

# Ports, Politics and the Pacific Gateway: Consequences for Regional Development in Western Canada

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## Abstract

*Much has been said in recent years about the need to wean Canada off its economic dependency on the United States. The rapprochement of the North American economies after the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 1989 and the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 has been followed by moments of introspection and concern about just how much our economy is tied to our neighbour to the south. The Pacific Gateway Strategy (PGS) is one potential answer to this dilemma. The purpose of the symposium is to bring together practitioners and scholars to discuss issues that pertain to the impact of the PGS on northern communities, particularly those in the provincial north.*

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Although this reorientation of Canada's trade focus has clear benefits for British Columbia, successive federal governments view the Gateway in terms of its broader geographical reach across Canada. When the policy was introduced, then Minister of Western Economic Diversification, Stephen Owen, commented:

The Pacific Gateway is of vital importance to the economic prosperity of Western Canada. This is a multi-sector initiative which will strengthen trade links, lead to expanded business opportunities for value-added goods and services, increase tourism in Canada, and enable western entrepreneurs to access important emerging Asia-Pacific markets. In building a stronger West, we are building a stronger Canada (Government of Canada, 2005).

The growth in Asian trade has placed a tremendous amount of pressure on ports along the western seaboard, from southern California to northern British Columbia. In Canada, a key aspect of the PGS has been the redevelopment of west coast ports in Vancouver and Prince Rupert. Indeed, the recently constructed container terminal in Prince Rupert is a direct response to the challenge of how to cope with the sheer amount of manufactured goods that are currently making their way from Asia to markets in the North American heartland. The new port is the result of a public-private partnership between the federal and provincial governments, the Prince Rupert Port Authority, Canadian National Railways and Maher Terminals, a US-based terminal operator. According to its proponents, this natural deep-water port is ideally located to act as a gateway for products coming in and out of Canada.

The developments that have taking place in Prince Rupert and throughout western Canada in response to the economic surge in the Asia-Pacific region and the Pacific Gateway Strategy are complex; understanding them requires a multi-dimensional approach that considers not only the political, economic and social consequences of development, but also their geographical implications in the domestic, continental and international spheres. Such an examination requires a multi-disciplinary group of researchers and the Annual Steelhead Symposium sponsored by the Department of Political Science at the University of Northern British Columbia provided such a vehicle.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of the symposium has been to bring together practitioners and scholars to discuss issues that pertain to northern communities, particularly those in the provincial north. In the past the seminar has focused on issues of multi-level governance, health care and northern governance.<sup>3</sup> Since 2002, the symposium has been held on an annual basis in the northern communities of Smithers and, most

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<sup>2</sup> A number of the authors in this special edition have been involved in a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Major Collaborative Research Initiative on Multilevel Governance and Public Policy in Canadian Municipalities. Some of the research on port development and federal property was funded by this project.

<sup>3</sup> The papers presented at the first Steelhead Symposium in 2002 were published in Gary N. Wilson and Greg Poelzer (eds). "Special Collection: Governance in the Provincial Norths." *The Northern Review*. 25/26 (Summer 2005).

recently, Prince Rupert. The organizers have aimed to provide an intimate and relaxing setting in which to discuss issues facing northern and rural communities in Canada.

In this context, the opening of the container port was a natural topic of interest. Prince Rupert has been subject to the vagaries of a boom and bust economy and the closure of a local mill in 2004 created significant economy problems in the community. The prospect of the port development created renewed hope and expectations, not only in Prince Rupert, but throughout western Canada and into the United States. With all the excitement and rhetoric that surrounds the port development, however, it seems prudent to take time to examine and critically assess the potential opportunities and challenges that Canada's newest port may bring from a variety of perspectives, including competition, governance, transportation concerns, and potential environmental impacts.

This special edition of the *Canadian Political Science Review* on "Ports, Politics and the Pacific Gateway" focuses on three main themes: ports and the important role that they play as transportation hubs; the consequences of the development of the Prince Rupert container port for communities in northern British Columbia; and developments outside northern British Columbia that will impact the port. The articles by Michael C. Ircha and Anne Goodchild et al speak to the first theme. They provide a comprehensive overview of the terrain and the trends facing Canadian ports at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as the particular transportation and logistical issues facing the port of Prince Rupert as it seeks to consolidate its position as a North American transportation hub. The articles by Gary N. Wilson and Tracy Summerville, and Jean Melious then examine the environmental, economic and societal consequences of port development for communities across northern British Columbia. Finally, the articles by John F. Young, Kevin Ginnell and Patrick Smith, and Paul Evans take a broader perspective by assessing the effects that external actors and forces will have on the port's development.

All of these articles, of course, were written prior to the global economic crisis of 2008. Given the dependency of the Pacific Gateway project and the Prince Rupert container port on east-west trade, the global economic slowdown is sure to have a number of negative impacts on these initiatives. We had originally intended to hold a follow-up symposium in the fall of 2009, to revisit the questions and issues that were raised in 2007. The events of the last several months will make such a symposium even more relevant.