

Seeing the north with new eyes

QUEBEC

ONE CAN take endless censuses of the caribou population, or know all about the bad effects on the permafrost of heating basements in the far north, or design doctoral programs in Arctic studies, but still miss the beginning of a "conscience of the north," according to well-known Quebec "nordicist" Louis-Edmond Hamelin. In his view, most Canadians, including specialists in the north as well as the literary luminaries who confuse pioneering with Canadian identity, have yet to develop a true "mental nordicity." Without it, he says, Canada can never expect to be "one country." And contemporary rendezvous with the northern environment are likely to constitute another voyage into errors, mess and disillusion.

To other nordicists, the 65-year-old unstoppable Mr. Hamelin is a familiar name and figure. A geographer by training, a linguist by lifelong taste, and anything a humanist can be in between, including an alpinist and a former university president, the "retired" self-described generalist was also the founder and first director, in 1961, of the avant-garde Centre d'études nordiques at Laval University. For his contribution to the understanding of the north he was awarded the highly prestigious 1987 Prix du Québec in social sciences.

Long before an internationally acclaimed world commission made it fashionable for Western thinking to link development and environmental concepts (the 1987 Brundtland report), Mr. Hamelin was advocating such an approach to the north. "I keep assailing those who would like to 'freeze the Arctic'," he said in a recent interview. "I cannot see why the planet should be deprived of the large potential of its far north resources."

Yet he was among those who fought against the first phase of the massive James Bay hydro-electric development in 1971. He had nothing against harnessing energy from the north. "There lies," he said, "the greatest opportunity for Québec since Jacques Cartier discovered Canada." But he was unhappy with the initial project's total lack of concern for the region's "nature and culture." The court injunction that compelled the government to negotiate with the native people resulted in the James Bay convention, "the most important moral law in the history of Canada," according to Mr. Hamelin.

Thanks to this imposed sensitivity, Quebecers — and Canadians generally through similar experiences — have entered a "second wave of nordicity," he said. The first was a classic, careless colonial model; the second is more cautious about disposing of wastes and protecting animal species, for example. Some respect is even being shown for northern native populations, through frustrating but continuing constitutional talks.

But too many, including those settling up there around mining, electricity and oil developments, still think of the north in terms of "big salaries" and technical challenges, Mr. Hamelin said. Despite



**LISE
BISSONNETTE**

an increasing adaptation to and even love of northern conditions, the average mythical view of the north is not swept by the "third wave of mental nordicity" needed to get the most and the best out of the development of Northern Canada.

Decision-makers and ordinary citizens should come to a point where they stop thinking of themselves as southerners, and include a northern perspective in all their debates about the future. Only then will they think of the Indian and Inuit peoples as equals, and of preservation of the environment as the basic ingredient in northern development. Even controversial projects such as diversion of water to the thirsty south could be conceivable if planned carefully in such a state of mind.

Sounding often like the poet he also tries to be in his "spare time," Louis-Edmond Hamelin does not accept being branded a dreamer. Canadians are "walking to the north backwards with their eyes fixed on their vacations' palm trees," he deplores in a special issue of Forces magazine dedicated to the environment, just released. But the ecological instinct among the younger generation, and the emergence of a "pre-north" way of life, offer clues for a better future. "Ten per cent of us are ready," he said.

There also for the asking are his plans for a Canadian "nordology," the research, teaching and preaching needed to achieve a deeper change in our stubborn, "sub-nordic" minds.