

A New Conversation on Inuit Self-Government in Nunavut

By Aluki Kotierk

ON NOVEMBER 16TH, 2021, during Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated's annual general meeting, the membership passed a resolution to pursue Inuit self-government. This may come as a surprise to some, given the great celebration and accolades during the creation of the Nunavut Territory in 1999.

The creation of the Nunavut Territory was an outcome of the signing of the Nunavut Agreement in 1993. Out of this process, Inuit agreed to the establishment of a public government knowing that Inuit were and continue to be the majority population. Inuit expected a *de facto* self-government. However, this expectation relied on the full and effective implementation of critical articles of the Nunavut Agreement, such as Article 23 which requires the public service to achieve a representative workforce in all levels of employment. This was meant to ensure that all jobs, across all categories, would mirror the public population. Further, Article 32 clearly articulates the Inuit right, "to participate in the development of social and cultural policies, and in the design of social and cultural programs and services, including their method of delivery."

When discussions to create Nunavut first started in the early 1970's, Inuit as young as nineteen and twenty-two participated in creating a vision for what it could be and held a lot of hope for a better future.

By then Inuit were living in settlements, had witnessed the introduction of schools, and were experiencing tremendous changes. Through the land claim process Inuit sought to protect their way of life amid these changes, including protections for their language and culture, specifically within governance.

The first proposal for the creation of Nunavut was presented on February 27th, 1976. James Arvaluk was the president of Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (now Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami). In his presentation to Parliament, he said:

We want a stronger voice in such fields as education, housing, health and welfare, social and political development, and the running of our communities. We want to be self-sufficient rather than having to rely on the generosity of southern Canadians. In other words, we are no longer satisfied to be colonial subjects. We want to handle our own affairs, just as the people in southern Canada do.

Years later, Arvaluk's ideas are reflected in the Nunavut Agreement preamble: "to encourage self-reliance and the cultural and social well-being of Inuit." This alongside land and wildlife rights compensation.

Central to these expectations was language. As I stated at the 18th session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2019, "Language was a motivating factor for Inuit to work towards achieving a land claim agreement. Inuit envisioned better services and programs, in our language and reflecting Inuit ways of understanding and being." We expected that our formal education system would instill strong Inuktitut skills, but also that all aspects of governance – and our lives generally – would be embedded in Inuktitut, the lens for our worldview.

It has now been twenty-two years since the public government was created. Our expectations for Nunavut have not matched our reality. Instead, we see that Inuit lives have largely not improved.

Instead, we find ourselves in a housing crisis, with crumbling and inadequate infrastructure, grave food insecurity, and no real measures to protect our language. We see the stark inequities in our homeland. According to the 2016 census, there is a significant economic and wage discrepancy where non-Inuit make five times more than Inuit. Poverty is very real.

To further illustrate this point, a Nunatsiaq News article from September 2021 revealed that, "In 2017, non-resident workers in Nunavut earned a total of \$357 million — nearly 30 per cent of the total earnings made in the territory that year." This data is important. It demonstrates that the chronic lack of commitment and investment in good formal education and training for Inuit is driving poor socio-economic outcomes and costing Nunavut the future. We see Nunavut's economy disproportionately benefiting non-Inuit and Southern Canada.

Yet, in 2018, the then Premier of Nunavut Peter Taptuna was asked in the legislative assembly about Inuit training in the territorial government, his response was "it is a public government." The sentiment that all programs and services designed and developed by Nunavut's public government cannot specifically target the majority population of Inuit is not only absurd, but it goes against the Nunavut Agreement. Sadly, this sentiment continues today and is even widespread in the public government. We saw this with the passing of Bill 25, an Act to Amend the Education Act and Inuit Language Protection Act. This act not only reduced the government's responsibility for Inuktitut language training and delayed established plans, but it also took away parent's rights to demand Inuktitut language of instruction for their children. Under the guise of efficiency and accountability this government took away Inuit rights!

From the creation of the Government of Nunavut (GN), Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) has consistently lobbied for Inuktitut language of instruction. Since the year 2000 there have been at least 14 resolutions, and several reports, including one that described the current situation as "linguicide" that have called for change. NTI has participated in public meetings and made many submissions to Legislative Assembly. We have worked with partners such as the Coalition of Nunavut District Education Authorities to create policy proposals to protect our language. None of these efforts have compelled the Government of Nunavut to act.

Nunavut has a very young population. We must invest enough in our children. We know that success in early years, including in school, is linked to success later in life. Many Inuit face desperate social and economic situations; this, on top of children facing language and cultural discrimination in the school system.

Given that English and French is prioritized in our education systems we are teaching our children that their identity, their way of life and their language does not matter. This reinforces the lack of self-esteem and mental health issues of young people and further perpetuates collective crisis we face in areas such as housing, health, and the economy.

