

Which Inuit?

The delegates and participants to the Inuit Circumpolar Conference at Nuuk, Greenland took some clear policy direction on a number of significant, common issues during the historic three-day conference. Among these were positions on issues related to arctic coastal zone management and off-shore oil and gas development. The General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for a ban on OCS oil and gas development activity throughout the Inuit Homeland. The resolution, developed during the Workshop on Arctic Coastal Zone Management and OCS, was unanimously adopted by the delegates to the General Assembly.

Little noticed during the deliberations was the fact that some of the principle parties in OCS oil and gas development were present, were seated delegates, and had taken an active role in the ICC. The Chairman Pro-Tem of the Conference, a seated delegate, is president of the NANA Development Corporation. This arm of the NANA Regional Corporation is involved in a joint venture with the petroleum industry to place oil wells in the Beaufort Sea of the Arctic Ocean. Also present, as seated delegates to the General Assembly of the ICC, was the Chairman of the Board and the Vice President of the NANA Regional Corporation Board of Directors.

These players were quiet during the discussion of the OCS ban resolution. They participated in the workshops when the resolutions were being prepared for consideration by the Assembly. Most significantly, they voted in favor of the OCS ban proposal when that resolution was brought to the floor. They voted in favor of the resolution. The question remains as to whether they will support the very policy stand they voted for when they return to consider NANA's activities and involvement in off-shore oil development.

The ICC, with approval of a charter and provision for ratification process, is off to a very fine start as an international organization to advocate for the concerns of the Natives of the Inuit Homeland. The policy direction which the ICC initiates will likely capture the interest of world governments, and managers and owners of arctic resource development corporations. The positions adopted by the ICC will have a lesser chance of success if its policies are ignored by its members.

Compromise on some issues is seeming inevitable when it comes to the matter of exploiting the vast riches of the circumpolar region. It is understood that compromises must be made on some issues and under some circumstances. For Inuit members of the ICC to become active partners in types of development which the General Assembly unanimously votes, however, borders on subversion. It is an embarrassment to the Inuit people and their organization.

NANA is not the only offender, but it is the most obvious one given the priority the General Assembly chose to give to the issue of off-shore oil and gas. The NANA delegates contributed much to the success of the ICC meeting, including their input into policy development and the conduct of the Chairman Pro-Tem. If the ICC is to succeed, however, Inuit people and their corporations and organizations will have to stand behind the new body. Basic policy direction should be fully supported. Embarrassments such as the dual-sided direction on OCS should be avoided, as they detract from the effectiveness of the organization. Inuit people need to take the ICC seriously and get with the program.