political party (Democrat) and was not particularly interested in fostering Governor Hickel's legacy vis-à-vis the NF. Instead, he was more closely tied with the Democratic President Bill Clinton and was supportive of the creation of the Arctic Council in 1996. The Northern Forum, instead of receiving a status similar to Permanent Participants as was designed in one of the early proposals of the AC, was relegated to observer status instead of accepted as a full member following disputes between the indigenous groups and the Forum (Tsui & Deagle, 2015: 10).

Governor Frank Murkowski (2002-2006) expressed greater interest in state involvement in international relations than his predecessor, but this attention was directed mostly towards Pacific Rim economic activities and not necessarily the NF. The NF's projects at the time were mostly cultural and therefore did not necessarily align with his priorities. Furthermore, a crash in oil prices during his tenure removed some of the discretionary spending available in the Governor's office. This reduced the amount of subsidies that the government provided to the Forum.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, there was a significant exodus of members from the Forum, especially from the Nordic members, who sought more cohesion in activities through the Barents-Euro Arctic Council and were not impressed by the minimal leadership that Alaska was displaying.

The greatest decline in support to the Forum occurred under Governor Sarah Palin (2006-2009). Displaying only the faintest of interest in international relations and using the 2008 economic crash as justification, Governor Palin cut funding to the Forum without consultation with its staff from 75,000 USD to 15,000 USD (Hertzberg, 2008). This caused the secretariat's office to go without pay for two months, and relations between the Forum and the Governor's office was substantially impacted. At the same time, the recession reduced the amount of private funding and federal grants available that the NF could apply to, and financial uncertainty lingered over the NF's operating activities for the next few years.

Governor Sean Parnell (2009-2014) was Palin's Lieutenant Governor and a year after Hickel passed away, he instructed his chief of staff, Michael Nizich, to send a letter to the NF secretariat informing them of Alaska's withdrawal.<sup>9</sup> The 2011 General Assembly was the last one that Alaska would attend for the next few years.

### **2011: Alaska Withdraws**

In Sarah Pralle's work on "venue selection," or why organizations choose membership in one forum over another, she suggests that actors select venues that would best fit their "larger strategic plan for achieving substantive policy change" (Pralle, 2003: 233). The perception by successive governors that the NF was not a worthwhile return on investment contributed to the decision to withdraw in 2011. This belief largely had to do not only with varying interpretations by the governors of Alaska's role in international relations, but also of the role of the Northern Forum.

However, what are the other factors that encouraged Governor Parnell to officially sever relations with the Forum? Interviews with key individuals involved in Alaska's withdrawal suggests that flaws in organizational design, including a lack of clearly defined objectives, lack of cohesive identity generated from the vague membership criteria of "Northern," lack of consistent funding, and an inability to separate personal and professional relationships,

contributed to a perception of the Forum's ineffectiveness. In particular, the dependence on the Governor's office for Alaskan participation also meant that a lack of interest from the governor significantly impacted the ability of the NF secretariat to dedicate resources into fixing these organizational issues.

The lack of clearly defined objectives caused confusion between the demands of what members wanted the NF's outputs to be and the actual projects that the NF undertook. In particular, the 1999 Lapland Declaration stated the NF's mandate as: "To improve the quality of life of Northern peoples by providing Northern regional leaders a means to share their knowledge and experience in addressing common challenges; and To support sustainable development and the implementation of cooperative socioeconomic initiatives among Northern regions and through international fora" (Northern Forum Board of Directors, 1999). Combined with the broadly defined criteria for membership, it is unclear what exactly the terms "Northern peoples" and "common challenges" that the NF are referring to. Projects were therefore undertaken in an ad-hoc basis, with members bringing projects to the table on issues that concern them specifically, not necessarily of the entire Forum as a whole.

Additionally, a lack of cohesive identity that emerged from such as broad definition of "Northern" meant that there was less of an incentive for members to stay in the organization. Differences in time zones, languages and geography across the regions meant that there would be "special and unique challenges" in co-ordinating projects, which called into question just how simply how "common" challenges facing regions across the circumpolar world are (Dubreuil, 2011: 923-924). It was hard to identify project areas that would be relevant to every member that would be worth the investment and feasibly co-ordinated by all members, especially during the peak of the Forum's membership of 25. The introduction of associate secretariats aimed to alleviate these issues, but also increased the likelihood of fragmentation in developing a cohesive identity.

Problems in developing a sustainable financial model meant that projects were conducted sporadically, based on the interest of members who were willing to invest the money. Funding for the Forum comes from membership fees of regional governments, subsidies provided by the state of Alaska and Hokkaido, grants from normally U.S. government or corporations, and after 1999, fees paid by business partners. However, during when some members experienced financial hardship, membership fees were waived. Subsidies from the state of Alaska were continuously cut as successive governors showed less interest in the Forum. The 2008 recession meant that less funding was available to be applied for. Uncertainty as to what role business partners should play in the Forum led to a high turnover rate among this membership category. As a result, the funding model for the Forum was highly unstable, making it difficult to devise long term strategies for projects and other plans.<sup>11</sup>

However, it was perhaps the inability of personal politics to be separated from the Forum's activities that made progress to overcoming structural deficiencies difficult. As Drue Pearce reflected, Alaska is small enough so that things get very personal, very quickly, and this held true for the NF.<sup>12</sup> Secretariat personnel, especially in the case of Priscilla Wohl, the former executive director of the Forum for about ten years leading up to Alaska's withdrawal, had previous relations with the executive office of the governor. In her case, she worked alongside Mead Treadwell, then Deputy Commissioner of Alaska's Department of Environmental Conservation,

who would become the state's Lieutenant Governor under Sean Parnell.<sup>13</sup> Differences between how Wohl saw she should steer the organization and Governor Hickel's vision, the secretary-general for life who still held considerable informal influence in Alaskan politics, created tensions between the NF and the Governor's office. Poor relations were especially deepened once Governor Palin unexpectedly cut the subsidies to the Forum. Without good relations, it became difficult for the secretariat to work together with the Governor's office to set the agenda, solicit further funding and to gain access to the network of the Governor's office.

These four principle issues point to fundamental problems in the Forum's institutional design. However, while interviewees questioned the Forum's effectiveness, all except one believed in the importance of having a Northern Forum to facilitate relations between subnational governments. This suggests that there is still value in a NF.

### **2015: Alaska Declares Intention to Rejoin**

Despite these grievances that led to Alaska's withdrawal, Governor Walker has expressed a renewed interest in the NF. This was spurred on by diverging perspectives between Juneau and Washington on Arctic policy, the creation of the Alaska Arctic Policy Commission (AAPC), current restructuring efforts of the NF, and personal motivations in the Governor's office.

Public opinion surveys conducted by the Gordon Foundation in Canada and the Institute of the North reveal that Alaskans see the world differently, and this has perhaps emphasized the need for subnational governments in the Arctic to organize under a collective organization to advocate on their behalf. Geographically so far removed from the lower 48, only 15% of Alaskans believe that the federal government best represents them (EKOS, 2015: 20). Alaskans are more likely to prioritize disaster response, improving education, healthcare and infrastructure, and preservation of traditional culture as opposed to the federal government's heavy emphasis on environmental protection and conservation as seen in its AC Chairmanship. The NF, in focusing on acting upon the voices of the locals, is directly in line with the sentiments of the majority of Alaskans.

The establishment of the AAPC in April 2012 led by the efforts of state senator Lesil McGuire paved the way for Alaska's re-entry. Created in anticipation of diverging viewpoints between Juneau and Washington as noted above in advance of the U.S. Chairmanship of the AC in 2015, the AAPC helped Alaska to assert its own Arctic priorities and including the perspectives of the local people. In the Implementation Plan for the AAPC released in January 2015, Recommendation 2H asked for consideration for Alaska to join the NF to expand the state's role in international relations. However, the extent to which this support for the NF will be serious is still yet to be seen, since 2H considers "potentially some additional travel funding" to be the only expense, emphasizing that "basic communications are fairly cost-neutral" (Alaska Arctic Policy Commission, 2015: 27). Alaska has since officially re-joined the Forum in July 2016, paying the 20,000 USD membership fee required. Further investment into the organization as seen before with greater investment from the Governor's office has not been committed.

Additionally, since the Sakha Republic has assumed the responsibilities of hosting the secretariat, there has been a significant move under the new and younger executive director, Mikhail Pogodaev, to correct for the previous mishaps of the NF. Efforts to restructure the organization have been underway since he assumed his position in November 2015, and Alaska has taken a

significant role in identifying areas for reform. These changes include changing the fee structure and better defining the role of the NF. By working with Alaska, the NF poises to have greater success in retaining the state's membership.<sup>14</sup>

Since the capacity of the state to conduct international relations is indeed heavily based within the competences of the executive office, Governor Walker's personal interest has been influential in bringing Alaska back to the table. His appointment of Craig Fleener as his Arctic Policy Advisor can be seen as a rapprochement, as his internationalist outlook can be seen from the early days of him serving as the chair of Gwich'in Council International. Fleener's dedication in promoting a "unified voice on Arctic issues" is telling for how Alaska may engage with the NF.<sup>15</sup>

### **Broader Implications for Inter-Subnational Co-operation**

The history of Alaskan involvement in the NF reveals that there is still a fundamental need to work with other Northern regions to advocate for its priorities on the Arctic agenda. Results from interviews suggest that the current structure of the NF in terms of its ambiguous priorities, poorly designed funding structure, and tense personal relations is more of a cause to blame for the NF's declining membership instead of a lack of a need of inter-subnational co-operation in the Arctic. This can be seen through the rise of other more "regionalized" organizations, such as the Barents Regional Council (BRC), and the Pacific Northwest Economic Region's (PNWER) Arctic Caucus. Both organizations represent a smaller geographic area and have a more clearly defined mandate. The NF could learn from its historical relations with Alaska and these other regional organizations in its restructuring efforts, such as bringing back the regional secretariats to create more specific goals and to collaborate with existing Washington-led efforts to reduce costs.

At the same time, the NF should capitalize on its niche policy space that it currently occupies. As seen in its history, finding common ground on projects for members across the circumpolar world is difficult. Focusing on localized projects as conducted through the regional secretariats or through existing organizations such as the BRC or PNWER should be instead the priority of subnational governments. However, the NF is unique from BRC or PNWER in that it has observer status on the AC, and can work to advocate for more integration of Northerner perspective when crafting federal Arctic strategies. Much like the AAPC is designed to lobby the US government to work with Alaskans on its policies, the NF could lobby the federal governments of the AC to actively include Northerners when designing international agreements.

The Arctic is changing rapidly, and a robust NF that could advocate for the needs of its circumpolar inhabitants is becoming increasingly important. While it would be prudent for the NF to correct its structural deficiencies as identified in this note when moving forward, it is also necessary for Alaska to assess the degree to which it is serious about its re-engagement. A quick examination of its previous relations with the Forum suggest that formalizing some of the state's commitment with the NF would benefit both the Forum and the state by stabilizing funding, building expertise in international relations, and improving relations among Northern residents. These would all contribute to better policy solutions by harmonizing existing activities and better addressing the needs of the Northerners, which facilitate an improvement of life in the North.

## Notes

1. N. Novik, personal communication, February 21, 2016.
2. For more information about the history and the structure of the NF, please see Waliul Hasanat's 2012 and 2014 articles in *Polar Record* and *McGill International Journal of Sustainable Development Law and Policy* respectively.
3. N. Novik, personal communication, February 17, 2016.
4. B. Ellis, personal communication, February 18, 2016.
5. J. Doyle, personal communication, February 15, 2016.
6. M. Treadwell, personal communication, February 22, 2016.
7. D. Pearce, personal communication, February 4, 2016.
8. N. Novik, personal communication, February 17, 2016.
9. N. Novik, personal communication, February 17, 2016.
10. N. Novik, personal communication, February 17, 2016.
11. P. Wohl, personal communication, February 16, 2016.
12. D. Pearce, personal communication, February 4, 2016.
13. M. Treadwell, personal communication, February 22, 2016.
14. M. Pogodaev, personal communication, February 3, 2016.
15. C. Fleener, personal communication, February 15, 2016.

## References

- Alaska Arctic Policy Commission (AAPC). (2015). *Implementation Plan for Alaska's Arctic Policy*. Juneau: Alaska Arctic Policy Commission.
- Dubreuil, A. (2011). "The Arctic of the Regions." *International Journal*. 66(4): 923-938.
- EKOS Research Associates. (2015). *Rethinking the Top of the World: Arctic Public Opinion Survey*, Vol. 2. Toronto: The Gordon Foundation.
- Hertzberg, H. (2008). "Foreign Countries." *The New Yorker*.
- Northern Forum. (1991). *Articles of Incorporation*. Anchorage: NF Inc.
- Northern Forum Board of Directors. (1999). *Lapland Declaration of the Fourth General Assembly*. Rovaniemi: NF Inc.
- Pralle, S. (2003). "Venue Shopping, Political Strategy, and Policy Change: The Internationalization of Canadian Foreign Advocacy." *Journal of Public Policy*. 23(3): 233-260.
- Third Northern Regions Conference Staff. (1990). Proceedings from *Third Northern Regions Conference: Cooperation in a Changing World*. Anchorage: State of Alaska Office of International Trade.
- Tsui, E. & Deagle, K. (Eds.). (2015). Proceedings from *Regional Governments in International Affairs: Lessons from the Arctic*. Toronto: Munk School of Global Affairs.