

NEWS RELEASE

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Visiting professor at Laurier researches ethnicity in Canada

Waterloo, Ont. (Dec. 2) — The prospects for a sovereign Quebec, self-government in the Canadian Arctic, and Asian investment in British Columbia have come under the scrutiny of a visiting professor at Wilfrid Laurier University.

Alfred Pletsch, chair of the geography department at Philipps University in Germany, is here examining the implications of competing ethnic values and aspirations for Canada's future as the first recipient of the John G. Diefenbaker award. Administered by the Canada Council, the \$95,000 award enables the recipient to spend up to 12 months in Canada to pursue research and promote academic exchange.

Pletsch is dividing his time between the three universities that nominated him for the award. At Laurier since September, he will move to Université Laval in January and then to the University of Windsor in the spring. He will return to Laurier in the summer.

A cultural geographer, Pletsch has published extensively on how ethnicity has influenced regional development in Northern Africa, France, and Germany. Canada holds particular interest for him.

"Is it really a cultural mosaic where every group has a fair share in decision-making?" he says.

Using census data from 1971, 1981, and 1991, Pletsch is examining to what degree certain ethnic groups influence the economy. "The changing Canadian economic landscape is partly due to changing ethnicity," the professor says.

In fact, he has entitled his study "Ethnicity in Canada: Background for Understanding or Sword of Damocles?" (The allusion to the Sword of Damocles is

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meant to suggest that Canada's cultural mosaic — often seen as a strength — may, indeed, hold a threat to the country's very future.)

One of the subjects of Pletsch's study is the changing economy of Quebec and how future development might be influenced by the province's attempts to become sovereign. He is evaluating government reports on the subject by using provincial and national statistical sources and by conducting interviews with political and economic leaders.

There, too, he is examining the influence of the printed media on "regional consciousness."

The professor is also investigating the possible consequences of self-government in the Canadian Arctic. In particular, the study will consider the impact — on the Arctic and also on the rest of Canada — of a change of players in the decision-making process.

"One of the basic problems might be the relatively small number of indigenous peoples living in the Arctic and the administrative and entrepreneurial experience that needs to be built up."

In British Columbia, Pletsch is using census data, corporate registries, and surveys to quantify Asian investment there and then assess its implications. "As populations change, so does the orientation of the economy, international relations — even architecture," he says.

The native of Germany says the fact that he is from outside Canada is helping him gain access to people and achieve a greater openness in the interviews he conducts.

His interest in Canada has brought him to the country before. In the 1980s, he and Al Hecht, chair of Laurier's geography department, teamed with a professor from McGill University to investigate how ethnicity influenced regional developments in Ontario and Quebec.

Pletsch has actively promoted Canadian studies in Germany and has served as an executive member of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-Speaking Countries. Together, he and Hecht worked to establish a student exchange program between Philipps and Laurier in 1986.