

# CANADA AND THE UN NORTH OF 60

Andrew Caddell



Andrew Caddell, senior adviser on the United Nations at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, recently flew to Whitehorse to speak to several Yukon groups, particularly high school students, about the UN and Canada's historic role in it. He was struck by the students' level of interest, and their knowledge. Here, in a letter from Yukon, are the impressions of a first-time visitor "north of 60," who says he will be back.

Andrew Caddell, conseiller principal sur les Nations Unies au ministère des Affaires étrangères et du Commerce international, se trouvait récemment à Whitehorse pour expliquer à plusieurs groupes du Yukon, notamment à des élèves du secondaire, ce qu'est l'ONU et quel rôle y a joué le Canada. Le vif intérêt et l'étendue des connaissances de son jeune auditoire l'ont marqué. Dans cette « lettre du Yukon », il décrit ses impressions d'une première visite au « nord du 60<sup>e</sup> parallèle », où il se promet de revenir.

There's a land where the mountains are nameless,  
And the rivers all run God knows where;  
There are lives that are erring and aimless,  
And deaths that just hang by a hair...

Robert Service  
"The Spell of the Yukon"

**I**t was a long Saturday flying from Ottawa to Vancouver, and then north to Yukon. Nothing like it might have been in the winter of 1898, when the rivers ran with gold. My head bobbed up and down like a rag doll's after a long day as I fought to stay awake. Then, 20 minutes from Whitehorse, I looked out the window and was transfixed by the unmistakable array of the aurora borealis dancing in the sky ahead. "God's own neon green," as the late Stan Rogers put it, was lighting our way and leading us in, a wide belt-like band across the whole sky. The first of many extraordinary sights for a southerner in his first trip north.

In the warmth of the early autumn, I was going to Yukon's capital city, Whitehorse, for what we call "out-reach" — to show the flag for the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. I was there to talk about the United Nations and Canada's role in the multilateral system. One of the main issues was how the work of the UN is pertinent to people so far away from UN headquarters or any developing country.

I had spoken on the UN before in many cities and towns, but never "north of 60." I didn't know what to expect, or whether there would be interest in Canada's

international engagements. That concern was allayed quickly, when I stopped into a local store the next day. The clerk, a man of about 60 originally from Nova Scotia, provided a running commentary with the local newscast. The lead story on Afghanistan had hardly begun when he began talking over the radio.

"Time to get them out of there. We got no business being there. Our soldiers think that too." I couldn't let his comment go unchallenged, so I began asking him questions, and we had a spirited conversation.

**I**n the next few days, I spoke at the local college, three high schools and a service club, before heading back to Vancouver and then Ottawa. There were several memorable moments. On my first day of speaking, a student at F.H. Collins Secondary School asked me what was my favourite place to work abroad. There were so many memories: the night silence of a west African jungle, playing with children in a refugee camp in Macedonia, the crowded streets and open marshes of Bangladesh. The pristine streets of Geneva, the hot sidewalks of New York. I told them to see the world, and work for the UN if they wanted to. Nothing could stop them if they had the desire.

At Porter Creek High School in the "suburbs" of Whitehorse, I had just finished my spiel about the history of the UN, Canada's involvement, the move toward reform under Kofi Annan and Canada's commitment to the responsibility to protect, when a slim teenager in a powder-blue shirt put me on the spot.

“What about Rwanda?” he asked. I asked what he meant. “What about the genocide in Rwanda in 1994? Why didn’t the responsibility to protect apply there?”

I noticed that, probably unintentionally, he was wearing a shirt which bore the exact colours of the UN. I paused and explained that the Canada-sponsored International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty had been struck to respond to the genocides in Rwanda and the massacre in Srebrenica; it reported in 2001 and leaders at the 2005 UN World Summit had endorsed the concept. So now it was up to Canada to back up “R2P.” It was a long answer for a short question, but it seemed to get the point across.

Then a confident and articulate Native student wanted to know how she could get a job in the UN system. I provided a few details, calling on my own experience with the UN, all the while thinking that this was a future leader, waiting to be discovered. Not long after, she wrote me to follow up.

At Yukon College, I was impressed by the modern building, centred on a green space, overlooking the city. The Whitehorse campus, one of eight, has about 3,000 full- and part-time students, who face climatic and other challenges not shared by their southern brothers and sisters.

On the front door and in the halls, a ubiquitous poster warned, “Bear Alert. A bear is in the area. Notify police if you see the bear.”

The first evening class at the college was attended by about a dozen students, each of whom knew his or her subject very well. After my presentation on Canada and the UN, the Arctic Council and International Polar Year, questions began to emerge on the inner workings of the UN. Some of

the students had worked within the UN system or with NGOs abroad. Their professor had come to Yukon years ago and worked her way from driving a truck to studying, then teaching international policy.

The next morning, I was up early for breakfast with the local Rotary Club, and a chance to speak about the long-time connection between the World Health Organization and Rotary that, with Canada’s help, has almost eradicated polio. I was soon back at the college, where I spoke in the “pit” (a small indoor amphitheatre) to an enthusiastic

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group, most concerned about Canada’s change from peacekeeping to peace-making. That night, I spoke at a philosophy class about the role of the news media and its influence on the decision making process at the UN. The interest of the students was palpable, and the discussion of what could have been a pretty dry topic was pretty intense.

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I finished the trip by driving 100 kilometres down the Alaska Highway to see the vast and spectacular landscape. Like the entire visit, the experience was an eye-opener. As I drove along, rarely seeing another vehicle, it reminded me that whenever I have travelled abroad, there is always someone who comments on Canada’s vastness. My response is always to remind people of our massive cities and urban centres.

But in Yukon, the space really hits home. Leaving Whitehorse, there are few signs of life. Compare that with Bangladesh, where I lived a few years ago: 144 million people live in a space only one-third the size of Yukon. In Bangladesh, one always saw people, even in the most remote places. Yukon is just so vast.

Even so, the arrival of satellite television has ensured that everyone has a sense of what is going on in the world, and young people are engaged, interested and receiving a education at least as good as they would get



Andrew Caddell

Students at Porter Creek High School in suburban Whitehorse. About 10 percent of the Yukon's population is French-speaking, and the author found students at École Émilie-Tremblay no less interested in the United Nations and Canada's role in it.

"south of 60." The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* calls Yukon "among the few frontiers on the North American continent." And it is hard to disagree. Everything is new here; this is the future, with a people as unspoiled as the land. The prospect of boom times in Yukon, with oil and gas and pipeline development, is expected to spur Whitehorse to double in the next decade. Still, at 50,000 to 60,000

people, it will still be a very small "metropolis."

There are many famous Yukoners: writers Pierre Berton and Robert Service come to mind. If the students I met are any indication, the people of Yukon will add their names to Canada's international reputation in the years to come.

*There are hardships that nobody reckons;*

*There are valleys unpeopled and still;*

*There's a land — oh, it beckons and beckons,  
And I want to go back — and I will.*

*Andrew Caddell is a senior policy adviser on UN issues at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada.*