

Can Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit be Integrated into Government? An Interview with Tina DeCouto

Tina De Couto interviewed by Hayden King

The [Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship](#) is a policy and leadership development program recognizing leadership potential among young northern Canadians eager to address policy challenges facing the North. This interview is part of a series Yellowhead is publishing, featuring discussions with 2018-2019 Fellows on their fellowship policy papers.

Here, we speak with Tina DeCouto on her paper, *Uncomfortable Inuk – Exploring Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*, which explores the application of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* and Inuit Societal Values throughout the territorial government administration and delivery of territorial government services in Nunavut.

**Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit = Inuit traditional knowledge*

HAYDEN: To start, maybe you can tell us why you were interested in writing on this topic - on Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) and whether it is or isn't being taken up by organizations or government institutions.

TINA: I chose to focus on Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit for two reasons: despite having been born and raised here in Nunavut [I often felt] inadequate as an Inuk, in terms of my language and culture. I didn't have a direct connection to a familial network that provided Inuktitut or other demonstrations of cultural skills.

The other reason was that as I embarked on my education and career, I would often hear Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit referenced and how it is being incorporated within our government systems. Well, what does that mean? How practically can you implement IQ within an institution?

That was my broad interest and as I continued on that journey with the fellowship, I realized what a complicated thing it actually is. A lot of my time and effort was focused on learning the history of the government of Nunavut, how they were established and how they attempted to incorporate IQ into the system.

HAYDEN: Your paper includes actual examples where it can be done well, such as the parenting program example. Are there other elements of effective integration or other areas where you see effective integration of IQ?

TINA: Yes, the new policy development process that the government of Nunavut is now using engages Inuit before a policy options paper is drafted. Then they ask Inuit to review it and they have Inuit review the complete product. That's a start at trying to incorporate Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit within our institutions, and an example of a simple task that we can undertake. For me, one of the biggest recommendations in my paper is to ensure that Inuit are within all areas of government, whether it's in policy and leadership or management roles. Having started my career here, I find there aren't a lot of Inuit who I had the opportunity to learn from or be mentored by or be supervised by. And I think that's a pretty huge issue and [barrier to] being able to incorporate Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit into government.

Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit is our way of being right? And if I'm learning or working in an institution that is predominantly led and managed by non-Inuit, then I'm not necessarily equipping myself to be able to know how to reflect or change the system to adequately reflect Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit. I think that's one of the largest issues.

HAYDEN: It seems really difficult to meet Article 23's promise and even Inuit that are employed tend to be in these, lower wage, lower responsibility type of positions, whereas the non-Inuk / bureaucrats end up being the managers and the directors. I wonder if there is this correlation between the lack of meaningful integration of IQ. Is there a resistance to IQ integration?

TINA: No, I don't think that resistance is necessarily the issue. I think there is definitely a lack of understanding — my paper talks about how government effort to incorporate Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit have waned over the recent years. I think that's true. There needs to be some renewed effort. I guess in order to achieve that, I keep going back to engagement so that Inuit are represented at all levels that can implement change within our institutions and systems.

I had one colleague make a statement, 'I work to ensure that an Inuk replaces me in my position when I leave'. I think that kind of perspective should be something that's held by everyone who is non-Inuk, but not everybody shares that same approach.

HAYDEN: I know that one of the other challenges is the importance of having language revitalization accompany IQ. Can you speak to the relationship between the two?

TINA: Revitalization is definitely important, it's been important to me on my journey to strengthen my Inuktitut. I always had a good foundation in the language, but it was a lack of confidence to be able to speak and I always understood more than I was able to speak. In my revitalization efforts, I've had opportunities to learn a few hours a week here and there, and even those few hours a week over the past few years have really propelled me to take more risks in speaking and attempting to speak and not being ashamed to try. When I'm able to converse with Inuit in Inuktitut, it definitely has positive ripple effects.

Through my learning the language, I'm also learning about language concepts: different terminology and how sometimes there isn't a direct translation between Inuktitut and English and understanding something in Inuktitut is really difficult to relay in English.

I think that's also an important part of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit. It's important to remember though, that revitalization is necessary for people like me. But there are a lot of Inuit who's first language is Inuktitut or who are fluent. I think that becomes another complicated factor, how you're addressing that systematically.

HAYDEN: I think there is a widely reported phenomenon where some well-meaning biologists and the non-Native planners will often just try to distill Indigenous knowledge and sort of weave it into Western science. But the challenge there is that Indigenous knowledge becomes tokenized, completely separated from the language and from the worldview itself. I wonder about your perspective on whether or not these two worldviews can actually be brought together into dialogue to actually achieve some sort of authentic Inuit or Indigenous governance?

TINA: Yeah, for sure. I mean, I think that's been the biggest thought — how do you ensure that the two worldviews are bringing Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit to the forefront? You're talking about the dialogue and I speak to the ethical space of engagement. I think one of the biggest challenges and issues is that the Western system is so strong and kind of imposing on Inuit ability to engage in that dialogue. The value is based on how well you can write in English, it's not how well you can conceptualize an idea in Inuktitut and make sure that's understood by the Western system. Everything about our current system is kind of negatively impacting the Inuit ability to participate in that dialogue.

But your question is whether that will ever happen, I'm an optimist and I hope so, I think so. Otherwise all of our efforts to be, would be useless. We need to be engaging more people in this conversation. We have Nunavut Sivuniksavut, which is a great start. And, you hear nothing but positive things about that program, especially from Inuit who go through it themselves, but I think that kind of learning needs to continue. One of my recommendations is a university level public administration program that would support and engage young Inuit to participate in this conversation of change.

HAYDEN: I've heard nothing but good things about Nunavut Sivuniksavut as well, but consistent funding for these programs seem to be a challenge as well. Since publishing your paper have you had conversations with colleagues or friends about some of the things that you wrote about?

TINA: For sure. I mean, a lot of people have requested copies of it and have read it. There has been dialogue, but there's also been work happening in these areas in small pockets. For me, highlighting those small pockets and building upon them would allow us to achieve that and it takes time. For example, Makigiaqta Inuit Training Corporation supported Nunavut Sivuniksavut to take on a third year pilot that can potentially become a public administration program. I know NTI as an organization is also exploring other areas, such as in service and things like that. There are small pockets everywhere.

We all experience challenges with competing priorities, communication, collaboration, staff turnover and there are so many challenges that we encounter that hinder progress. At the same time, me producing this paper [also means] it's up to me to champion [and encourage] progress.

HAYDEN: I think that it's really easy to be cynical and it's really easy to get down and to see how immense the challenges are. I appreciate the positivity and the spaces of hope that you're pointing to and the constructive dialogue that's happening. I think it's worthwhile for people outside of Nunavut, other Indigenous people trying to do similar things, to be thinking about. So thank you.