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Nunavut: The Still Small Voice of Indigenous Governance¹ by Peter Jull²

The Setting

Nunavut, 'our land' in the Inuit language, is 2,000,000 sq. km. of treeless tundras, coasts, and islands occupying one-fifth of all Canada's land area. C. 29,000 people, 85% of them Inuit, make up the population. Most of the non-Inuit are short-term residents, e.g., teaching and technical staff. Caribou are important food in many areas, especially the south-west mainland where great herds migrate from south to north and back annually from their winter range. No less important is the land-fast sea ice on which Inuit hunt, travel, and camp for much of the year, and the floe edge rich in food species. The seas of Nunavut include a large portion of Hudson Bay, together with many straits, gulfs, channels, and part of the north-west Atlantic. The Northwest Passage creates problems – the American navy abuses Canadian public opinion regularly by insisting on rights of passage of its ships, notably submerged nuclear submarines.

Canada 'discovered' Nunavut and other far northern regions and their peoples in the early 1950s (Robertson 2000), but through the Cold War 'two solitudes' existed. One was a Northern or Arctic policy centred on future technology (especially the extraction and transport of natural resources), economics, international law, military systems and strategies, and utopian fantasies. The other was the daily North of inadequate housing, alcohol problems, social welfare, racial discrimination, and, later, indigenous self-government and land/sea rights movements – a North of angry and semi-literate Inuit youths in torn T-shirts. The end of the Cold War was a spring thaw in virtually all aspects of Arctic life.

Other divisions and distinctions were the split between 'native' and non-native in the Northwest Territories (NWT). Whether Inuit in Nunavut, or Dene or Métis in the Western NWT (i.e., the Mackenzie Valley with its great lakes and rivers), or the Inuvialuit Inuit of the Arctic coasts west of Nunavut, non-whites were second-class citizens in every sense but one: they had general hunting rights denied to others. As hunting peoples this was no small item. Another split was world mining and hydrocarbon economics *vs.* subsistence hunting, gathering, and fishing. The furs traded by all indigenous peoples and seal-skins hunted by Inuit have been prey to world markets, too. Under-estimated till recently was a third surging Northern economy: services, notably in the public sector. Finally was the division between those who wished *to administer* the North in someone or other's best interests, and those who wished *to practise politics* to determine the Northern future.

Nunavut since the 1960s has been a world of modern villages, mostly with a few hundred or 1500 people, no villages connected by road with anywhere else. They are supplied by sea in the brief weeks of late summer and rely on aircraft for urgent needs. All villages now have a small supermarket or two, and a snack bar or two. Modern suburban bungalows are surrounded by snow

¹ An earlier, longer, and somewhat different version of this paper, exhaustively referenced, is available from IWGIA or the author, *Indigenous Autonomy in Nunavut*, June 29, 1998, 30 pages.

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most of the year, and mud or rock in summer. Houses have a busy clutter of scooters and skidoos around them, but telltale cultural items are animal skins stretched and drying, and remains of land and sea mammals. There are modern well-equipped schools and offices, and art and craft co-operatives, as well as other co-op work sites and government offices. The 'Mounties', i.e., federal police, are present. A substantial nursing station or small hospital is where the real problems of the North are known, but nurses are too discreet to speak even if they weren't working virtually 24 hours per day.

Before this recent modern Nunavut there were seasonal gatherings around Anglican or Catholic missions, and the Hudson's Bay Company trading posts. Housing and schooling brought permanence to a seasonal hunting camp society, and brought the contemporary world with a rush. There is a very long journey from the Nunavut of the 1920s described by Rasmussen (1927) to the late 1960s of Brody (1975) and that now reflected weekly in *Nunatsiaq News*, surely the most responsible newspaper that any new self-governing jurisdiction could have.

Building Nunavut

The national annual Inuit Tapirisat assembly of local, regional, and organisational representatives from across Inuit Canada, long the source and central clearing house of Inuit politics, approved and released a policy paper for Nunavut self-government at Igloolik in 1979. It called for an essentially familiar Canadian and Northern territorial model with a few special features to meet Inuit needs. The very small non-Inuit population in Nunavut and the familiarity of Inuit with Canadian meeting formats thanks to the Co-op movement and local councils allowed for such a conventional model. This approach was also strategic. Inuit had seen how Canadian governments and public whipped themselves into a hostile and shameful frenzy in 1975 over the newly named 'Dene Nation', formerly NWT Indian Brotherhood, and over Dene talk of 'nationhood', despite the Dene assembly's discussion fully reported in *The Native Press*. The whole modern indigenous policy reform era in Canada has taken place against the background of public and official anxiety about 'separatism' of ethno-cultural or regional groups, notably the Francophone province of Quebec, a fact which has made indigenous political achievements the more remarkable.

Inuit wanted to avoid unnecessary conflict. As long as their basic needs were met for Inuit-run government and maximum control of land and sea territory, they could be flexible about details. One weak indigenous affairs minister attacked the Nunavut concept very publicly. However, Inuit generally presented their demands in a positive way in non-threatening language. They would gently tell fretful parliamentarians and sceptics, 'We are trying to join Canada, not separate.' They were astute with national audiences and élites in explaining themselves. Finally they were on national television sitting with Prime Minister and Premiers in televised multi-day national constitutional conferences with Indian and Métis leaders. By turns articulate, witty, and charming, Inuit spokespersons like John Amagoalik (the recognised 'father of Nunavut'), Mark R. Gordon, Rosemarie Kuptana, and Mary Simon made an impression. Prime Minister Trudeau had told Inuit leaders it was unnecessary to discuss Nunavut in such forums (because it was already being negotiated bilaterally by Inuit and the Trudeau government), but others raised it and soon Trudeau himself was talking about it in such conferences. Premiers were as intrigued by positive and cooperative Inuit approaches as they were afraid of some of the angry rhetoric of indigenous leaders closer to home. Of course, those others had much more to be angry about, but being the less-known, quieter, and second of national indigenous peoples was unquestionably a political resource for Inuit (as for Torres Strait Islanders in Australia).

There was excitement in Canada about ‘patriation’ of the Constitution in 1982, the televised committee hearings having encouraged public demands for rights recognition with indigenous peoples as prominent players. In the early months of 1982, too, an NWT plebiscite on Nunavut was held. With a low turnout in the Western NWT, where Dene and Métis communities supported Nunavut, and the massive 4-1 ‘yes’ vote and high turnout in Nunavut, Inuit won the day. The federal governments had not wanted to recognise the vote but such a clear result could not be ignored. Now creation of Nunavut became policy in Ottawa and Yellowknife. A Nunavut Constitutional Forum (NCF) of elected leaders from both the Legislative Assembly and the Inuit political organisations was set up. It hired full-time staff and was supported helpfully by the NWT government and rather less so by Ottawa (who nevertheless set up an office to keep an eye on it!). The operating principles of NCF were to show responsible stewardship of Arctic Canada; positive arguments only; ostentatious openness in consensus-building; passionate commitment to Canadian unity; and modest pride in conducting the first truly popular (i.e., ‘of the people’) constitution-making in Canada’s European history. The Inuit and their friends showed that they were better Canadians than most, and were showing national leadership in citizenship. Not only would this disarm many non-indigenous fears, but it would undermine the silent anxiety of many European-descended Canadians about handing over part of the country to an exotic or ‘primitive’ people who might harbour dangerous or ‘savage’ ways.

NCF and the broader Nunavut group were a mixed team, both Inuit and non-Inuit. The Inuit were young with at least some high school or higher education; non-Inuit were older and all had worked long with Inuit organisations or communities. There were lawyers and other skills. Three elements crucial to success. The team was well grounded in Inuit local opinion. It could also communicate effectively with both the Canadian public and government. And despite federal insistence that Nunavut claims and Nunavut government processes were separate, neither Inuit nor their white staff acknowledged such distinctions – the Nunavut team was one, even if dealing at two different tables. While Canadians were talking about a new constitutional culture, Inuit in Nunavut, then the least-educated regional population in Canada, were using modern communications to devise their constitution-in-progress.

There were studies and discussion documents prepared, leading to the most important, *Building Nunavut*. One was on human rights in order to reassure whites. Two dealt with fiscal mechanisms and the division of constitutional powers between Canadian governments. There was an elegant argument for Inuit official language rights. One small item was instructive. A preamble to a Nunavut constitution, despite the likelihood that Department of Justice lawyers would sniff at anything they had not devised, could be printed and distributed widely for public relations, to help focus attention outside Nunavut and pride within it. The Inuk head of the Inuit language association was recruited. She consulted Inuit elders, looked at preambles of various types around the world, and presented a neat draft preamble. There was uproar. Everyone around NCF seemed upset. Despite prior approval of the idea, there had been no discussion of expectations. Everyone had different ideas for a preamble’s style, purpose, and tone. The draft was set aside. On the other hand, a draft ‘history’ of Nunavut read by NCF members as their plane flew to Tuktoyaktuk in January 1983 resulted in no word of advice – although much political and diplomatic energy of members went into deciding which photos should illustrate the book. Later another mess saw a poster keyed to the history in the hands of a new printer. Eager to please, he filled in the multi-period historical scene with extra vikings, *too many damned vikings!* And only an intuition and phone call from the airport prevented the dread sea goddess, Takannaaluk, from being portrayed as a long-haired *blonde* bombshell.

The critical point was tabling *Building Nunavut: A working document with a proposal for an Arctic Constitution* in the NWT legislature on May 17, 1983. A fine 4-language version printed was taken around to all communities for discussion, eliciting many views. One hunter in Coral Harbour wanted a guaranteed right to hunt one bowhead whale as a price for supporting Nunavut, while another community wanted a constitutional right to visit family in hospital. Hospital separations, like residential school experiences, are the most bitter of Inuit grievances with the white man's rule. Many people in all communities wanted maximum Inuit control and protection of the marine environment and marine mammals, while the other overwhelming issue was worry about lack of training of Inuit to run the new government.

Crucial Innovations

Inuit were not only negotiating land and sea claims, a political identity, and self-government, for their huge region, but they were also negotiating national indigenous policy, in effect, with the Government of Canada. Their persistence and frequent mulishness resulted in Canada adopting various new policies, as well as politico-administrative concepts and structures. There was no adequate or relevant government policy in place, so governments had the uncomfortable experience of 'learning on the job' and having many pompous assumptions challenged and overturned. These various breakthroughs now benefit all other indigenous groups who negotiate claims, and in some cases have much wider application. The master concept for an indigenous policy for Canada contained in the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) is essentially an extrapolation of the Nunavut and other Northern claims success stories with proposals for locking an overall framework in place, constitutionally.

Two critical battles won were the Inuit demand that marine areas be included in 'land' claims and fall under Inuit management rights (yielded by Ottawa after a federal task force report on that and other issues in 1985) and Inuit insistence that management boards (see next paragraph) have *decision-making*, not merely advisory, power. The claims settlement, like other Northern agreements, provides for mostly local decision-making and control of lands within the broader Nunavut-wide framework. The full agreement is on the Internet.

The agreement's main feature is widely misunderstood outside Nunavut. That is, although there are land selections for exclusive permanent Inuit ownership – including many chosen for their mineral potential – it is the power to manage the entire territory with Ottawa's environmental experts and make the decisions with only very narrow purview for federal cabinet interference in very special circumstances which is the key innovation. Inuit saw that they could gain *in fact* the power to manage what happened in their vast territory by yielding apparently *in law* on some points. Unlike some other groups Inuit have turned their backs on the language of full ownership and sovereignty, and have gained the benefits of ownership and sovereign political jurisdiction.

Three Contexts

Three background contexts were relevant. First post-war anti-racism feeling in Canada and support for United Nations ideals – the sense of breaking with an old world of ultra-nationalism and racist or cultural triumphalism. This was evident as Canadians watched the from Empire by Britain as country after country was handed over to its non-European population. Then the American civil rights movement, and racial violence and social disparity in American cities, shocked Canadians. Canadians at home, having survived Depression and War, were humiliated that indigenous non-

European peoples in Canada should live segregated by race and poverty amid white affluence. National intentions were assimilation – pumping in funds and schools and clinics and housing to brown-skinned communities – until Northern peoples first and southern ones later showed that this was not the answer. The Alaska indigenous claims settlement of 1971 with its apparently huge compensation payout, transfer of millions of acres of land, and creation of strong and funded regional corporations with governmental powers for Inuit, Dene, and Aleut weakened Canadian resistance. Later, Greenland’s home rule provided more inspiration for many.

A second less tangible context was growing anxiety in Canadian society. Among Francophones this was often a desire to break up the Anglophone-dominated federation and set up a new country, together with the rush to secularism, education, and urbanisation from church-dominated old Quebec. Among Anglophones a breakdown of faith in post-war materialism, its damaging social and environmental effects, and the lack of a clear or ‘Canadian’ alternative to failing American industrial society, so long admired, demanded new answers. The discovery of another kind of wisdom, culture, environmental know-how, humour, and inclusive social ethics among the abused and despised ‘natives’ all around us, not to mention distinctive art forms from Inuit carvings and graphics to Iroquois and Pacific coast masks, made national indigenous rebirth a vicarious national awakening. Many people recognised that Canada’s white-indigenous history was being relived in the North – whites searching for saleable resources, settling, meeting opposition from tribal peoples, trying to survive hostile climate and isolation, while establishing organised societies and towns. Now the whites had a chance to ‘do it right’ and negotiate fair outcomes with indigenous peoples. Canadians could re-write history, and in the early 1980s they re-wrote the Constitution to include prominently Inuit, Indians, and Métis.

Third was the national search for new hydro-electric power (Canada’s main energy source), pulp logs, minerals, and oil and gas across the country reaching north from the cities. This faced a new indigenous confidence resulting in great environmental conflicts. These were not between idealist urban youth and their fathers in company offices, but poor, often desperate indigenous villagers trying to catch enough fish and small game to live. Environmentalists joined later, but a broad front in environmental politics across the mid-North and far North opened between indigenous peoples and white businessmen, the latter backed by provincial and territory governments eager for ‘development’. The federal government was more complex – while resource industries usually won policy battles within officialdom, there was a strong ‘conscience’ faction concerned about indigenous well-being and saving Northern Canada from the past ravages of the South. However hypocritical, romantic, foolish, or misinformed they were, ordinary Canadians had a large emotional stake in the North, its peoples and polar bears. Inuit and other Northern peoples were seen increasingly as ‘the good guys’.

Industry and politicians attempting to paint indigenous peoples as trouble-makers or dreamers met a growing public view that Inuit and other peoples stood for worthy things, a lost conscience of the country, brave against tedious officials and greedy developers. Canadians allow romanticism towards the Northern *territories* which they deny provincial northlands. Nonetheless, the Nunavut case was argued for decades before it succeeded.

Implementation

From mid-1993 when the Nunavut land claims and new territory laws were passed by Canada’s national government, the details, processes and politics of implementing the Nunavut arrangements became a story in themselves. Nunavut paid more attention to training and preparation than

previous agreements. A major reason for this concern was the experience of other regions. In Northern Quebec, for example, Inuit had spent many years and all their claims body's annual income fighting with governments to carry out obligations agreed during the negotiations of the land claims agreement.

NTI, or Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., is the novel feature of the Nunavut constitution. As the Inuit 'birthright corporation' to which all Nunavut Inuit present and future belong, it safeguards and manages the Nunavut claims agreement, works with the Nunavut government to implement it, manages the huge compensation fund which was part of the settlement to generate employment and economic development for Inuit, and attends to the various Inuit-specific aspects of the claims settlement. That settlement went deep into political and administrative matters normally left to governments alone so that Nunavut is truly a dual government made up of the 'public' government of Nunavut open to all residents and the Inuit-only claims settlement. NTI is the guarantor of the Inuit character of Nunavut, but Premier Paul Okalik, a former claims negotiator himself, feels no less an Inuk for running what almost everyone regards as an Inuit government, and no less Inuk for working to reconcile the races and their creative energies in the new Nunavut. Indeed, Premier Okalik's speeches in August 2001 in Australia and his question-and-answer sessions had the feel of inspired and expanded civility we have come to associate with leaders like Mandela and Gusmao.

Most pressing of implementation issues was preparing young Inuit to fill the jobs and take on the roles required of Inuit self-government. There were two basic concerns:

- that the severe under- and un-employment of the Inuit young would be addressed, and
- that Nunavut not become another case, like the federal and NWT governments before it, of white outsiders shaking up an already badly shaken Inuit society.

Nunavut inherited the NWT government system, itself a system created by the national government and later by Inuit, Dene, and Métis and white political leaders elected in the NWT for dealing with indigenous communities scattered across a huge and difficult terrain. That system was far advanced compared with any other Canadian administration for indigenous peoples, and now Nunavut Inuit have set up special bodies to study its laws and practices to reform them to suit Inuit culture and Nunavut needs even better. The NWT system, for all its good intentions, made too many compromises with expediency, usually by copying some Southern Canada model in order to write new laws or set up new programs quickly. Too often NWT ministers wanted their programs to be accepted as equal and worthy by the governments of Southern Canada instead of recognising their first priority of suiting Northern cultures and conditions.

The NWT-Nunavut system differs in other ways from the usual Canadian provinces' government. It relies much more on government intervention and leadership in economic, social, and cultural matters. While NWT heads of government and ministers mouth the typical North American rugged enterprise talk, they have in fact run a total welfare state system with large sums of tax dollars generously provided by Canadian taxpayers through the federal government. (Those days are over now with federal cost-cutting so that Nunavut and the other Northern territories have real, urgent, and deep needs which even some Right-wing Southern premiers acknowledge.) It was not possible to rely on private business to operate viably in the North, nor were indigenous peoples there familiar with the administrative or political cultures of Canada. So public administration always has had a leading role, rather than simply acquiring local roles incrementally as local people did elsewhere in Canada. Furthermore, in the postwar era governments had money and were prepared to spend it to overcome the more obvious Northern blights of Depression style poverty and the racial attitudes associated with defeated Wartime fascism. Nothing was simple, however. Ottawa

wanted Inuit to be self-reliant, but also wanted to spend enough money and pay enough attention that they would not suffer or starve as in 1950s famines at Garry and Ennadai Lakes. Scattered hunting camps were rounded up and centralised in new villages to which typical Canadian-style housing, social programs, citizenship rituals, and eventually community ice hockey were directed. A doll's house, indeed. It took rather longer – here, as in Greenland – for governments to see that such 'solutions' were generating new problems on a wide scale.

However, Inuit, like white officials, were convinced of the power of government, whether for good or ill. The Nunavut government has wide powers and programs in virtually every area of life. Running schools and developing school courses, local government, small business regulation, hunting and fishing livelihoods (shared with NTI and Ottawa), health, social programs, justice, and much else come under the new government. Nunavut Inuit long ago mastered the arts of meeting and deliberation, without need of the white man, and now will face the challenges of executive power in a modern setting. The federal government has not finalised the handover and revenue sharing of Northern lands and resources, long withheld to insure that indigenous claims were not pre-empted by development-minded white-controlled governments, but the principles are clear enough and the timing right for these reforms now. Nunavut now has the means and expertise under Inuit control to shape, with the Canadian government, the big contextual issues of the future – sea management, resource extraction, and development transport and infrastructure. The Nunavut government and NTI have tremendous potential in power and funds to concert and coordinate their efforts to achieve almost anything. Alaska's North Slope Borough and Greenland's Home Rule government have already demonstrated the capacity and verve of strong Inuit government.

What has been learned?

The Norwegian sailor Leif Eriksen concluded in 1000 AD that Nunavut was 'good for nothing'. Although Canadian governments in the 20th century have tried to think of some use, their ideas rarely went past extracting resources and an empty reference to 'Canada, an Arctic nation' in speeches for foreign audiences. In the last few decades of the millennium, however, Inuit have redefined Canada, the North, and the Arctic through their political energies and renewed stewardship of their traditional homelands.

Inuit, like other peoples (e.g., Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines in Australia's north, centre, and west), view regional autonomy as both desirable in itself and necessary for participating equally in national society. This is not separatism. Many non-indigenous Canadians (and Australians) realise that their own nationhood cannot be authentic or even legitimate without political accommodation – or *reconciliation* – of indigenous peoples. This is a sign of national maturity. There is an implicit exchange. The majority European culture convert garrison sovereignty into domesticated and recognised forms of organised society, while those recognised forms are based on the physical occupation, customary rights, and culture of ancient non-European inhabitants.

The major Nunavut hints for other indigenous peoples may be the value of

- making indigenous self-determination a 'good news story' for the general public, no less than a private indigenous project;
- retaining the moral high ground of practical, even homely concerns, understandable and understandably fair to any outside observer;

- a clear and consistent storyline and presence for informed publics, media, and élites, and
- placing priority on gaining tangible power ahead of grand appearances or distant hopes.

The corollary is that while angry assemblies and clenched fist salutes are inevitable, they may be pre-political – that is, one must move beyond them in order to achieve serious political goals, or leave them as noisy background on the street while leaders meet quietly indoors to negotiate substance.

Nunavut was fought for on many levels at once, notably:

- international articles and lectures;
- national constitutional and political reform processes (most obviously the First Ministers Conferences on the Constitution);
- national policy reform discussions (such as the Royal Commission on Canada's Future, Northern foreign policy discussions, the work of special inquiries on, e.g., visible minorities);
- Northern constitutional reform (generally quite separate from the national process, although Nunavut leaders brought both processes together at times);
- the work of the NWT legislature (where the Nunavut caucus was the principal NWT 'party' and used its power);
- regulatory board and environmental panel processes dealing with proposed mega-projects, this being *the principal forum* in which Inuit fought their long battle for land/sea rights and self-government (other than the direct negotiations on Nunavut claims and, later, government, that is, and often for lack of the latter);
- court cases (e.g., the Baker Lake land rights case);
- the animal rights, sealing, and whaling debates in Canada and internationally (remote indigenous livelihood vs. urban non-indigenous sentiment); and
- other opportunities suddenly available, such as American maritime intrusions into Canadian Arctic seas where Inuit could take a lead in outraged Canadian feelings (and give governments some environmental substance to that outrage).

In other words, Nunavut activists were not only highly visible, but visibly responsible for the health and future of their Arctic region. Nunavut was a moral and political fact long before it was a practical jurisdictional one.

Now a new phase has opened. The old battles and landmarks are gone. New and greater responsibilities have changed Inuit public standards and ideas about personal conduct and public accountability. Some of the longtime notables and activists are not surviving among a younger generation for whom early Nunavut movement ideals and heroes seem remote. Inuit are now debating social issues very publicly, and solving things in their own way – surely the whole point of creating Nunavut! The Nunavut young are Canadians in every sense and will demand the best which Canada can provide, but Canada does not know how to 'fix' Nunavut – that, after all, is what the Inuit political movement fought for the right to do itself.

Reconciliation in Practice

Nunavut exemplifies a form of racial and regional reconciliation underway across Canada and in various other countries.

1. Central political authority rescues deteriorating hinterland race relations and environment from settler bloody-mindedness to broker new politico-administrative arrangements.
2. Substantial indigenous-government co-management of environment, renewable resources, development planning, and territory is adopted pragmatically to accommodate traditional livelihoods and lifeways alongside industrial world hunger for commodities and energy.
3. Formal recognition and support for indigenous cultural collectivities are given in place of an 'equality' usually understood as uniformity.
4. National capitals recognise that large territories with few people can no longer be deemed too poor to justify decent public services while their resources remain 'too rich' to benefit the locals.
5. The long-running failure of outsider-designed public services in areas like health, education, welfare, culture, and community affairs gives way to substantial indigenous operation and control producing more accepted and appropriate outcomes.
6. Ways to compensate indigenous peoples for legal and physical dispossession are found, e.g., transfer of some land and resource rights, resource revenue-sharing, capital funds, etc.
7. Regional agreements are designed to accommodate existing non-indigenous communities and land ownership (although a feature little needed in Nunavut).
8. Hinterland settlers appealing to national majoritarian tradition to maintain dominance over indigenous peoples are overruled and obliged to share power with them.
9. Government if not the general public is shamed into treating indigenous fellow citizens as political and socio-economic equals as official rhetoric says they are.
10. Governments dither about how to square publicly the obvious moral imperatives of marginal peoples and regions with pretensions of national sovereign uniformity, but when they finally make adjustments they find the experience refreshing and worth boasting about abroad.

In practice the main items are a package, not separate items. Whether ethno-political mobilisation of contemporary sorts begins with housing discrimination or oil spills, the other demands come quickly into play. The package is finite and predictable, not whimsical, but if major elements are withheld by governments the fight continues.

It is worth stating that indigenous self-government such as Nunavut or any number of other models contributes to social peace, economic benefit, and regional equity in any contemporary nation-state. This unexceptional realisation has been accepted by liberal, conservative, very conservative, labour, and other political parties in government around the 'first world', with debate having usually moved on to the practical details of implementing reform.

Nunavut – A Still Small Voice

Nunavut is important to indigenous peoples everywhere. Inuit hunter-gatherers living scattered over a vast, isolated, and politically undefined region have created a strong modern government

there with all the latest gadgets and fashions of contemporary 'first world' countries as the means to strengthen their traditional culture, solve recent social ills, protect the environment and vital resources, and decide their own future in their own language and in their own way. Despite the incredulity of many including the world news media since Nunavut's launch in April 1999, the fact of many serious social problems at family and community levels, and the lack of a resource export or secondary economy, were actually reasons for Inuit wanting to establish their government as quickly as possible. Canada's political principles of sharing financial resources with 'have-not' regions and of rejecting 'user pay' notions for political rights meant that economic issues were not a major obstacle. Nevertheless, Inuit only succeeded through a generation-long determination and patience in the face of changing governments and ministers, and a few too-unchanging officials, forever ready to forget or defeat Nunavut.

Former Inuit negotiator and first Nunavut premier Paul Okalik visited Australia and spoke at public forums in Sydney, Brisbane, and Canberra during August 2001 as a gift by the Canadian government to Australia's Federation year celebrations. For two months Australia had been whipped into a frenzy by accusations and revelations of endemic violence against Aboriginal women so that even the usual unhelpful indigenous policy rhetoric of the federal government had been blown away by something unpredictable and wilder. Intelligent discussion and serious proposals seemed impossible, while the media and audible public had embarked on a shrill blaming of Aborigines for all their problems past and present. It was a rich demonstration of how liberal democracy without moral leadership quickly descends to frightening depths. Okalik's quiet charisma surprised many Australians used to decibels as the measure of politicians, but those who attended his talks were the more impressed and inspired by his account of progress across a range of difficult social, cultural, and justice areas in the mere 28 months since the Nunavut government took office. This was particularly affecting in Brisbane where he spoke of his own early problems and some bitter contacts with 'the law' before these provided motivation to turn his life around. He had become a lawyer and, now, as Premier and justice minister was implementing important justice reforms to reconcile Inuit and European systems to avoid similar pain for others. His presence and overall visit were truly 'a still small voice' amid the earthquake, wind, and fire of public opinion gone mad. The quiet hope, the negotiations between aggrieved indigenous people and reasonable governments, the long-term commitment to achieving solutions rather than the mere bombastic advantages of a moment, the vision of indigenous and non-indigenous people working harmoniously together now creating a new or renewed 'frontier' society, the practical programs and reforms now being put in place, and practical benefits beginning to appear were what Australians needed to hear. They also needed to believe in the possibility of such things amid the choreographed uproar of Australian policy since 1996.

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