

Dear Qallunaat: Racism, Public Government and Inuit Nunanga

by Sandra Inuitiq, Chief Negotiator for the Qikiqtani Inuit Association's Tallurutiup Imanga Inuit Impact and Benefit Agreement

The population of Nunavut is nearly 35,000 people, with 86 percent Inuit but a powerful and very visible non-Inuit minority. In Iqaluit, with a population of around 7,000, 40 percent is non-Inuit. In the territorial government, despite the Nunavut Final Agreement mandating 85 per cent Inuit employment, that number is around 50 per cent. Since the creation of Nunavut, a disproportionate amount of senior government positions and the professional class generally has been non-Inuit.

DEAR QALLUNAAT,

We have been living in the same Nunavut cities and towns for some time now. In fact, the collective relationship is sometimes held up as **innovative governance and Inuit self-determination**. Yet, you, the non-Inuit in our territory, rarely reflect that assumption, rather, the opposite. I have thought a lot about the level of damage having a highly transient, mostly white population, does to Nunavut. The indifference to social conditions, the policy inertia, and all the collective microaggressions that maintain an impoverished Inuit population. (I think these trends are palpable on other Indigenous territories as well).

So for those interested in changing this state of affairs, here are ways that maybe you can be a better white person, or may I suggest, an ally.

As a preface to this letter, let me say that I do not dislike or hate you; it is out of love for myself and communities that I share it. More, even though this is primarily addressed to white people, white supremacy is common among people of all backgrounds – including Inuit (even me) – either to get ahead or not be left behind. This letter is addressed to those readers, too. I hope that it stimulates a healthy discussion.

- 1. You are a visitor on Inuit homelands.** No matter how long your family has been in Canada or Nunavut, you are a settler on Inuit land.
- 2. Being close to Inuit, being proximate, does not make you an expert and voice for Inuit.** This includes those with Inuit children, an Inuk spouse, family or friends. Nor does having lived in or travelled back and forth to the North for a number of years, even knowing some Inuktitut. These situations do not give you Inuit identity, the right to claim authority over the subject of Inuitness or defining answers for Inuit. Neither does travelling to other “exotic” places make you automatically sensitive to Inuit culture.

Asking other non-Inuit how long they have been here is a common question to seemingly test legitimacy in the North, as if competing for expertise. Stop.

3. **It is common for white professionals like you to use working in Nunavut or with Inuit to embellish a resume.** After working with or studying Inuit, many suddenly become an “expert” on Inuit or Inuit Nunanga. These situations make people appear to be more ‘equitably minded’ or ‘culturally sensitive’, therefore more appealing to hire, or work with in other Indigenous territories. We have planeloads of consultations arriving on daily flights from the south, a lot of men with white heads, who exploit and then move on to the next per diem.
4. **Meritocracy is a system that assumes everyone is on a level playing field, i.e. education, skills and experience, and are considered based on their qualifications.** Yet, its a system that rewards white people with those privileges of education and certain types of work experience. When those non-Inuit add “cultural competency” they are further rewarded. Meanwhile Inuit are relegated to lacklustre employment equity programs, with little regard for alternative qualifications. Equity, must take into account these structural barriers to genuinely reflect merit.
5. **Attitudes that the North/Inuit Nunangat is inferior and backwards are common.** We hear these daily in statements that infer it is a punishment being here: “can’t wait to get out of here” or “I’ve been here for 5 years”; all expressed in a tone that could be mistaken with those serving a jail sentence. Similarly, the “only in Nunavut would (insert shitty event) happen” is common. These miserable people with high salaries and exotic experience wear golden handcuffs’ of economic opportunity. And while they complain incessantly, they obliterate any positive morale of workplaces and the community. Guess what? There are daily flights going south. You are welcome to leave. You are doing more harm than good by being here.
6. **Reverse racism or racism against white people does not exist.** “Reverse racism” is often exclaimed when the opinions above are stated publicly. Or, when one loses a job competition to an Inuk, an education/training opportunity, some kind of benefit generally, or are made to feel uncomfortable with their privilege. Reverse racism or racism against white people is not a thing.
7. **Moreover, you cannot be the one to judge whether an act is racist, culturally insensitive or appropriate.** Also, by saying “I’m not racist” or “there is no racism” does not absolve racism or responsibility. You are assuming because you cannot see it, it does not exist. If an inuk, or person of colour is calling something out, pay attention and listen. Listen to those that face racism *e_v_e_r_y_d_a_y!* Including shallow small talk, being spoken down to, not being listened to, and clear differential treatment. Beyond these everyday exchanges, there is the clear reality that the system generally tells you in many ways your life is not worth anything or very little. That is racism.
8. **If there are mainly Inuit or Inuit-spaces, allow that to be, either by excluding yourself or by listening and not talking.**
9. **Part of the process of achieving equity in Nunavut means making space for Inuit, whether physically on the land, in policy and decision-making, economically or through employment.** In order for an Inuk to take a managerial position, someone has to move on. For Inuit to have better access to housing, we need to stop making our housing subsidies available primarily to the transient population. The same goes for down payment and renovation funding
10. **“It is a public government!”** This statement, which we hear alllll the time, sanctions racism. The subtext here is that any efforts to reverse systemic discrimination and racism should be avoided. This common refrain, excludes Inuit concerns and maintains the very system that oppresses Inuit. There has been nothing done to reform the system in any large scale and consistent manner, including finally focusing on Inuit employment, education, housing, poverty related issues (and these are all interconnected). Imagine after Nunavut was created if there was a program to train Inuit to become Inuktitut teachers in a deliberate systematic way? Our language would be thriving rather than on a *downward spiral*, treated as inferior language and not worth saving.

11. **The attitude that Inuit get everything paid for them, health benefits, and post-secondary education might be more common than "it's a public government."** But if that is the case, why are Inuit still facing wide scale poverty? 70% food insecurity of children is a shocking statistic. That means most children miss a meal each day. Hunger! Assuming Inuit are on some free rides anti-Inuit because it implies Inuit are not actually worth the benefits we should receive.
12. **You need to change the attitude that when Inuit talk about cultural reclamation it is about nostalgia for the old times.** Cultural reclamation and self-determination are not about going back in time. We want to reclaim ourselves on our terms. Our land, our bodies, our lives! These concepts are to be applied in today's conditions and circumstances. It is not your decision to make regarding what is "traditional" and what is "modern."
13. **Suicide, homelessness, hunger, mistreatment or discrimination in health or justice systems are not theories to us.** Disproportionate incarceration rates, a failing education system, which can't graduate students with culturally, socially relevant education with an accounting colonization, are real. Inuit are living them or the effects of them. White people love having loud insensitive conversations about alcohol and suicide issues within earshot of Inuit as if they are abstract, without realizing these issues are being experienced by Inuit.
14. **Stop expecting Inuit in the office to translate words, work or give advice on what "Inuit think" as if Inuit are ethnographic objects of study.** Not only is this an expectation of subservience ("translate this for me"), it is a clear superficial engagement that serves only to get an Inuk stamp of approval to legitimize your work.
15. **Why don't they just (fill in the blank).** Any statement asking why Inuit just will or won't do something is so laden with overtones of white supremacy. Not everyone lives and thinks like you do. Check your arrogance.
16. **Do not negotiate with artists or crafts people. Chances are they are selling their item at just above cost of the material they used. You are potentially negotiating an individual into poverty.**
17. **White people do not seem to understand why Inuit do not volunteer or volunteer as much, for boards and committees, etc.** I can promise that Inuit are expending more hours and energy helping each other out than the superstar white volunteer who gets all the volunteer awards. Inuit also deal with a lot of loss or trauma. We help those grieving. The invisible "volunteering" we do is giving rides, visiting each other, helping with application forms, feeding and looking after kids, taking someone shopping or to run errands, helping with sewing projects, fixing snow machines, fundraising for funerals or kids sports. This is just the tip of the iceberg.
18. **Address your apathy.** While we have this territory, and all of these so-called rights, Inuit continue to suffer and die in various dispiriting ways including suicide and violence. The failure, fear, or apathy from having serious conversations about the impacts of colonization, assimilation and racism actually kill. If there is any willingness among you to start turning the social conditions around to improve Inuit lives your apathy must be addressed.
19. **Stop talking over Inuit, cutting people off or finishing sentences for people.** These signal to people that they are not worth listening to, or, that you have the answers for them. This is classic whitesplaining and an expertise that is generally unwelcome. Also, you don't have to fill every silent moment with incessant talk. Shut up and listen.
20. **People of colour spend expend a lot of emotional energy trying not to upset white fragility. Like A LOT.** So when you get defensive, change narrative to be white-centric, or Individualistic, it is an effort to maintain power. You have responsibility to take responsibility for that.

21. **If you've read this far, the most important thing for you to remember is to have humility.** You have been socialized to be unconsciously invested in racism, and there are many ways that you are willfully ignorant or racist. One is not exempt from racism because they are simply 'a good person'. All white people are racist to some degree because they are born and raised in a system made by white people, for white people. Let that sink in!

Recognize and admit your power and privilege, and the fact you are benefitting from racist systems. That we have a society, even in Nunavut, where being white or white passing is "normal" and everything else is 'other'. Once you recognize that you have the ability to reflect and learn.

You have to have the ability to admit to making mistakes or being wrong. It may require a deeper level of consciousness and willingness, but with hard work, you can change.

The only way we can start equalizing voices in Inuit Nunaga is by calling things as they are. And in doing so, recognizing that we are in highly racialized systems.

This Brief has been adapted from a Facebook post, February 2, 2019.