

Nunavik – Inuit Homeland in Québec

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My answer is yes ... It is quite simple; if Inuit unify their approaches in the way of an autonomy within Québec, in order to have a better management of their affairs, to pass laws in the fields that concern them directly, to organize their life, we would be ready at once to discuss that with them and to accept this consideration. We could negotiate from this base whenever they want ... We would be ready anytime but it is up to them to decide.

René Lévesque, Québec Premier, 1983

When we think of Québec what immediately comes to mind is the French language, the unique history of the province and the culture of the people. Few are aware that Québec is also home to the second largest population of Inuit in Canada (Nunavut has the largest population). In the northern third of the province, above the treeline, almost 10,000 Inuit live in a region called Nunavik – the “big land” in Inuktitut. While not presently independent, the people of Nunavik have a significant say in their own governance and almost complete control over their education system. And, they are in the process of negotiating a unique and autonomous government with both Canada and Québec, not unlike the new territory of Nunavut.

Inuit in Nunavik, like Inuit across Canada, have been in the North for some 8,000 or more years. Unlike aboriginal people in the rest of North America, the survival of their language, culture and traditional way of life was not threatened by outside culture until the mid-20th century. Until that time contact with explorers, whalers, fur traders and even missionaries lasted for only brief periods allowing English words and materials to be incorporated into Inuit culture without significant impact. It wasn't until the 1950s that federal programs were implemented in the North with a considerable and mostly negative impact on Inuit society.

As a result of the atrocities of World War II combined with a strong economy, the federal government of Canada decided that no Canadian should live in poverty leading to the development of Canada's many federally funded social programs such as health care, family allowances, old age pension, etc. In order to make these services available in the North, Inuit had to be relocated to permanent settlements. The Canadian and Québec governments implemented a major relocation effort in Nunavik in the late 1950s encouraging the Nunavimmiut to move into villages where government housing, education and health care were provided. While these services had positive results in the south, in the north they led to the interruption of traditional life and created a dependency on the government.

The darkest period for Inuit across Canada was in the 1950s and 60s during which time most Inuit were relocated to permanent settlements and children sent to mandatory residential schools. Inuit children were sent away from their homes for up to a year at a time leading to the loss of the Inuit language and skills necessary to live traditionally and survive in the North. The result was tragic causing a break down in the families and loss of meaning for the younger generation.

By the mid-70s Inuit began to make efforts to regain control over their culture, language and governance. Fortunately, this effort was significantly helped along by the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement. The Agreement, the first modern-day land claims settlement in Canada, was a turning point in Nunavik history as it marked the beginning of

limited forms of self-government and Inuit control over aboriginal culture, land, and governance.

In a nutshell the 1975 Agreement was an exchange between the provincial government and aboriginal peoples in Northern Québec – the Québec government won the right to develop hydro-electric projects in exchange for the aboriginal people gaining title to territory, compensation monies for the lands and resources used, and the power of self-governance. The current system of governance in Nunavik has evolved directly from the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement. Immediately three important and Inuit-run institutions were created: the Kativik Regional Government, the Kativik School Board and the Kativik Regional Board of Health and Social Services.

The Kativik School Board has jurisdiction over all levels of education and is responsible for providing teaching materials in Inuktitut, French and English as well as training new teachers. There are about 3,000 students in Nunavik and all attend Inuktitut-only classes for their first two years of school. In Grade 3 parents must decide between French and English as a second language (a slightly larger number of students take French) but Inuit language and culture education continue until graduation.

The Kativik School Board immediately established the Inuit Teacher Training Program at McGill University in Montréal. The courses in the teacher training program are taught by Inuit instructors and are conducted in Inuktitut. Similarly, all teachers in Nunavik schools must be Inuit. The people of Nunavik believe it is crucial to the development of a child's self-esteem to be taught and mentored by a teacher with the same background and language.

The James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement also necessitated an Inuit corporation to act as a legal entity, administer compensation monies (over one million dollars) and, oversee the implementation of the Agreement. In 1978 the Makivik Corporation was created for this purpose. The Makivik Corporation is recognized as Inuit Party to the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement. The compensation monies from the Agreement are treated as "heritage funds" meaning that the monies must be utilized in a manner that supports future generations of Inuit. The Corporation funds non-profit groups in Nunavik, cultural organizations, and recreational facilities such as the Avataq Cultural Institute, founded in 1981, to preserve and promote Inuit culture.

The Avataq Cultural Institute has already been successful in achieving several of its goals. In the early 1980s the Institute organized the "surname project" to correct Inuit names that had been assigned by non-Inuit. The Institute also assisted in selecting Inuit names for all the Nunavik communities that had formerly been given non-Inuit names. For example, Inukjuak was formerly named Port Harrison by the Hudson's Bay Company. In addition, the Avataq Cultural Institute publishes a beautiful magazine twice yearly entitled, *Tumivut* or "our footprints." The publication is mandated by the Nunavik Inuit Elders to protect and promote the language and culture of the region. The magazine always includes several interviews and oral histories with the elders as well as archival photographs of the region.

Most importantly, the Makivik Corporation is leading the effort to establish an autonomous government in Nunavik. This process started over 30 years ago, in the early 70s, when public hearings were conducted across Nunavik regarding the creation of a new government. The case was pleaded before a special Commission of the Québec National Assembly and then Premier René Lévesque clearly indicated that the Québec government would consider such a proposal if a draft constitution could be created. Such a proposal was drafted but the initiative did not gain ground until the late 1990s.

In the fall of 1999 the three major parties involved in the potential creation of a new territory - the Makivik Corporation representing the Nunavik, the Québec government via the Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat and, the federal government through the Ministry of Indian and Northern Affairs – mandated that a report be written outlining all of the recommendations for a new Arctic government. The Nunavik Commission began to work on the report by setting up extensive meetings with community members, school administrators, students, elders, and other Inuit governments such as Nunavut and Inuit government in Greenland.

On 5 April 2001, the Nunavik Commission presented the report at a meeting in Kuujjuarapik, Nunavik. It is entitled, "Amiqqaaluta - Let us Share: Mapping the Road toward a Government for Nunavik." The Report has been printed and distributed throughout Nunavik to inform residents of the parameters and nature of the new government. Once negotiations are settled with the provincial and federal governments a vote for final ratification will be presented to the Nunavimmiut.

The Nunavimmiut are intent on creating a government that will relate to both the Québec provincial and federal governments on an almost state-to-state basis quite unlike the rest of the provinces or territories that have less autonomy. This would allow the Government of Nunavik to be a truly Arctic government able to respond to the needs, desires and aspirations of Inuit.

The law-making powers of the Assembly would include the ability to establish laws specifically for the protection of Inuit language and culture, to have effective powers over education, health care and justice, and to disallow any natural resource development without the consent of the Nunavik Assembly. The Report also recommends the creation of a Nunavik court with its own full-time judge and crown attorney.

While the official languages of Canada are French and English, each province or territory has its own official languages. Most, including Québec, are unilingual with Québec's official language being French. There are now two territories with Inuit as one of the official languages - Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. Nunavik, like Nunavut, is recommending three official languages - French, English and Inuktitut - with Inuktitut being the dominant language and the one used in daily government and institutional operations.

The Report of the Nunavik Commission was just tabled in March of 2001. It now has to be agreed to by the governments of Québec and Canada. Once this takes place, hopefully by 2003, the agreement would then be presented to the Nunavik population for a referendum vote. If it is accepted by the electorate, the transition process to establish the new government would be set up over a couple of years. The Report recommends that the Nunavik Assembly and Government hold its first election in the fall of 2005. While there is no guarantee that this time line will be met or that all will agree to the recommendations laid out in the Report, the efforts to create a new Inuit jurisdiction are well underway.

The potential new jurisdiction is the final step in the 30-year process leading to self-determination for the Nunavimmiut. Certainly, these efforts have not been without their extreme challenges as Inuit across the North struggle with the highest rates of suicide and substance abuse in the country and lowest levels of education. Yet, there is every indication that the language and culture will survive. Interestingly, Nunavik is part of the province of Québec whose people faced similar language/cultural struggles not long ago. The creation of

a new government of Nunavik, like the now “distinct society” in Québec, is an illustration of how minority languages and cultures are surviving and thriving in an era of globalization.