

Canada Could Lose Control of Northwest Passage, Says Prof

By Tina SAWCHUK, Gateway

EDMONTON (CUP) -- Canada will lose control over the Northwest Passage in the next five years if the government doesn't take action now, said University of Alberta political science professor Morris Maduro.

Maduro, a visiting professor from the University of Regina, spoke to a small but attentive group of professors and students March 13. His lecture—entitled "The Northwest Passage, Canada, and the United States: On a Collision Course in Troubled Waters"—was part of the department's series, Reshaping Globalization: Empires, Gender, Race & Class.

"In five years, the Passage will be navigable in the summer, and in 10 years, in the winter," Maduro warned.

The Northwest Passage, a 3,500 mile-long strait through the Canadian Arctic archipelago, was first explored by Europeans in the 1570s, and was impenetrable for centuries.

Enter global warming, said Maduro. Arctic ice is melting at a rate of nine per cent every year, and areas the size of Alberta disappear every decade.

"In five years, the Passage will be navigable in the summer, and in 10 years, in the winter," Maduro warned.

"This will become one of the hottest issues dividing Canada from the U.S."

The rest of the world is watching, he said. The Panama Canal is currently the main route for trans-oceanic shipping, but rising tolls, Panama's unstable government, and the threat of terrorism have forced

European, and particularly American businesses to look north.

"For 25 years, they've goaded Canada, tweaked its nose and sent vessels through [the passage]," Maduro said.

But international law also works against Canada, said Maduro.

Under the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention, a United Nations document ratified by over 150 countries, the Northwest Passage is one of 110 straits worldwide to be classified as "critical."

Canada is powerless to limit access to and travel through the Passage.

Maduro also emphasized environmental concerns. Canada already has 624 shipping accidents annually, which harm wildlife and cost millions to clean up.

If an oil spill occurred, like that of the Exxon Valdez in 1989, which spilled 11 million tonnes of crude oil into the Passage, the Arctic ecosystem would be catastrophically effected.

Yet the Canadian government will do nothing, he argued. Maduro's contacts in the Department of External Affairs told him, "We don't want to wake the sleeping lion. We hope the melting won't occur."

Canadian military commitment in

the Arctic is minimal, he described. There are army bases at Inuvik in Nunavut and Alert in the Northwest Territories, 1,500 mobile Inuit Rangers, and 500 soldiers stationed in Yellowknife.

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But despite international laws preventing submarines from travelling submerged in straits, the Canadian navy sighted 12 periscopes near Baffin Island in August and September of 2000.

Maduro called on Canada to present the Passage as an "unusual" body of water because of its unique length, navigational hazards, and ecosystem, and said he

believed Canada could secure special recognition and international funding for the Passage's protection.

Tom Keating, the respondent to Maduro's lecture and a fellow professor in the department, stressed the controversy will reshape the way Canadians see their country.

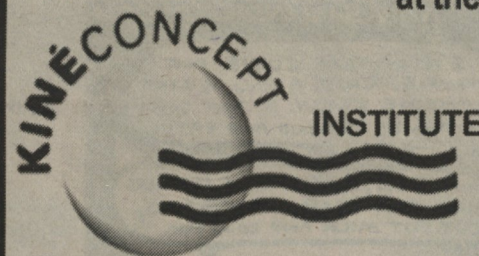
He suggested bilateral cooperation with Americans to reduce the future economic pressure of maintaining the Passage for shipping and to develop commercial opportunities. But Canada must act quickly, said Keating.

"[Canadian folk singer] Stan Rogers called the Passage 'one warm line through a land so wide and savage.' The line's widening, and Canadian sovereignty is going to be savaged."

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