Contested Colonialism: Responsible Government and Political Development in Yukon

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Introduction

Following twenty years of advocacy, Yukon attained full responsible government on October 9, 1979 with the stroke of a minister’s pen.1 In his letter to Commissioner Ione Christensen, Progressive Conservative Minister Jake Epp wrote: “There is no question, but that this Government intends to continue and give high priority to the evolutionary process toward full responsible government. Normal constitutional development in the history of the world is not only and necessarily by way of statutory enactment, but has been and continues to be in part by way of custom and usage and executive directive” (1979: 1). The previous June, the federal Progressive Conservatives had won a minority government with a platform that included the promise of constitutional development and provincial status for Yukon. Since its creation in 1898, the Yukon Territorial Government had functioned as a semi-autonomous arm of the federal bureaucracy (Elliott, 1978; Moodie Michael, 1987). Until 1970, the Yukon’s executive had consisted of political appointees, often from outside the territory,

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including a commissioner who was its formal and effective head. In the span of an afternoon, the now-famous “Epp Letter” had ended Yukon’s administration by a colonially appointed public servant, replacing her with a fully elected cabinet government headed by a premier.

The Yukon experienced an economic boom in the mid-1960s that saw the opening of new mines, increased government expenditure and rapid population growth (Coates and Morrison, 2005). Despite these boom conditions, non-Indigenous Yukoners grew increasingly frustrated with perceived neglect by federal officials. Yukoners saw opportunities to develop economically but found their efforts frustrated by distant bureaucratic oversight and conflicting priorities with colonial administrators in Ottawa. Increasing self-confidence—fuelled by economic prosperity and the consolidation of “Yukoner,” “Sourdough” and “Northerner” as entrenched non-Indigenous identities—led settlers to organize and advocate for self-determination.

In 1967, Ken Shortt, founding editor of Whitehorse’s Yukon Daily News, published a short pamphlet on Yukon political development. Titled Blueprint for Autonomy, his essay called for self-government in Yukon as a “practical necessity,” arguing that the “events of the past few years have shown that unless the Yukon achieves self-government, its development will be stunted and retarded in many ways” (1967:5). The Yukon, Shortt argued, was being held in an “iron grip, the virtual fief of a single government department and its legislative, executive and administrative control [that has] caused the residents of the Yukon to revert in status to that of mere colonists without rights to an effective voice in their own affairs” (1967:1). For Yukon’s political class, the long march towards responsible government would be a defining feature of its dealings with the federal government and Yukon’s Indigenous peoples.

I argue that responsible government in Yukon was not the inevitable outcome of territorial political development but the result of a protracted and organized settler political movement that emerged first in opposition to the federal government and, later, to Yukon’s Indigenous peoples. To make this argument, I bring two literatures into conversation, Northern political science and settler colonial theory, and make three contributions.

First, I open analytic space for the study of non-Indigenous settler societies in Canada’s North by presenting a settler colonial framework that I term contested colonialism. The Canadian case raises interesting questions about internal colonialism and the development of settler societies within federal states. Settler colonial scholarship is dominated by studies of colonial powers transforming foreign lands and peoples, whereas in Canada we see a central government establishing satellite jurisdictions in its own hinterlands. In both instances, these efforts have encountered strong resistance from Indigenous peoples. Complicating this picture are settlers whose self-constituting societies operate both in tandem with
Abstract. This article argues that the granting of responsible government to Yukon in 1979 was not the inevitable outcome of territorial political development but the result of a protracted and organized settler political movement that emerged first in opposition to the federal government and, later, to Yukon’s Indigenous peoples. I analyze settler actor political behaviour and outcomes using the framework of “contested colonialism.” Non-Indigenous Yukoners are understood as actors who simultaneously bring colonialism to the North while also contesting elements of that same colonial order. Using extensive archival research, I identify several critical junctures leading to the implementation of responsible government during the 1960s and 1970s.


federal priorities and, where those interests diverge, in opposition to federal colonial control.

Second, this paper challenges political scientists to take non-Indigenous settler political actors and institutions seriously in their analyses of Northern political development. Political scientists have tended to adopt a normative framework that emphasizes Indigenous political narratives and the relationship among Indigenous peoples, the Crown and the federal government. One would be hard pressed to criticize the important work of this literature, except to say that the addition of this settler colonial perspective will deepen our understanding of this complex part of Canada and complicate established narratives of Indigenous-settler relations.

Third, drawing upon extensive archival research, this paper conceptualizes the development of responsible government in Yukon as part of a settler political movement. It identifies several critical junctures leading to its implementation and takes responsible government as a site of social, political, and economic conflict with both the federal government and Indigenous peoples.

I begin this article by defining the characteristics of settler society and its political orientations and by adapting a settler colonial framework for use in Yukon. In developing this framework, I present a brief history of the development of settler society in northwestern Canada. In the second section, I demonstrate the use of the settler colonial framework in Yukon by applying it to the development of responsible government in the 1960s and 1970s. If land claims and Aboriginal rights are the political story of northern Indigenous peoples during this period, then responsible
government was the ultimate political prize for Yukon’s settler political class and remains a case where the behaviour of non-Indigenous actors and institutions have been neglected by the scholarly literature.

**Settlers and Northern Political Development**

In the past three decades, students of territorial politics have documented and analyzed the rapid change that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have experienced across northern Canada. In doing so, they have made significant contributions to the broader fields of provincial/territorial politics, Aboriginal politics, and public policy (White, 2011), research on the development of political institutions (Cameron and White, 1995; Dacks, 1986; White, 1991), the devolution of province-like jurisdiction to the territories (Abele, 1987 Abele and Prince, 2006; Alcantara et al., 2012; Clancy, 1990), the management of northern natural resources (Rodon, 2009; Slowey, 2008), and new risks to Canadian Arctic sovereignty from climate change and the opening of the Northwest Passage (Griffiths et al., 2011) have challenged conventional accounts of institutional development and political behaviour both within and beyond Canada’s North. By far, the greatest political change in northern Canada—and where political scientists have concentrated the bulk of their efforts—has been the recognition of Indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination and government (Dacks, 2004; Dickerson, 1992; Watkins, 1977), the negotiation and settlement of comprehensive land claims (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009), and the development of new Indigenous political orders, cultures and institutions, such as the creation of Nunavut (Abele and Dickerson, 1985; Dahl et al., 2000; Henderson, 2007; Kulchyski, 2005 Loukacheva, 2007).

Important to this literature are studies that develop sustained and nuanced understandings of the political interests and behaviours of non-Indigenous northern populations and their relationships to Indigenous northerners. While “settler” is frequently invoked by activists and academics, its theoretical meaning within the northern context, along with substantive content about who settlers are and how they behave, has been left unexplored. This is striking given territorial demographics and the prominence of many non-Indigenous persons among territorial political elites. Non-Indigenous persons represent 75 per cent of Yukon’s population and 82 per cent of Whitehorse residents (Canada, 2006). Of the 106 territorial councilors and members of legislative assembly elected in Yukon between 1958 and 2011, only 16 per cent were Indigenous. The first MLAs of Indigenous ancestry were elected in 1978, while no Indigenous person has held the office of Premier (Yukon, 2011; Yukon, 2014).

Of course, demographics alone do not warrant additional attention by political scientists for these populations. Rather, I contend, it is the
significant and sustained influence over political processes and outcomes by this population that should draw the attention of scholars. In his account of the Northwest Territories’ social structure, for example, Jull (1977) differentiates among “natives,” “settlement whites” living in small and primarily Indigenous communities, and “town whites” residing in the larger communities around Great Slave Lake. These descriptions also reflect the social realities of Yukon, although the non-Indigenous population represented a larger share of that territory’s population. Jull describes town whites as wanting:

their communities to have class, prestige, arenas, traffic lights, a monument or two, a festival with a northern motif and dog team races. For them there is no interest in new forms of organization but rather getting the proven Canadian ones, pronto, and dominating them. They dispute native claims to have political forms of their own, and ask what such alleged forms have accomplished in the way of progress. They equate the forms they know with progress and civilization. They have always assumed that the north was large and plastic, waiting for them to shape it. The natives would stand aside or carry the tools. This metropolitan and unwittingly monoethnic approach to the future has received a pretty devastating jolt since the natives began speaking out in the latter half of 1968, and more importantly, articulate their own vision via land claims proposals. Our Canadian norms seem challenged. (34–35)

Dacks provides additional nuance in the social structure and political orientation of non-Indigenous northerners in both territories. He writes that the non-Indigenous population in the territories is diverse: “While some come to the North to settle and create a life for themselves and their families, others motivated strictly by economics intend only to stay in the North long enough to gain the income they are seeking or as long as they can stand the climate and the isolation” (1981: 41). Both groups participate in the building of settler society, even if, on the surface, only long-time settlers participate in its politics.

As I will demonstrate in the next section, settlers in Yukon differ from other economic and social migrants in recent Canadian history, as these northern settlers “are founders of political orders” that claim autonomy over their internal affairs (Veracini, 2010: 3). As Belich puts it, a migrant “joined someone else’s society, a settler or colonist remade his own” (quoted in Veracini, 2010: 3).

Contested Colonialism: Defining Settler Society in Yukon

Colonialism is the subordination of people and lands by an exogenous power (Barker, 2009; Russell, 2005). By contrast, settler colonialism
displaces this order, superseding the colonial power while working to “repress, co-opt, and extinguish indigenous alterities” (Veracini, 2011: 3). A growing international literature has emerged that distinguishes between colonialism, settler colonialism and decolonization as discreet relational systems of power. While colonialism seeks to extract surplus value from Indigenous labour and lands, settler colonies are premised on displacing and replacing Indigenous societies with new orders and institutions (Wolfe, 1999). In offering analytic precision and wide applicability, settler colonialism provides the necessary tools for understanding power relations in “settled” societies where traditional colonial analytic frameworks fail to capture and explain political relationships and phenomena.

While covering a wide range of geographic and cultural circumstances, settler colonial literature has yet to fully incorporate and explain the Canadian case. In the past decade, several significant monographs and edited collections have appeared which analyze the rise of settler colonialism around the world (Bateman and Pilkington, 2011; Coombes, 2006; Elkins and Pedersen, 2005; Rowse and Ford, 2013; Thompson, 2008; Wolfe, 1999). Few of these collections use the Canadian case alone or in comparison with other cases. Moreover, the Canadian case has played only a small and referential role in the construction of settler colonial theory, and as such, the idiosyncrasies of the Canadian case have yet to be accounted for in settler colonial theory.

Despite this, we are not without accounts of the historical development, or crystallizing moments, of subnational Canadian settler societies. They are present in the literature, albeit usually without exploring the relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples. For example, Lingard (1946) and Thomas (1956) examine the role of autonomy movements in Western Canadian political development from the granting of responsible government to the old North-West Territories in the late nineteenth century to the creation of Alberta and Saskatchewan in the early twentieth. Others, such as Macpherson (1953) and Mallory (1954), examine how these autonomy movements—expressed through the Social Credit Party—shaped both the party system in Alberta and federal-provincial relations.6

Later, Canadian legal scholars offered both salient and nuanced accounts of the formation and behaviour of settler societies. Erickson, for example, uses legal cases to “explore how the criminal courts reflected and reinforced the social boundaries and discourses of difference that underpinned the construction of a settler society and a liberal economic order on Canada’s settlement frontier” (2011: 13). Documenting moments when settler societies crystallize is a necessary condition for understanding contemporary settler political trajectories and the outcomes of Indigenous-settler relations.

Northern settlers are simultaneously subjects that bring colonialism to the North, while also contesting elements of that same colonial order as
settler colonies have done across the “settled” world. As such, settler colonial theory as deployed by such scholars as Veracini (2010) and Wolfe (1999) does not always map comfortably onto the Canadian case. In identifying the characteristics of northern settler societies, I propose a concept of “contested colonialism” to understand the relationship between traditional colonial and settler colonial forces in remaking northern Canada. To do so, I examine the development of a settler society in Yukon from 1898 to 1980. This paper engages with two aspects of settler colonial theory: identity formation and settler autonomy and sovereignty claims.

Identity

Razack defines a settler society as:

one established by Europeans on non-European soil. Its origins lie in the dispossession and near extermination of Indigenous populations by the conquering Europeans. As it evolves, a white settler society continues to be structured by a racial hierarchy. In the national mythologies of such societies, it is believed that white people came first and that it is they who principally developed the land; Aboriginal peoples are presumed to be mostly dead or assimilated. European settlers thus become the original inhabitants and the group most entitled to the fruits of citizenship. (2002: 2)

Consequently, the identity formation of settler societies has both spatial and ideational components and is often formed in opposition to Indigenous or “other” identities.

Spatially, settler societies require tenure of the land and a built-form that delineates settler spaces from Indigenous ones. In Yukon, the recreation of Euro-Canadian settlements, complete with southern amenities, serves this purpose. In addition, the displacement of Indigenous peoples into “Indian villages” further distances settler and Indigenous societies (Coates, 1993). Land is incorporated into capitalist or Crown regimes for use by all “northerners.” Removed from the land, Indigenous peoples also become invisible societally, ignored and absorbed into larger systems.

Ideationally, settler identities require the creation of new histories that root settler experience in the land. Lotz, for example, considers the question “What is a Yukoner?” In parsing competing definitions, Lotz’s work demonstrates the insular and oppositional aspects of settler identity formation. In the late 1960s, the definition of Yukoner ranged from “an idealized frontiersman, optimistic, boosterish, boisterous, idealistic, friendly, anti-intellectual, hardy and above all, independent” to the dispossessed and dependent Yukoner, whose identity reflects a place where the “colonial pattern of British society met the frontier pattern of American wilderness.
society” (1970: 102). However, both definitions were contingent on settler Yukoners not being Indigenous nor having “gone native” (114). The creation of specific identity-forming institutions, such as the founding of the Yukon Order of Pioneers in Dawson City or the Sourdough Rendezvous in Whitehorse, serves to reinforce and police these ideational boundaries.

This process of identity building simultaneously pushes Indigenous peoples out of non-Indigenous spaces, while ideationally erasing them in the “post-race” settler society. Settlers create an imagined history in which they are the legitimate landholders. When the Council for Yukon Indians requested a land-transfer freeze from the federal government in 1975 during early land claims negotiations, settler Yukoners were incensed. As Flo Whyard, MLA and former editor of the Whitehorse Star, said at the time: “This thing hits you right in your guts. We’re all northerners; we’re all friends. Why do they want segregation? All they’re going to get is this backlash that’s ripe and ready to go” (McCullum and McCullum, 1975: 99). Whyard argued that Yukoners had moved beyond racial prejudice: “We worked with them and played with them and there was no racial discrimination. Now, whammo, we’re back where we started” (99). Dan Lang, also an MLA and current Canadian Conservative senator, was quoted in the Toronto Star stating that when “you give away the land you are giving away your economy by birth and blood right” (“Lang responds,” 1975). Settlers become themselves “indigenous” to the land, leaving Indigenous peoples with a choice: remain invisible or risk a “backlash” in challenging and disrupting settler orders.

Contrary to expectations, the transient nature of Yukon society does not undermine the coherence of these identity regimes. While many individuals cycle through the North—the structure of labour participation and the geographic isolation encourage turnover—settler identities remain stable and self-replicating over time. The built environment, along with formal and informal social institutions, integrates newcomers into settler patterns of social, economic and political behaviour. This is not to suggest that settler society is monolithic. To the contrary, settler society in Yukon demonstrates the same political diversity as southern Canadian communities. It is precisely the flexibility of these identities and political orientations, however, that has enabled settler political movements to survive.

Autonomy

Settler colonies are above all political communities. Settler societies do not emerge organically, but require the development of social, economic and political processes to manage populations, to reinforce identities and to protect settler actors, institutions and systems. However, settler colonialism as practised in Canada differs in several important ways from settler colonies elsewhere. Veracini argues that “while settlers see themselves as
founders of political orders, they also interpret their collective efforts in terms of an inherent sovereign claim that travels with them and is ultimately, if not immediately, autonomous from the colonizing metropole” (2010: 53). If Northern settler societies do not make sovereignty claims separate from those of Canada, then are they settler colonies or something else?

Northern settler societies, while related to the Canadian national form, are separate both in identity and politics. The settling of northern Canada is still in living memory; the North remains a frontier in Canadians’ collective memory and the identity of a “northerner” continues to be distinct from other Canadian identities (Grace, 2001). There have been no separatist movements in northern Canada by non-Indigenous settlers, nor any claims to the inherent sovereignty of Yukoners. And yet non-Indigenous Yukoners see themselves in a colonial relationship with the federal government and, as a result, make claims for greater control over their lands and lives.

The pattern of displacing old colonial orders with new settler colonial systems has played out across the world (Elkins and Pedersen, 2005; Wolfe, 1999). Whereas former colonies, such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada, gained sovereign independence from the United Kingdom, settler colonies in Yukon and the Northwest Territories have remained part of the larger Canadian federation.

The dispersed federal nature of Canada therefore complicates settler colonial accounts. Russell (2005) documents similar autonomy struggles between settlers in Australia’s Northern Territory and that territory’s Indigenous peoples. Settlers in Yukon, like those in northern Australia, are both members of a national settler society as well as founders of their own. While systems of shared sovereignty exist between federal and provincial governments and, more recently, between federal and Aboriginal governments, territories remain creatures of statute. As such, both politically and constitutionally, the concept of settler sovereignty in northern Canada does not apply in this case as it does elsewhere.

One way to incorporate the northern Canadian case into settler colonial theory is to focus on autonomy claims made by settlers as opposed to strict sovereignty. Veracini points to the “corporate nature of settler political entities,” suggesting that “a settler sovereignty should be understood in pluralistic terms… and not as primarily concerned with establishing state institutions. A focus on political power rather than state sovereignty… enables an exploration of settler colonialism’s self-constituting capacity” (2010: 54). Thus while many settler colonies seek independence from colonial powers, settler colonies seeking only autonomy within colonial states can exist.

Contested colonialism

Understanding the push and pull dynamic of settler societies—that is, both the desire to remain part of, and apart from, the Canadian colonial state—
reveals new lines of inquiry into Northern political events. I call this dynamic contested colonialism. Yukon is not a colony in the traditional sense. Non-Indigenous Yukoners are simultaneously subjects that bring colonialism to the North, while also contesting elements of that same colonial order. Settlers are not the handmaidens of the federal colonial state, but independent actors who influence political processes and outcomes.

Several elements characterize the contested colonial relationship in Yukon during the late 1960s and 1970s. The first element is discursive. In Yukon, settler political elites used the language of colonialism to describe their own political situation. For these politicians, Yukoners were themselves in a colonial relationship with an external power and this belief served as a potent metaphor for fostering wider political engagement in the autonomy struggle. As one unnamed Yukon politician summarized his position in 1965:

I don’t think you can get intelligent physical development until you have self-government. I think it has to come for several reasons. It has to come because historically no group of people anywhere in the world have ever been satisfied with having their decisions made thousands of miles away by people who are not a part of the country that they govern. We are a colony right now. And we know what happened to colonialism all over the world. (CBC, 1965)

The contention that non-Indigenous Yukoners were subject to similar colonial conditions as those experienced in the developing world was pervasive. In December 1969, for example, MLA Ken Mckinnon compared Yukoners’ demands for autonomy to those of black South Africans and Rhodesians (CBC, 1969). This position’s hypocrisy cannot be overstated; settler co-operation in the marginalization and dispossession of Yukon’s Indigenous peoples belied the settlers’ own privileged place within the North’s colonial order (Cruikshank, 1977).

The second element is structural, consisting of the general alignment of economic and institutional interests of Yukon settlers and federal government actors. Unlike the vision put forward by the Council for Yukon Indians in Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow (1973) or the Dene Declaration in the NWT (Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories, 1975), settlers shared the federal government’s commitment to capitalist economic development, Westminster parliamentary democracy and the progressive liberalism that marked the period. Yukon’s political class led similar lives to their federal counterparts, coming from similar educational backgrounds, engaging in the same professions, and belonging to the same political parties. Indeed, the transient nature of northern settler societies reinforced this alignment. Of the seven members elected to Territorial Council in a pivotal 1967 election, all but the lone woman
member, Jean Gordon, were born and raised outside the territory (Yukon Archives, 2014).

Meanwhile many, although not all, Indigenous persons in Yukon were structurally shut out of these important political and social alignments. While the land claim was negotiated outside government between separate parties, the push for responsible government was an inside job. The autonomy demands of settlers were intelligible to federal officials because the settlers themselves were intelligible.

Finally, the contested colonial relationship in Yukon was characterized by the settlers’ ability to capitalize on political opportunities to achieve their goals. These opportunities were shaped by the structural alignment of settlers and government officials. Territorial councillors, commissioners and MPs worked within the bureaucracy, government and political parties to take advantage of openings within the political system that were largely closed to Indigenous political actors during the period. As I will demonstrate in the next section, by taking advantage of openings in both the Liberal and PC parties, as well as leveraging control of the territorial government, settlers capitalized on multiple opportunities to achieve responsible government.

**Responsible Government in Yukon**

In the remainder of the article, I identify three critical junctures that led to the granting of responsible government in Yukon. These junctures demonstrate the utility of the contested colonial framework in capturing the political and discursive dynamics between settlers, Indigenous peoples and the federal government.

Yukon’s first settler autonomy movement emerged in the decade following the Klondike Gold Rush (Morrison, 1968). In response to settler demands, the federal government amended the *Yukon Act* to create a ten-member elected council in May 1908 (Zaslow, 1971). Ironically, just as Yukon’s “home rule” movement reached its objectives, the territory’s population and economy collapsed, undermining the very political claims settlers used to win representative self-government. The federal government had long denied Yukon federal and territorial electoral representation, using its short history, large American population and geographic isolation to delay establishing local democratic institutions (Morrison, 1968). Facing a moribund economy and an interwar population no greater than 5,000, the federal government at first slowed and then reversed political reforms. By 1920, the Territorial Council had been reduced to three elected members, representing Whitehorse, Dawson City and the Klondike (Johnson, 2009). Simply put, Yukon’s first settler autonomy movement died with its economy.

Postwar prosperity and population growth renewed interest in Yukon’s political development, including Yukon’s place in the federation. By 1961,
Yukon’s Territorial Council had seven elected members, but few legislative powers and no executive. More an advisory committee than legislature, most political and administrative power rested with the federally appointed commissioner (Yukon, 1975). With no ability to initiate money bills, Council was nonetheless charged with passing territorial budgets written by federal bureaucrats. Although enfranchised, Indigenous peoples were excluded from this system politically and structurally through gerrymandered constituencies that favoured settler candidates (Steeves, 1977). Despite settler sympathy for the “plight” of Yukon’s Indigenous peoples, efforts to increase Yukon’s political autonomy were almost exclusively arranged to favour settler communities and interests (Coates, 1993; Cruikshank, 1977).

Yukon’s growing prosperity encouraged a second settler autonomy movement to emerge among young Progressive Conservatives who were gripped by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker’s “Northern Vision” and eager to see its promises realized (Zaslow, 1988). Erik Nielsen, Yukon’s Progressive Conservative MP and Ken McKinnon, a 25 year-old MLA, capitalized on Yukon’s growing prosperity and set about fostering an autonomy and “pro-provincialist” movement (Toner, 1978). “For 70 years Ottawa has ruled the Yukon as a colonial satrap,” Councillor John Watt said in early 1967, using the rhetoric of the contested colonial relationship that would become the movement’s clarion call (“Watt, Taylor Fed Up,” 1967: 1).

The second autonomy movement’s goals were not uniform and public opinion shifted considerably between the early 1960s and late 1970s. The terms “autonomy,” “responsible government” and “provincial status” were often used interchangeably. In a 1976 public forum, Nielsen responded to a question on the issue by stating that they were the same thing (CBC, 1976). Yukon’s ultimate form did not matter; throwing off the federal yoke did. Ten years earlier, in 1966, Nielsen articulated the movement’s goals by placing them within a larger narrative of Canadian political development:

The political problem—the growth from colony to province—is analogous to the same problem confronting the nation as a whole and which we have been struggling for 150 years… Canada is a federal state and the fact remains that within our own boundaries we have not yet completed the process of democratic evolution. The western provinces were evolved in 1905, finally obtaining resource control in 1930, and since 1905 there has been no further progress of substance made toward self-government in the remaining 40% of Canada. In so many areas of the world this process of political evolution from colony to self-government is the source of so much strife—the evolution from external control to autonomy and self-government. (1966: 2)
Yukon’s “colonial” status, placed within this larger framework of Canadian political development, formed the basis of the movement’s 20-year push for increased autonomy. Still, by the late 1970s, many Yukoners had turned away from provincial status in favour of lesser autonomy measures, realizing that their small population and tax-base could not support a provincial government without federal support.

1967: Autonomy and the Yukon Territorial Council

The first critical juncture leading towards responsible government was the territorial election of September 1967. While the previous council had taken some actions to pressure the federal government to make political reforms, such as passing a motion on “autonomy” in 1966 (Yukon Territorial Council, 1966), its actions were largely ineffectual. The autonomy question became a central issue in the 1967 territorial election, with candidates ramping up the language of contested colonialism in identifying the root cause of Yukoners’ frustrations with property development, housing costs and infrastructure, in the absence of local and effective governance institutions. Pat Olsen, for example, ran under the slogan: “What is Pat Olsen building in the Yukon? … Progressive Autonomy” (“Vote for Pat Olsen!”, 1967).

The 1967 election returned four vocal PC supporters to council: John Dumas, Jean Gordon, Ken McKinnon and George Shaw (Hayden, 1999; Johnson, 2012). Their first motion, unanimously adopted in January 1968, called for an overhaul of the territorial government. This new council demanded that Territorial Council be renamed the legislative assembly, that its size be increased, that an executive council consisting of elected members be created and that all province-like powers be devolved from the federal government to the territory. Ultimately, it demanded the creation of the Province of Yukon once the “economic and social conditions” necessary to support it were in place. This motion was summarily ignored by the federal government.

Dissatisfied with Yukon’s political order, council set about obstructing the federal government’s agenda for the territory. When newly appointed Minister of Northern Development, Jean Chrétien, offered councillors one seat on an otherwise fully appointed executive committee, he was roundly denounced (“Chrétien Announces Change,” 1969). The conflict came to a head in December 1969 when, demanding three seats on the appointed Executive Committee (Ex Com), council refused to pass its budget. Federal bureaucrats were stunned and a meeting between councillors and Prime Minister Trudeau was quickly arranged in Ottawa (Canada, 1969).

Ultimately, Trudeau countered council’s demand for three Ex Com members with an offer to create one position, hoping they would accept a compromise position proposed by Chrétien of two members. Council
acquiesced and two new Ex Com members were appointed after the 1970 election: Hilda Watson and Norm Chamberlist. Using contested colonial rhetoric, settlers seized both Territorial Council and the political opportunity afforded by passage of the 1969 budget to force the federal government to negotiate over political development in Yukon. The first steps towards responsible government had been achieved.

In the shadow of these events, another political movement was coalescing in Yukon at the end of the 1960s. Indigenous peoples in Yukon and Northern British Columbia, who were not covered by a treaty, had been quietly organizing since 1966. Their leadership, including Chief Elijah Smith, had several goals: “The settlement of the Yukon land claim, the election of an Indian to the Yukon Territorial Council, the encouragement of economic development, aboriginal culture, and education, and the improvement of social conditions” (Coates, 1993: 237). The Yukon Native Brotherhood was formed in October 1968 to represent all status Indians in the territory, and just in time to harness outrage over the June 1969 White Paper. While local media noted this increasing activism, most settlers ignored Indigenous demands, continuing to live socially and politically segregated lives.

Settler and Indigenous movements came into direct conflict in 1973. In January, the Supreme Court released its decision in Calder v. British Columbia (Attorney General), recognizing the existence of Aboriginal title in common law. Two weeks later, Elijah Smith and others presented Trudeau with Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow (Council for Yukon Indians, 1973) in Ottawa, Canada’s first proposed comprehensive land claim. The reaction from Yukon’s settlers was swift and negative. According to Coates, non-Indigenous Yukoners “were worried that their land was about to be expropriated by Indians and that Native financial and property demands would emasculate the territorial economy” (1993: 231). Settlers “refused to credit” Yukon’s Indigenous peoples with devising the land claim, blaming instead young non-Indigenous “radicals” and “traitors,” such as the Company of Young Canadians (231). For its part, the Yukon Native Brotherhood came out against continued political development of the territory until land claims negotiations were settled. Negotiations began in July 1973 and a final umbrella agreement was not signed until 1988.

1973: James Smith and responsible government

Direct conflict through the Territorial Council was only one strategy pursued by the settler autonomy movement in taking advantage of political opportunities. While much of the energy was among PC supporters, those affiliated with other parties engaged the autonomy question too, in keeping with the structural alignment inherent to the contested colonial relationship in Yukon. In this light, the appointment of James Smith as Yukon Commissioner in October 1966 is a second important juncture for
the Yukon autonomy movement. Smith, a longtime Yukoner whose background was in small business, was deeply embedded in the social and political life of Yukon’s settler society. While Nielsen, McKinnon and others continued to work through the federal PCs, Smith sought ways to advance the autonomy cause within the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and the federal Liberal party.

By the early 1970s, Commissioner Smith was negotiating with Minister Chrétien over responsible government, an independent effort informed by, but separate from, that of Territorial Council. In April 1973, Smith wrote in his confidential retention files about a breakthrough:

Basically, the minister is prepared to accept our constitutional proposals, but he feels that he is going to be forced to go further than what he wants if he can, indeed, get the matter to be dealt with by Parliament… He pointed out very realistically that in the eyes of the cabinet, both northern seats were lost by the Liberals in the last election and as a consequence, they are not very much disposed towards giving up valuable House time on behalf of a very obviously lost political cause (1973).

Cabinet documents from July 31, 1973, show that the Cabinet Committee on Government Operations sought cabinet authority to amend the Yukon Act to provide for a larger council and to establish a fully elected and responsible executive committee in Yukon: Cabinet decided that “the principles underlying the proposed amendments be the subject of further consideration by cabinet in the fall” (Canada, 1973a).

By November, however, Trudeau killed responsible government for Yukon. A November 8, 1973, Cabinet Conclusion shows agreement that the Yukon Act should be amended to “increase the size of Council to 12… [and] the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development be authorized to add an additional member of the Territorial Council to the executive committee to be appointed by the commissioner on the nomination of the council, so that the executive committee would be composed of the commissioner as chairman, three elected members of the council and one appointed member” (Canada, 1973b).

It is unclear why the federal government delayed responsible government in 1973. Concerns about the fiscal sustainability of the territory, punishment for re-electing Erik Nielsen, or perceived political immaturity may all have played a role. More likely, the decision in Calder, the publication of Together Today, and the announcement of the federal government’s Comprehensive Land Claims Policy in August 1973 encouraged Trudeau to postpone political autonomy for Yukon.

Even though Smith’s efforts were unsuccessful, they do mark a significant change in settler strategies within the contested colonial relationship. While the council still passed resolutions demanding greater autonomy
for Yukon throughout the 1970s, settlers began capitalizing on their structural access within federal political parties to influence political development in Yukon. The Liberal party, however, was an increasingly dead end. In late 1977, the chair of the Yukon Legislative Assembly’s Constitutional Committee, Walter Lengerke, commented to Liberal ministerial staff that “unless the Conservative party or the NDP get into power, the move to responsible government in Yukon is still 10 to 15 years away” (Canada, 1977). The settler autonomy movement’s close association with the federal Progressive Conservatives would shape the final juncture leading to responsible government.

1979: The election of Prime Minister Joe Clark

The settler backlash to the land claim grew more intense as the 1970s wore on. The situation in Yukon was described by McCullum and McCullum as “one of the most serious and open white backlashes in the country” (1975: 76). The Yukon government characterized sides in the land claims debate as follows: “There is essentially a choice of two approaches to settlement in Yukon: an integrative approach favoured by the federal and territorial governments; and an apartheid approach apparently favoured by [Indigenous peoples]” (Toner 1978: 35).

In response to what was seen as favouritism towards Indigenous peoples by the Liberal government, settlers turned towards the PCs to protect their interests. This loyalty was cultivated and rewarded by party leadership within the territory. PC Leader Joe Clark visited Whitehorse in 1976, promising reform. In a speech to supporters, he said:

A small population is not an argument against democratic government. Economic development and development of natural resources would stimulate the economy and help you to pay your own way. The Trudeau government is not above suspicion in its rejection of the idea of provincial status for Yukon. After all, it would lose control of the resource revenue. But that revenue would help sustain the needed provincial services...I believe the time has come that the people of the Yukon be granted the democratic rights and institutions that all other Canadians have. Representative government alone is no longer good enough. You also deserve responsible government. If it is the desire of the people of the Yukon, you will have provincial status within my first term in office. (Nielsen, 1978: 6–7)

By accident or design, the Liberal government alienated settlers. In August 1977, Prime Minister Trudeau stated that he did not see provincial status for Yukon in “our lifetime” (“Trudeau kills,” 1977). Several months later, Liberal Minister Hugh Faulkener stated that “I see the constitutional
process taking place in parallel with the land claims issue so that the two processes converge” (“An interview,” 1977: 2). Both statements reinforced the perception that settler and Indigenous movements were in competition. One could not succeed without the other’s failure.

Yukon’s 1978 territorial election was the first using the modern party system. The territorial PCs won a majority government, which was interpreted by the political class as signifying a strong support for the autonomy movement. As Erik Nielsen wrote to a constituent, the “results of the territorial election would indicate that the majority of Yukoners are convinced that this evolution must be expeditious. Once becoming a province there will be the recognition which [has been] observed to be lacking” (Nielsen, 1979).

The final critical juncture on the way to responsible government was the fall of Trudeau’s government in April 1979. Here we see the alignment of the three elements of the contested colonial relationship. The federal PCs, having adopted the settler discourse of territorial subordination and colonial status within Canada, sought to reform Yukon’s political institutions. This shift was abetted by the structural ties between settler political elites and the federal Progressive Conservatives; the election of a territorial PC government in Yukon demonstrating these ties to politicians like Nielsen. Finally, settlers took advantage of the political opportunity of an ally attaining power to seize the moment and seek change.

Following Joe Clark’s win, Chris Pearson, leader of the Yukon Progressive Conservatives, wrote the new Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, Jake Epp, about Prime Minister Clark’s promise made in 1976, requesting action. Epp went further than even Pearson had asked. While granting full responsible government, he also allowed the government leader to style himself “premier” (Pearson, 1980). Settlers, after almost two decades, had met their central objective: greater autonomy for Yukon.

This victory was not without its costs, which were borne primarily by Indigenous Yukoners, who saw the breaking down of their relationship with the federal government. In an editorial, titled “Epp Betrays Indians”, the Yukon Indian News decried Epp’s decision to grant Yukon responsible government: “The commissioner, as the chief federal representative in the Yukon, had previously been instructed to look out for the interests of the Indian people. Now, under the new terms of reference, the Territorial Council is allegedly ‘responsible.’ This is the same government that sits on the opposite side of the table from the council for Yukon Indians, which represents the majority of the permanent population in the Yukon, in land claims negotiations. This is a farce” (1979: 2). While the federal government maintained control of territorial Crown lands, responsible government was a setback to land claims negotiations and settler-Indigenous relations.
Conclusion

Settlers were able to use their dual status as colonizers and colonized—the contested colonial relationship—to access federal political parties, government officials and the press to direct political outcomes in their favour. Settlers accessed colonial state institutions within the structure of national political parties as insiders while bemoaning their colonial outsider status through a politics of protest. As such, the granting of responsible government to Yukon in 1979 was the outcome of a contest between two political movements: settlers who are both agents of colonialism in Yukon and creators of new settler political orders, and Indigenous peoples, left on the outside of both the federal and settler governments, struggling for control of their lands and lives. This second settler autonomy movement capitalized on the nature of the contested colonial situation by taking advantage of key access points within the state while reinforcing its message through outside agitation. The granting of responsible government in October 1979 was not inevitable, but relied on several critical junctures to enable this significant institutional change.

The contested colonial framework provides new insight into the dynamics of settler-Indigenous-Crown relations in Yukon political development. While further research is needed to demonstrate the applicability of this framework in Canada’s other northern territories, by focusing on the political motivations, strategies, and discourses of settlers, this framework enables researchers to develop a more comprehensive understanding of autonomy movements at subnational levels, as well as the forces that opposed Indigenous struggles for self-determination.

Ultimately, the efforts of Yukon settlers to shape territorial development for their own ends failed. In both Yukon and the NWT, Indigenous peoples resisted colonial political, economic and social orders, claiming their right to self-determination through the negotiation of comprehensive land claims. While Yukoners eventually gained responsible government, politics in northern Canada today are shaped as much by the fully responsible territorial legislatures as by the innovative and constitutionally entrenched Aboriginal governments that have emerged since the 1980s.

Notes

1 “Responsible government” is a parliamentary convention that implies the responsibility of ministers and cabinet to the legislature.

2 The commissioner performed both executive and legislative functions under the Yukon Act. Elliott notes that there was “no general provision in the Yukon Act requiring that the commissioner consult with advisors, or an advisory body, when carrying out most or all of his executive functions” (1978: 108). This advisory body included the Yukon Territorial Council. By the late 1970s this was changing, however, as a tradition was emerging of acting consistently on the “advice” (that is, legislation) of the Territorial Council.
“Sourdough” is a term that pre-dates the Klondike gold rush and refers to non-Indigenous persons, usually prospectors in Yukon and Alaska, who have lived in the North for at least one winter. In the postwar period, it came to refer to longtime white residents of Yukon (Lotz, 1970).

See, for example, the interaction of settler and Indigenous knowledge systems on Northern land claim boards (White, 2006), settler-Indigenous relations (Dickerson, 1992), within the Nunavut public service (Timpson, 2009), or consocialtionalism in the NWT (Dacks, 1986). While most of these studies examine the NWT, their general approach and findings have resonance in Yukon.

Terming Yukon’s political decision makers as “elites” or a class is problematic. While political decision-making power was shared among a small group of Yukoners—who persisted over sometimes decades in their positions—the relative flatness of Yukon society prevented the development of an insulated or aloof political elite.

The place of Quebec as a separate settler society within the Canadian federation falls outside the scope of this paper. The pattern of development in Quebec does, however, follow patterns seen in the Canadian West. See, for example, Little (1991).

Here we see allusions to the rhetoric employed by Quebec nationalists in such works as Pierre Vallières’s White Niggers of America (1968).

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