



Inuit leaders from across Inuit Nunangat discussed new goals for the evolving Inuit-Federal partnership with Prime Minister Stephen Harper and members of his cabinet during the first meeting between Inuit leaders and representatives of the Crown on August 22, 2013 in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut. From Left to Right: Aboriginal Affairs Minister Bernard Valcourt, Environment Minister Leona Aglukkaq, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council; Thomas Anguti Johnson, President of the National Inuit Youth Council; Duane Smith, President of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (Canada); Terry Audla, President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami; Nellie Cournoyea, Chair of the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation; PM Harper, Cathy Towtongie, President of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated; Rebecca Kudloo, President of Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada; Joe Oliver, then Minister of Natural Resources, Sarah Leo, President of Nunatsiavut; Jobie Tukkiapik, President of Makivik Corporation. Photo: PMO

## Inuit—Stewards of the Arctic

Terry Audla

*The people of Inuit Nunangat have made the rocky transition from “Eskimo” to “Inuit” in a generation. The Inuit way of life has changed drastically in that time, with traditional practices from hunting and fishing to child-rearing and education being replaced with modern ways from the South. At the same time, Inuit possess a rich ancestral wisdom and a unique current perspective that can educate the world on issues from climate change to governance. Terry Audla, President of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, demystifies the stewards of the Arctic.*

**I**nuit look at our world in a completely unique way. The vantage point from our Arctic homeland—what we call Inuit Nunangat in the Inuit language—offers an expansive perspective of our world. Particularly in the context of our planet’s changing climate and our intensified efforts to explore additional resource development, assert modern sovereign lines and establish newfound transportation channels, our Arctic perch has offered Inuit an unmatched observatory to witness these enduring changes.

But Inuit are not—nor do we want to be—simply observers in a changing world. Inuit have a vision for our homeland and we will continue to be active, adaptive players in this modern world.

The remoteness and relative isolation of our communities for thousands of years has afforded Inuit the opportunity to learn from history. Inuit have only had earnest and sustained contact with the outside world for a generation. In fact, there are many Inuit alive today who were raised in nomadic communities, travelling the Arctic land and sea by dog-team and kayak, tracking game and marine mammals for survival.

In a matter of decades, Inuit have moved from living in igloos and skin tents to settling in static communities in (often inadequate and overcrowded) houses. Where we used to get our food exclusively from the land and sea, we now go grocery shopping for packaged food items from the South at exorbitant costs, supplementing our diet with traditional food sources regularly. Where providing for a family until very recently entailed hunting, gathering, sewing and building, for the majority of Inuit, it now means going to school and getting a job.

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We have made the rocky transition from “Eskimo” to “Inuit” in a generation and the incredibly rapid speed of this transition has come with its share of challenges to our communities and our people manifesting in a number of ways.

There is a troubling health gap between our population and the rest of Canada. Inuit life expectancy rates are much less than non-Inuit (9.8 years less for men and 8.5 years less for women) while infant mortality rates remain high. Inuit carry a strikingly disproportionate burden of communicable diseases such as

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tuberculosis—in 2011, the reported incidence rate of TB among Inuit was almost 254 times that for Canadian born, non-Aboriginals.

Inuit also face specific challenges to obtaining adequate supplies of safe, nutritionally balanced and culturally acceptable foods. A large-scale health survey found that the prevalence of food insecurity among Inuit was up to six times higher than the Canadian average and a separate study found that nearly 70 per cent of Inuit preschoolers were residing in food insecure households. This represents the highest documented food insecurity prevalence rate for any aboriginal population residing in a developed country.

Mental health and addiction treatment remain significant challenges in our communities. In 2004-2008, children and teenagers in Inuit Nunangat were more than 30 times more likely to die from suicide as were those in the rest of Canada.

Carving out a place in the world and finding new hope and meaning in an unfamiliar system presents difficult obstacles that are intensified by the devastating legacy of the Residential School System, as well as the government’s relocation of Inuit families to the high-Arctic and the alienation that comes from prejudice and misunderstanding.

As we work to combat these troubling challenges in our communities, we need to find ways to improve our economic prospects with innovative investments, new jobs and renewed confidence among our populations.

**W**ith the renewed global interest in our homeland as the next frontier, it is our commitment to be at the table ensuring respect for each other and our land that will determine our future.

It is important to remember that Inuit are the only players who have

the advantage of building on a rich ancestral wisdom that allowed us to thrive for thousands of years in one of the harshest climates. It is this intrinsic and pragmatic traditional knowledge that should ensure that we have an irreplaceable seat at any Arctic table.

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From our isolated Arctic observatory, we have witnessed the successes and the failures elsewhere in the world, taking note so we can chart a favourable course for our people.

As a result, Inuit have signed five very modern and comprehensive land claim agreements with the Crown that span almost 40 per cent of Canada’s landmass and about 50 per cent of its coastline. This is an area somewhere between the size of India and Australia. Indeed, as a result of these agreements, Inuit hold exclusive rights and title to collective lands equivalent to the size of Spain and Portugal.

The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement was signed in November, 1975. It was the first modern land claims agreement in Canada, driven by the massive James Bay hydroelectric development in northern Quebec. At the time, litigation was required to stop the bulldozers in their tracks and engage in land claim negotiations with Quebec and Canada. In this historic agreement, Inuit agreed to give up their exclusive use of their ancestral lands in exchange

for other guaranteed rights, in the form of land, wildlife management and financial compensation. This agreement was followed three decades later by the Nunavik Offshore Agreement, the fifth comprehensive Inuit land claim agreement to account for the exclusion of offshore areas in the 1975 agreement.

The Inuvialuit final agreement was signed in June 1984 after 10 years of negotiations. It was the first comprehensive land claim agreement signed north of the 60th parallel.

The Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, signed in May 1993 is the largest land claims agreement in the world. The agreement was the basis for the creation of the territory of Nunavut, which was officially established on April 1, 1999.

The Nunatsiavut Land Claim Agreement was the last to be signed, in May 2005. It provides for the establishment of the Nunatsiavut Government to represent Inuit and non-Inuit residents of the land claims area and also Labrador Inuit living throughout Canada.

Through the recent establishment of these agreements and the accompanying Inuit Land Claim Organizations across the North (Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, Nunavut

Tunngavik, Inc., Makivik Corporation, Nunatsiavut Government), we have established governance and decision-making structures to assist our 53 communities and nearly 60,000 Inuit as we establish our status in the modern world on issues that matter to us.

**C**limate change is a prime example. The Arctic has proven to be a harbinger of change in our global environment—the proverbial “canary in the coal mine.”

In recent years, Inuit have seen countless campaigns, oftentimes well-intentioned, emerging from the South to “Save the Arctic” but few of these campaigns actually make an effort to engage those who still live in and off the Arctic land and sea.

Inuit experience the ongoing changes in the Arctic firsthand and we know that much of what we are now seeing in our homeland did not originate here. “Save the Arctic” campaigns created in the South need to first look at what is happening closer to their own backyards before setting their sights on our homeland and Inuit must be actively involved in developing and implementing innovative solutions to the complex challenges we are facing in our region.

Despite the long history of efforts towards cooperation, Inuit still find it difficult to raise awareness among those not resident in Inuit Nunangat about the value of our governance and decision-making systems, as well as our knowledge and our Arctic vision.

It is troubling when our homegrown capacity to address the intensifying pressures we are witnessing within our homeland is discounted. That is why Inuit must continue to assert ourselves as modern participants in today’s world. Much of my work involves communicating these messages to audiences in the nation’s capital, across the country, and to some international audiences as well on a wide spectrum of policy issues affecting the Arctic.

Despite the challenges, we are making strides and I have great hope for our communities and our people now and in the coming generations.

Because, in the end, Inuit remain the stewards of the Arctic. We are its keepers and will continue to be for millennia to come. **P**

*Terry Audla is President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), representing nearly 60,000 Inuit in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, northern Quebec and northern Labrador. president@itk.ca  
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