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Canadian pushes for a place in the sun

By Chris Mallinos

TORONTO (Reuters) - Canada, the land of ice, snow, moose and hockey, could one day be the land of palm trees and tropical beaches -- if a Canadian politician gets his way.

Peter Goldring, a member of Canada's Parliament, is pushing a decades-old idea that Canadians -- whose long winters prompt thousands to vacation in Florida or Mexico -- should have their own sun and sand paradise in the Caribbean.

To that end, Goldring is proposing the Turks and Caicos Islands, a string of about 40 islands southeast of the Bahamas, become Canada's 11th province. The Turks and Caicos is currently a British territory.

"It's well-known that Canadians have a cultural affinity with the islanders," Goldring told Reuters. "It's a good mix."

What sounded like a far-fetched idea at first has received "overwhelming acceptance" from Canadians he has spoken to, Goldring said. He plans to set up a parliamentary committee to promote the idea and hopes to get Canadian and Turks business leaders on board.

"We are not just talking about a beach in the Caribbean, we are talking about business and economic interests," he said.

Goldring believes the union could generate about C\$2 billion (840,000 pounds) in trade and form a "domestic" southern market for Canadian goods.

"When I visited the islands in January, I found there were an awful lot of Canadians on the beaches, but not many Canadian products on the shelves," he said.

For the Turks and Caicos Islands' 19,000 inhabitants -- who could fit comfortably into the Air Canada Centre in Toronto, home to the National Hockey League's Maple Leafs -- they would have access to a range of social services, like public health care, and would benefit from Canadian investment and development.

"I think it can be a win all the way around," Goldring said.

OLD IDEA NEW AGAIN

The idea of a sun-soaked tropical province first made waves in Canada in 1974 when another member of Parliament proposed annexing the Turks and Caicos. The idea came up again in 1987 when the islands' government approached Canada.

Both times the marriage proposal failed to gain enough support -- in part because Ottawa wasn't comfortable being seen as a colonial power.

Melanie Newton, an assistant professor of history who specialises in Caribbean studies at the University of Toronto, says annexing the islands "reeks of colonialism."

"Does Canada want to establish itself in the Caribbean as a colonial power?" she asked. "Do Canadians want to think of themselves this way?"

Instead of acquiring more territories, Newton said, Canada should concentrate on strengthening its shaky relations with French-Canadians and its native people.

"In the current political climate, colonialism is suddenly starting to look sexy," she said. "This kind of proposal reflects that. That's very dangerous."

Britain would not comment on the idea of a Canada-Turks and Caicos union.

"It's not official (Canadian) government policy, so I wouldn't want to speculate," Naheed Mehta of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office said. "It all sounds quite speculative."

She added Britain has good relations with the islands, which have been a crown colony since 1973, but she had not personally heard of any talk of annexation to Canada.

Goldring doesn't see this as a colonial acquisition, but as two peoples forming a mutually beneficial alliance. He hopes the time is right for such a proposal.

Goldring visited the Turks and Caicos Islands earlier this year to meet with government and tourism officials and said they were still open to the idea of closer ties with Canada, whether that meant an outright merger or some other level of political or economic ties.

"This is something the people want to discuss," he said. "It's not just a frivolous idea."

That sentiment is shared by the Turks and Caicos Islands Tourist Board.

"I think people here are very excited about the idea of talks," said Ralph Higgs, a member of the islands' tourist board who has been following the proposal. "They want to talk and see what is in it for the Turks and Caicos, and for Canada."

Higgs said that while there is an "overwhelming" amount of support from islanders for exploring closer relations, it is still too early to tell if some people would be opposed.

"It depends on the nature of the relationship," he said.

A 1986 survey showed 90 percent of islanders favoured some kind of association with Canada.

Higgs believes that formal, bilateral talks would again stir up enthusiasm.

And, he believes, a union could even spark some interest in the islands for hockey, Canada's beloved pastime.

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