

Canadian Inuit create new government

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Canada's new constitution which includes important provisions for aboriginal and individual rights was made law by the Queen of England when she visited Ottawa in April, 1982. A few days earlier Inuit in the Northwest Territories had made another historic step in Canada's political life: they overwhelmingly voted to create a new government for their homeland, Nunavut.

From the time it was created at the beginning of the 1970s, Inuit Tapirisat, Canada's national Inuit organization, has argued that the Inuit homeland north of the tree-line needed a new government. Nunavut has been inhabited by Inuit and Inuit-related peoples for thousands of years. Primarily sea-coast life and the shared culture of Inuit with their language and family ties across the Arctic have given it a distinctive character unrelated to peoples and regions farther south.

But the one third of Canada where Inuit live and in which they are the majority of the population has always been denied the political rights which would allow Inuit to run their own lives and determine their future.

The Northwest Territories (NWT) was a large space on the map which had grown smaller for over a hundred years while provinces and territories were carved out of it to meet the needs of a growing Canadian society. In spite of this, the NWT is still the largest political jurisdiction in Canada. It contains two societies: south of the tree-line are the Dene (Indians) living along the rivers and lakes of the Mackenzie Valley, with many white settlers and new towns among them, while to the north is the land of the Inuit, "Our Land" or Nunavut.

Yet the NWT has developed according to the plans and ideas of white Canadians in the south, with little consideration given to the political needs and cultures of the people who have always lived there, the Dene and Inuit. The people of the north do not have the same rights as southern Canadians to govern themselves, and this is perhaps the one fact which unites all northern peoples.

On April 14, 1982, most Dene and Inuit voted in a special referendum to divide the NWT into two new territories, Nunavut and Denendeh. The choice was easier for Inuit who would be a clear majority in a Nunavut territory. But the Dene also saw that division would bring changes in the political structure, and without change they might soon be a minority in a political system run by outsiders.

Inuit in the western Arctic were concerned about boundaries and where their future

might lie, so vote results there were not decisive. COPE, the western Arctic Inuit association, therefore reserved its right to join either Denendeh or Nunavut. But in the eastern and central areas which were the Nunavut heartland, the total vote (including non-Inuit) was 4 to 1 in favor of Nunavut, and more voters than in normal elections had turned out to express their views.

Following the vote, the NWT legislature assembly voted 19 to 0 in favor of creation of Nunavut and Denendeh. In order to carry on this work, the legislature assembly also

created a constitutional alliance consisting of a western constitutional forum and a Nunavut constitutional forum. Each forum was made up of elected political leaders from the legislative assembly and from the aboriginal peoples' associations.

The Nunavut Constitutional Forum (NCF) has four members: The presidents of Inuit Tapirisat and COPE (John Amagoalik and Peter Green), and two territorial cabinet ministers from Nunavut (Kane Tologananak and Dennis Patterson who acts as NCF chairman).

Inuit have made clear that a Nunavut government would respect the rights of minorities such as the white settlers who have come to live in the Arctic. All people, regardless of their race or language, would participate in a Nunavut government. This government would be modeled on familiar Canadian structures and would fit fully into Canadian federalism.

Nevertheless, Inuit have had a difficult time convincing southern Canadians that they don't wish to "separate" from Canada and that they are not creating a racial state. Such

people seem to wish to use false arguments to deny Inuit political equality with white Canadians and the benefits of economic development in their homeland.

On November 26, 1982, the Canadian government announced that it agreed to the creation of Nunavut. However, the minister responsible, John Munro, said that there were some conditions such as agreement on boundaries among northern groups, major progress in land claims negotiations and continued northern consensus on the desirability

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Inuit constitution being readied in Canada

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of Nunavut.

Both western and Nunavut forums then travelled to Ottawa at the end of November to spend a week explaining their concerns to politicians, the public and press. In particular they protested the government's refusal to discuss sharing of northern resources revenues with the northern peoples.

They asked for more detail about the conditions and timetable under which Ottawa will move forward with political change, but received only vague assurances that Ottawa would be "flexible." They found much sympathy from politicians in all parties, although not from government

officials, with their demand for resources revenue sharing. (A poll taken earlier in the year showed that most southern Canadians believe northerners should have the same political and resources rights as other Canadians).

The NCF is working to a tight timetable to prepare a constitution for Nunavut. Background research is being prepared and then discussed at public meetings. Publications with the purpose of encouraging discussion at the community level in Nunavut are appearing. A history of Nunavut political development was approved for publication in January, 1983, by NCF. A major proposal for the Nunavut constitution will be published in

April 1983, and a constitutional conference for all of Nunavut will be held by September 1983, to agree on its final form.

The three most difficult issues are the relationship between an eventual land claims settlement and the new structures for Nunavut; the location of boundaries between Nunavut and the western or Denendeh territory; and the forms of regional government to be provided for in the Nunavut constitution. At an NCF meeting in Tuktoyaktuk on January 11, 1983, COPE agreed to join in Nunavut and to provide proposals for regional government, such as the western Arctic regional municipality (WARM), to be included

in the new constitution.

During the visit of the two forum to Ottawa, national politicians were startled by the strength of feeling and unanimous agreement of northerners — white, Dene, Metis

and Inuit — about political change and resources issues. The united struggle of northern peoples for political fair play and the work of the Nunavut and western forums to maintain the momentum for change.