POLICY BRIEF

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Churchill's Costly Dream: Why the Port is Not Fit for Major Exports

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Nation building and speculation concerning major infrastructures projects has been in the air since Mark Carney became the 24th Prime Minister of Canada in March 2025. After stagnant economic growth, the new Liberal leader has dialed in on his campaign pledge to get Canada building again. In the past several months, the Government has laid the groundwork for future infrastructure development. Bill C-5 received royal assent in June, which works to fast-track nation-building projects chosen by the Federal government by creating a single set of conditions, reducing the approval timeline for projects of national interest to a maximum of two years, and working with provinces and territories to achieve a "one project, one review" approach. Furthermore, the Federal government has established the newly minted Major Projects Office (MPO) and appointed Dawn Farrell as its Chief Executive Officer. As a result of this groundwork, the first series of projects were referred to the MPO for consideration. Projects include, LNG Canada Phase 2, the new Darlington nuclear project, Contrecoeur Terminal, McIlvenna Bay Foran Copper Mine, and the Red Chris mine expansion. The Prime Minister's Office also denotes in addition to the five projects already announced, the Federal Government also believes that other projects in the early stages of development could be transformative for this country, most notably the Port of Churchill.

The Port of Churchill, located in Northern Manitoba in the reaches of the Arctic on the western shore of Hudson Bay, is Canada's only Arctic Deepwater seaport. Churchill Port features specialized infrastructure designed to handle bulk cargo and resource-oriented maritime operations. Its primary cargo berth encompasses a 214-meter linear wharf, with a maximum draft of 50 meters accommodating medium to large bulk carriers. In addition, the Hudson Bay railway line from The Pas to Churchill is the lifeline to the Port. It ensures that the Port of Churchill is connected to Canadian supply chains and how the Port receives commodities to transport.

The Port of Churchill is inseparable from the Hudson Bay Railway; one cannot exist without the other. The idea of developing and increasing the capabilities and capacities of the Port of Churchill and Hudson Bay Railway line has been a topic of consideration recently. This stems from the on-going trade disputes with United States and President Donald Trump, popularizing the notion of getting Western commodities to international markets abroad through alternative trade routes in response. This is not a new idea as the history surrounding the Port of Churchill and the idea of upgrading its capacities and establishing a new trade route through Hudson's Bay has always been a topic of consideration in Canada. However, so too has its economic viability and its ability to garner capital returns in an efficient, cost-effective, and competitive manner. And more recently, concerns surrounding the effects of climate change on the port and railway, the environmental impacts that come with

upgrading Churchill's Port, the on-going logistical issues of the railway-port network, current Search and Rescue (SAR) capacities of the Canadian Coast Guard within Hudson Bay and the James Bay region, and questions surrounding local indigenous consultations.

In recent months, the Prime Minister, members of his cabinet, and the Premier of Manitoba have highlighted the potential of the port and railway network without offering details of the network itself. Public proclamations are cheap; long-term costs and negative effects are not. Ambition without restraint turns infrastructure into a monument of short-term thinking, specifically for communities who are left stranded when infrastructure networks falter or fail. Today, the Canadian North is home to the high cost of living in Canada, and the primary reason for this is the inadequate amount of transport infrastructure in the Canadian north and the North's overall isolation from Canadian supply chain networks. Canadian Arctic communities do need major infrastructure upgrades, but developing the Port of Churchill and Hudson Bay railway to serve as a future export hub to international markets is an irresponsible bet for an infrastructure network that already has major ongoing issues. Developing the Port of Churchill to meet future export needs is irresponsible economically, environmentally, and logistically. However, the port is a vital resource for remote communities spread throughout Nunavut, Manitoba, and Quebec, which needs to be upgraded proportionately with local Indigenous communities in mind. Upgrading the Port of Churchill should not be a nation-building exercise for Canada, but rather a nation-building exercise for Northern Indigenous communities. The Port of Churchill will never be a viable option for exporting Canadian critical minerals, grain, oil, or natural gas. Any upgrades announced to the port need to reflect the needs of Indigenous communities and Northerners in Nunavut, Manitoba, and Quebec before we consider all of Canada.

The Economics Behind the Churchill Infrastructure Network

First, the economic feasibility of the port itself has always been in question, as the port and railway were established under contentious conditions in the early twentieth century. Prairie seed farmers advocated for an alternative to get seeds to market, and proponents ignored the fact that the creation of the Panama Canal diverted prairie grain traffic to Pacific ports and deflated the business case for opening and developing a port and railway network from The Pas to Churchill. Regardless, the port was built on Hudson Bay. Since then, the port's viability and lucrativeness swelled at moments but has largely diminished over the ensuing 65 years. Canadian National Railway's 1997 privatization transferred the port to US-based OmniTRAX for just $10 million and the railway for $11 million. During the 2000s, the port handled healthy grain volumes as the Canadian Wheat Board, the sole buyer, directed wheat exports via Churchill. During this time, declining grain prices significantly affected the Port's export rate, with wheat accounting for 90% of all export traffic through the port. However, the passage of the Marketing Freedom for Grain Farmers Act in 2011 has permitted growers and grain companies to route shipments of wheat through West Coast ports and U.S. corridors. This offers year-round operations, larger terminals, and closer proximity to Asian markets. Churchill's seasonal window and limited capacity eroded its competitiveness, prompting OmniTrax to suspend grain shipments in 2016. In 2017, a flood destroyed the existing rail line, only exacerbating the port's economic output more, forcing local communities to utilize air and sea supply services. The Arctic Gateway Group, an Indigenous and private investor consortium (AGT Foods and Fairfax Holdings), purchased the railroad and port with federal assistance for $117 million in

2018, and repaired the railway 18 months later. Though investors were optimistic about the route, in 2021 AGT Foods and Fairfax Holdings sold 50% of their share to the Arctic Gateway Group because they deemed the port and railway network to be a low-return asset. The Arctic Gateway Group is now the sole owner of the Port of Churchill and Hudson Bay rail line.

Since the Arctic Gateway Group took ownership over the infrastructure network, the Port has seen minimal traffic and now operates far below its potential with no grain exports recorded since 2020. The only exception came in August 2024, when Churchill handled its first mineral shipment in over twenty years: 10,000 tonnes of zinc concentrate from HudBay Minerals bound for Europe. The Port of Churchill activity falls short of the substantial public investment required to keep it operational. Thus, despite harbor managers' upbeat efforts to court new shippers and the railway and port's vital service to a handful of isolated communities, the Port of Churchill shows little promise of emerging as a robust export artery for Canadian grains, critical minerals, oil, or natural gas in the foreseeable future. As an investment, returns on the Port of Churchill and Hudson's Bay rail line will be extremely long-term — if it yields any at all.

Port infrastructure investments generally have long payback and return horizons, commonly spanning two to four decades with some assets evaluated over fifty years depending on asset life and financing structures. Returns vary widely with port geography, congestion, demand volatility, and the targeted use case. Investments yield the largest gains when ports are in congested areas, whereas projects in low-traffic or seasonally constrained locations can take far longer to break even or deliver the expected commercial returns. Consequently, the economic case for the Port and railway network for Churchill as a nation-building project that will garner future Canadian prosperity is a bit far-fetched, particularly given its current reliance on public funding.

Recently, Arctic Gateway Group and Potash and Agri Development Corporation of Manitoba announced their intention to collaborate on a range of shared priorities. This includes collaboration on logistics to enhance rail and port capacity for potash shipments, environmental stewardship and market expansion opportunities for Manitoba potash. The Manitoba-based company has made substantial investments in the development of a potash deposit in Harrowby, Manitoba, which is expected to produce up to 250,000 tonnes of potash per year. The potash development, which is the first for Manitoba, was approved in June 2022. This is an interesting development for the Port, because it will be a contemporary test that will illustrate whether or not, the Port of Churchill's export rate will garner enough capital to make it a sustainable practice in the medium to long term.

The Arctic Environment and the Port of Churchill

Skepticism surrounding the port and railway network is also a result of the port and railway's surrounding environment, which is defined by its geographic location and limited access, physical geography, and Arctic climate, compounded by the on-going effects of climate change within the greater Canadian Arctic. Positioned on the western shore of Hudson Bay, the port experiences a sub-arctic climate with significant seasonal variations, including extended winter periods with significant ice formation. Navigation is primarily feasible during the summer and early autumn months from July to October. Freeze-up commences in October, along the northwestern shore, and proceeds southeastward. The entire Bay is ice-covered by early January, except for

persistent shore leads. Winter Arctic shipping in North America is exceptionally hazardous, facing strong, consolidated ice, near-total darkness, and extreme cold, making year-round navigation infeasible. Although climate change is extending the summer season, winter conditions including persistent multi-year ice, continue to pose significant challenges, limiting the port and railway networks' overarching prosperity. Furthermore, the drastic effects of climate change, specifically permafrost melt, have continued to hinder the Hudson Bay rail line. Due to Arctic amplification, the impact of climate change on Arctic infrastructure is immense, specifically thawing permafrost. The 821-kilometer Hudson Bay rail line was the first major transportation facility to be built over permafrost in 1929. Over time, the railway has required recurring maintenance because of the thawing of ice-rich permafrost beneath its embankment. In 2017, the railway also experienced damage due to flooding and washouts. Since then, the railway track has been upgraded. Nevertheless, sections of the railway continue to experience heightened vulnerability. The railway segment spanning from O'Day to Belcher stations, in particular, exhibits the highest vulnerability to flooding.

The Canadian Arctic and North is an environmentally vulnerable and sensitive region, with local Inuit, First Nations, and Métis Peoples reliant on the Arctic environment for their livelihoods. Proposals to expand the Port of Churchill could bring an increase in shipping traffic and commercial activity, leaving local people concerned that more shipping and marine traffic around the Port would disrupt the beluga whale population and other marine food sources. Underwater noise pollution, which has been proven to affect whale migration patterns in Arctic waters, has been a point of concern among Inuit around Hudson Bay.

Similarly, as the Port of Churchill stands now, its berth, draft limit and seasonal ice freeze restrict the size and class of vessels able to utilize the ports facilities, favoring ice-class variants of vessels. For the Port to expand operations and service larger classes of vessels in the future, the harbour entrance, approach, channel, and fairway will have to be dredged. Dredging increases turbidity of suspended sediments, smothering benthic habitats, reducing light penetration for aquatic plants, and disrupting fish spawning grounds. Dredging Churchill would resuspend sediments and mobilize legacy contaminants, smothering benthic habitats, disrupting fish spawning grounds, and reducing water quality for marine and bird life. Repeated maintenance dredging and spoil disposal would alter currents and ice-formation patterns, accelerate shoreline erosion, and cause long-term loss of sensitive wetlands and coastal ecosystems. This would be disastrous to the Hudson Bay ecosystem and the Indigenous communities that rely upon it.

Don't Forget about Search and Rescue

A major aspect of developing the Port of Churchill that is overlooked consistently concerns the logistics of operating a port and maritime shipping within the Canadian Arctic. Specifically, Search and Rescue (SAR) response in the region, and the federal government and the Department of National Defence's ability to respond to maritime emergencies, environmental disasters, and medical emergencies in a prompt and efficient manner. Search and Rescue response are two key aspects that need to be addressed immediately if the Port of Churchill is going to broaden its horizons. SAR operations on the water, land, and ice of the Hudson Bay and James Bay region are often challenging due to austere environmental conditions, the strain they place on limited local resources, and the vast distances involved in responding with Canadian Coast Guard assets or Royal Canadian

Air Force aircraft based in the South. Further, these operations are generally jurisdictionally complex and require cooperation, coordination, and communication between a wide array of actors at the local, regional, provincial/territorial, and federal levels.

Currently, the biggest issues facing SAR operation in Hudson Bay and the greater James Bay region is the increasing size of the yearly SAR caseload. Community responders throughout the region highlighted that changing environmental conditions have intersected with the failure of some people to take sufficient fuel and equipment on the land and water, the loss of traditional skills and knowledge, and overreliance on technology to increase the dangers of personal travel, affecting safe access to harvesting grounds, disrupting travel between communities, and causing high SAR incident rates, injury, and deaths.

Harsh and changing environmental conditions not only increase the SAR case load, they also pose significant challenges to all responders. Marine and ground SAR operations are frequently hindered by poor weather conditions across the Hudson Bay and James Bay region, which can slow responses and increase risk. For instance, ice conditions are complicating and expanding the scope of local community search areas for short-range community SAR boats, aerial rescue's ability to land is becoming more dangerous. Ice also adds to the dangers faced by RCAF SAR technicians who may have to jump into Arctic waters. Finally, the vast distance and size of the Hudson Bay and the James Bay region dictate slow response times from federal assets to assist with SAR operations.

Community responders frequently underscore slow response times from Canadian Coast Guard icebreakers and southern-based SAR air assets as a source of major concern. Given the distances involved, it can be hours before aircraft arrive on scene during an incident in the region. The average response time to Rankin Inlet, for instance, is 4 hours for a fixed wing aircraft and 11.5 hours for a rotary wing. A present-day example of lagging response times involves the on-going situation in the Northwest Passage, specifically the MV *Thamesborg*, a Dutch-owned cargo ship, which is currently undergoing salvage operations after running aground in the Franklin Strait in Canada's Northwest Passage on 6 September 2025. The vessel was carrying industrial carbon blocks from China to Quebec when it struck a shoal in a poorly-mapped area of the waterway, and salvage operations are still on-going. The initial response time of the Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker *Sir Wilfrid Laurier* to the location of *Thamesborg* was nine hours after being dispatched from approximately 150 nautical miles away.

If maritime shipping to and through the port of Churchill was year-round, as Premier Wab Kinew has indicated, logistics surrounding maritime SAR within the Canadian Arctic need to be addressed in a prompt and meaningful way. The current capabilities and operational capacities of SAR operations will not suffice if there is a substantial increase of shipping from the Port of Churchill through Hudson Bay to the Hudson Strait.

Does Arctic Gateway Speak for Indigenous Communities, or will Bill-C5?

Since Bill C-5 received royal assent on 26 June 2025, questions about Indigenous consultations with respect to nation-building infrastructure projects have been an increasingly prevalent topic. Through the *Building Canada Act*, the government will expedite projects deemed in the national interest by streamlining federal review and approval processes to increase regulatory certainty. The Act allows the federal Cabinet, on the recommendation

of the minister, to classify certain infrastructure projects as being in the national interest. Before placing a project on a Major Project list, Cabinet must publish the name and project description of the proposed project for 30 days. The Federal Government must consult with the government of any province or territory in which the project will be carried out, and obtain written consent from the government of any such province or territory whose exclusive jurisdiction the project may fall under, and consult with any Indigenous Peoples recognized and affirmed under section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982,* whose rights may be adversely affected. The Act allows proponents to streamline the approval process for projects that would fall under the purview of the Impact Assessment Act (IAA). Impact assessment review boards in the Canadian Arctic specifically are intertwined with indigenous consultations and co-management, with many Indigenous community members being active participants in the impact assessment process.

However, the Act stipulates that Sections 9 to 17 of the *Impact Assessment Act* (the IAA-specific Indigenous consultation, addressing of issues, and the detailed project description) no longer apply to National Interest Projects. Furthermore, the Act gives cabinet powers to modify the applicability of legislation that may govern National Interest Projects, such as environmental legislation. In response to this legislation, Indigenous leaders' responses have been swift and strong, stating unequivocally that such projects cannot proceed without their consent.

On 3 June 2025, federal Minister of Justice and Attorney General Sean Fraser appeared to answer this question, stating that Indigenous Peoples do not possess a blanket veto over major projects. Under Canada's constitutional framework for protecting Indigenous rights, governments are required to consult Indigenous groups with a view to accommodate their interests and reasonably balance them with larger societal needs. The Supreme Court of Canada has repeatedly held that this does not amount to giving Indigenous rights holders a veto. The law requires a balancing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests. This means that the government, provinces, and private investors must take a more nuanced view on the question of whether Indigenous consent is required because many "nation building projects" will likely fall somewhere between unanimous Indigenous opposition and unanimous Indigenous consent.

Premier Wab Kinew has stated that the Province of Manitoba will take a different approach from that of Bill C-5, specifically consulting in partnership with Indigenous communities. The Premier noted that "spending a bit more time, on project proposals, is how we're actually going to be able to maintain a true nation-building approach." This is reassuring for any upgrades that might take place at the Port of Churchill. Although Indigenous consent for the Port of Churchill is foundational, it is salient to remember that the port operator, Arctic Gateway Group (AGG), is a partnership involving 29 First Nations and 12 northern communities in Northern Manitoba. Though Arctic Gateway Group is an Indigenous-owned business, but this does not mean that local Indigenous communities do not need to have their voices heard and their concerns resolved or managed. Accordingly, meaningful consultations still need to take place..

Conclusion: Communities over Commodities

Ultimately, as a contender for future critical-minerals and other commodity exports, the Port of Churchill appears more of a liability than a transformative nation-building asset. Since opening in 1929, the port's

prospects as a major export hub have long been contested and its modest activity does not justify the level of public funding needed to upgrade its capacities to service Western export commodities to international markets in the medium- and long-term future. Although climate change is dramatically affecting the Arctic, the Hudson and James Bay region is still frozen over in the winter months, precluding maritime accessibility without ice-capable vessels. Climate change is also affecting the Hudson Bay rail line, which is the port's terrestrial lifeline.

The gradual thaw settlement of subgrade permafrost, recurrent sinkholes, and recent flooding events in 2017, underscore the Hudson Bay Railway's vulnerability to natural hazards and climate change impacts, specifically to northern track sections. The vulnerability of the Hudson Bay rail line will continue to be an on-going issue for the foreseeable future. Moreover, upgrading the port to a size that would improve its economic viability would entail environmentally hazardous activities that could put the Hudson Bay and James Bay region, and its communities, at risk. Specifically, the port's harbor entrance, approach, channel, and fairway will have to be dredged to accommodate increasing ship traffic and size if the port is going to be economically viable. If this is the case, noise pollution will affect beluga whale populations within Hudson Bay, putting Indigenous communities' hunting and subsistence activities at risk.

Current SAR capacities will not be able to ensure the safety of Maritimers if the Port of Churchill is upgraded to meet the needs of exporting commodities. SAR capacities are struggling to meet current caseloads. The effects of climate change are only exacerbating the challenges associated with these operations. If the Port of Churchill is upgraded, funding for enhanced SAR capacity needs to be top of mind.

This *Policy Brief* contends that reviving the Port of Churchill and Hudson Railway to export commodities is a naive investment, and even substantial upgrades will not make it a prosperous Canadian nation-building infrastructure project. Rather, it will be a liability. The economic and logistical issues of the port and railway network will not reduce Canada's reliance on the United States to export goods. Funding it with taxpayer money to do so is irresponsible and negligent.

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