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Toward North Corps

Nurturing the Spirit of Inuit Independence while Pre-Empting a Movement for Inuit Secession

It’s time for a circumpolar North Corps program, modeled on the Peace Corps, to help the North achieve its full potential

Securing the Northern Front

In the years since the nail-biter of a referendum on Québec separation held on 30 October 1995, Québec and Anglo-Canada have worked hard to patch up their differences, and on 22 November 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper preempted a renewed effort by Québec separatists to assert their enduring nationhood in yet another referendum that would unravel the Canadian confederation, and “surprised the House of Commons […] by announcing his party wants to recognize Québec as nation within a united Canada” (Weeks 2006).

For the moment, the issue of Québec’s distinctiveness, and its yearning for independence, seems to have been alleviated, but the perennial nature of this issue, across so many generations, suggests it will inevitably resurface again, and when it does, the role of the Arctic as a potential strategic counter-balance to an independent Québec will have to be assessed, as will its role as part of the re-emerging “Arctic front” as the world community races to exploit the strategic and economic opportunities of a polar thaw.

In anticipation of a future secessionist threat from Québec or an external challenge to Canada’s Arctic sovereignty, a tighter integration of the Inuit homeland with the rest of Anglo-Canada would go far to enhance the bond that unites Canada, north and south, fostering greater loyalty to Canada among the people of the Arctic. This can be achieved by a closer collaboration between Ottawa and Nunavut in their land claims implementation and co-management efforts, and through continued recruitment, training, and deployment of Canadian Rangers that patrol the Arctic coast, engage in surveillance, and assist in search and rescue in partnership with the crown.

But just as the aspiration of Québec to become independent will likely never entirely be extinguished, it is possible that a genuine desire by the Inuit for independence might also emerge. In Greenland, which is one of the world’s largest, remotest, and poorest islands, and which within the context of long-term global warming shows many potential attributes of sovereign independence—with its own language, a distinct culture, vast offshore and potential onshore resources—the case for independence, and to end its colonial dependency on Denmark, is indeed compelling.

Between Inuit Dependency and Independence

For the Inuit of North America, who inhabit the coastal strip along the con-
tinent’s northern shore as well as the islands further north, the issue is more complicated—owing to their habitation of the North American mainland where the United States and Canada have asserted formal sovereignty, and to the resolved nature of their land claims, through which the Inuit and the national governments have mutually recognized one another, and agreed to subordinate tribal sovereignty to that of the state with whom they have partnered through a lengthy series of negotiations and the formal implementation of their final accords, which include “cede and surrender” clauses legally extinguishing Aboriginal title to their homelands.

But just because the Inuit have entered into these binding, constitutional arrangements does not mean that they will always accept their legitimacy, particularly in light of the passionate reaction against the extinguishment clause, and what has been perceived by many Inuit to be a less than candid, or at least less than clear, explanation by their leadership of the full extent and implications of their surrender of Aboriginal rights and title. In the effort to sell the land claims as negotiated to the beneficiaries who must ratify the accords, Aboriginal leaders have tended to understate the risks inherent in the surrender and to emphasize the benefits.

As time passes, and in particular as the climate warms and the Arctic basin opens up to all manner of new external influences, challenges, and opportunities, the yearnings for more formal Inuit independence could begin to be felt. Especially if the bold and ambitious Nunavut experiment continues to disappoint the Inuit, and if the Inuit continue to perceive indifference and at times bad faith from Ottawa when it comes to implementation of their land claim accord.

As recalled by Andrea Mandel-Campbell in her January 2005 Walrus magazine article, “Who Controls Canada’s Arctic?” during the middle of the twentieth century,

Ottawa largely neglected the region’s sparse aboriginal population, which suffered from rampant tuberculosis, lack of housing, and even starvation. The dire situation facing the Inuit forced St. Laurent to admit at the time that Ottawa had “administered these vast territories of the north in an almost continuing state of absence of mind” (Mandel-Campbell 2005).

After Prime Minister John Diefenbaker launched “what became known as a golden age in Arctic science and research during the 1960s and 1970s,” she adds that a general decline set in and since the 1980s, “Canada’s underfunded programs in Arctic research have lagged behind most other northern nations” (Mandel-Campbell 2005). Part of the problem, Mandel-Campbell writes, is that while Canada is an Arctic state, “most Canadians do live within one hundred miles of the border, and are more obsessed with U.S. trade and culture than a dwindling scientific and military presence in the North,” and as a consequence, “the Arctic remains an imagined place far from their daily realities” (Mandel-Campbell 2005).

The continuing perception of neglect, when combined with the historical grievance from broken promises, mistreatment, and cultural insensitivity during the 1950s relocation of the “High Arctic Exile” families, and further
compounded by the despair experienced in the communities where shockingly high youth suicide rates remain a deep social wound, could become politically potent, and boil over to rage—and that rage, if no longer directed inward but instead becomes directed outward, toward the government and its continuing neglect, could result in a bona fide independence movement. This is partly why Ottawa is now so intent on jump-starting the economic development of Nunavut, having lately recognized the strategic risk of continued northern underdevelopment and committing last spring to the establishment of the Northern Economic Development Agency based in Iqaluit, reiterated in its Northern Strategy unveiled this past summer.

Aspirations for Arctic Sovereignty

But the seeds of an Inuit independence movement are already planted, as reflected in the April 2009 Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Arctic Sovereignty, which stopped short of declaring independence but established a compelling legal, historical, and political context for one to later emerge—should the modern state fail to assert Arctic sovereignty in a manner that is respectful of Inuit values and inclusive of Inuit participation. When communism collapsed in Europe, many sovereign political entities that did not adequately or justly address the aspirations of their underlying nations, tribes, or social groups—which had until then been content with increased autonomy within the modern state—quickly broke apart, fracturing into their constituent parts as they found sovereign expression in a smaller form. Many long-standing, internationally recognized constitutional frameworks and formal sovereign structures of governance evaporated between 1989 and 1991—as if works of fiction.

Should Nunavut fail, and other Inuit regions—whether governed by municipal, territorial, or tribal systems of governance—continue to stagnate and to endure the festering persistence of despair, their failure could turn Canada’s bold experiment in Aboriginal self-governance into a catalyst of a secession struggle, much as the original structures of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act—in particular the twenty-year window when exclusive Native title to lands and shareholder equity was at risk, and newborns were excluded from the claim—left many Alaska Natives with the perception that their land claim was designed either to fail, or worse, to eradicate Native culture, as chronicled by Thomas Berger in Village Journey.

This fueled a Native sovereignty movement that swept like a prairie fire across village Alaska during the 1980s, culminating in an Inupiat secession threat in 1992, Alaska’s very own Balkanization crisis. So far, however, Inuit aspirations for independence have been largely episodic, ebbing and flowing without a sustained build-up of momentum, enabling decisive government action to preempt a formal independence movement—thus far at least. And with the exception of Greenland, there is currently no active movement to form an independent Inuit nation, at least none that commands a significant political following. But that does not mean this always will be the case. In Canada, as in Alaska, movements for secession have been thus far contained within the broader sovereign and constitutional framework of their countries. In Alaska, when Balkanization appeared to be a clear and present danger to the unity of the state, the Inupiat leadership called for a fifty-first state, but not their own country.
And in Canada, during the formation of Nunavut, the Inuit seceded from the Northwest Territories to form their very own territory, while remaining a part of Canada—indeed helping Canada to more credibly assert sovereignty in the Arctic in the process. And with the formation of the North Slope Borough in Alaska, the Inupiat remained part of both the United States, and part of Alaska, with their own municipal authority but without their own state-level government.

Until now, the Greenlandic Inuit have remained part of Denmark, albeit with their own autonomous Home Rule government, with substantial authority on domestic issues and an increasing role in diplomatic and strategic affairs—with an eye to eventually gaining formal independence once they achieve economic self-sufficiency, made possible in large measure by the effects of global warming, as evident in their decisive “Yes” vote in the non-binding referendum on Greenlandic independence on 26 November 2008. But it remains to be seen if the Inuit aspiration for sovereignty and that of the modern state can remain integrated in a mutually reinforcing and balanced fashion, especially if the Arctic demographic balance begins to shift as greatly and as rapidly as seen in the Yukon during the Klondike Gold Rush, or like Alaska experienced during World War II and in the years preceding statehood, when a non-Native influx forever altered the political balance in favor of non-Native interests—or even more recently, as seen in Yellowknife during the Diamond Rush of the 1990s, with its indigenous Native majority becoming a minority in less than a single decade, making an indigenous assertion of sovereignty that much harder to implement.

Even along the Arctic coast, where the Inuit maintain their demographic predominance, the larger administrative centers such as Barrow, Inuvik, Iqaluit, and Nuuk have seen a dramatic influx of non-Inuit, helping to fulfill the need for skilled workers to staff the positions in the new governments—as what some scholars have recently described as the “Aboriginal Industry” sets up shop purportedly to help Natives achieve self-government, but then becomes a permanent drain on the Arctic economy, siphoning off resources meant for the Inuit and desperately needed in the villages into the coffers of consultancies that ultimately contribute to a continued economic stagnation that persists at the village level, where jobs remain scarce, and marketable skills continue to elude local residents who long to participate as equals in the new, northern economy.

New Thinking Required

Even a decade after Nunavut was formed, a crisis persists, with hope in retreat and despair on the rise—requiring the attention of the highest levels of the Government of Canada, and the return of the famed retired B. C. Supreme Court Justice, Thomas Berger, to facilitate a solution. At a constitutional conference in Yellowknife in 1995, one Dene leader noted in his remarks to the delegates that behind every chief, behind every tribal leader, stood a non-Native consultant.

Fifteen years later, that situation remains largely unchanged—though a much-needed public discussion has at last begun, as awareness of the depths of this problem leapt into Canada’s national consciousness in 2009 with publication by McGill-Queen’s University Press of the controversial but widely read and nationally debated book, Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry. The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation (Widdowson & Howard 2008). This work was selected as just one of five Canadian books chosen to stand as final-
ists for the prestigious 2009 Donner Prize, though it was not the eventual winner. Nonetheless, their work has transformed the debate in Canada on how best to address the issue of indigenous sovereignty, shining a much-needed light on the problem of the inherent corrupting influence of what they have effectively dubbed the “Aboriginal industry.” In a review of their book in the National Post, Kevin Libin wrote that the authors:

identify the main culprits as the primarily non-native agents such as lawyers, consultants and anthropologists who thrive on our segregated policy approach to First Nations people. The tens of billions of dollars a year channelled to reserves and Canada’s North from governments and industrialists, they argue, attracts mercenaries in swarms, manipulating Natives to inflate land claim grievances, demand industry payoffs and pressure politicians for more funding with few strings attached (Libin 2008).

Ironically, the movement for greater Inuit self-governance has unwittingly contributed to the declining demographic prominence of the Inuit in their homeland, as a new class of government administrators migrate north to fill the many positions left vacant owing to the continued lack of fully credentialed locals with the required degrees and accreditations.

Rather than revolutionize these new job descriptions to reflect the cultural, political, and educational realities of the Arctic, and commit to a massive on-the-job training program on the scale of the U.S. Peace Corps, a veritable Marshall Plan of northern development to enable the creation of a truly Inuit government, Nunavut has instead become as dependent upon non-indigenous experts as the old territorial government the Inuit worked so hard to separate from. Thomas Berger has proposed a recommitment to the preservation of Inuit language and culture as the backbone of the new government, but his program requires a substantial commitment of new educational funds to be viable. In the meantime, Nunavut continues to be pulled in two directions, as the dueling assertions of state and Inuit sovereignty continue to collide.

Berger delivered the seventeenth annual John Holmes Memorial Lecture at the Glendon Campus of York University in Toronto on 31 March, 2009, on the topic of “From the Mackenzie Valley to Nunavut. Northern Challenges,” in which he noted “30,000 people live in Nunavut on a land the size of India,” and while 85 percent of its population is Inuit, only about 50 percent of government employees come from that background, doing mostly lesser-paying jobs. The problem lies in education, because there are not enough qualified Inuit to fill the jobs requiring higher skills” (Kemeny 2009).

Berger reaffirmed his belief that “Canada has an obligation to help the Inuit improve their situation and take their place in running their own affairs,” adding that “societies find strength in diversity,” and concluding that “we have an obligation to keep our promise to help them succeed” (Kemeny 2009).

But add to this the new uncertainties and challenges of climate change, which could usher forth a new wave of migration of non-Inuit into the Arctic, and the situation promises to become even more complex—and finding a bal-
ance that reconciles the interests and sovereign aspirations of the Inuit and the modern state will become even harder to strike. Mandel-Campbell considers a solution proffered by Canadian Arctic sovereignty expert, and author of *Politics of the Northwest Passage*, Franklyn Griffiths, to overcome what he calls Canada’s “two-faced approach to sovereignty” (Mandel-Campbell 2005). As she describes it, Griffiths advocates the establishment of a consultative committee for the archipelago similar in design to the Arctic Council, a Canadian-inspired international body, which brings together the world’s eight circumpolar countries and aboriginal groups. The committee would serve as a forum for government departments to consult with the Inuit on such issues as shipping and seabed mapping. “We should be taking the lead from the Inuit,” says Griffiths (Mandel-Campbell 2005).

Such an approach is precisely what the Inuit have called for in their Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Arctic Sovereignty at Tromsø, Norway, on 28 April 2009—where they reaffirmed their desire to achieve a synthesis of these two competing perspectives on sovereignty, and thereby find a balance in the sovereign aspirations of the Inuit and the modern state throughout the Arctic. Section 4.3 of the declaration observes, “[i]ssues of sovereignty and sovereign rights in the Arctic have become inextricably linked to issues of self-determination in the Arctic. Inuit and Arctic states must, therefore, work together closely and constructively to chart the future of the Arctic” (Inuit Circumpolar Council 2009a). As ICC chair Patricia Cochran explained, “[w]e have lived here for thousands and thousands of years and by making this declaration, we are saying to those who want to use Inuit Nunaat for their own purposes, you must talk to us and respect our rights” (Inuit Circumpolar Council 2009b). ICC vice-chair Duane Smith added that the declaration’s provisions “make it clear that it is in the interests of states, industry, and others to include us partners in the new Arctic, and to respect our land claims and self-government agreements” (Inuit Circumpolar Council 2009b).

Beyond the Nunavut Project. Time for North Corps

To help align the interests of the Inuit and the modern states with whom their destinies are intertwined, and to ensure that the opportunities and not just the challenges of Arctic sovereignty are maximized, a program even more ambitious than that called for by Thomas Berger with his proposed Nunavut Project is required. Think “Marshall Plan” in scale, and “Peace Corps” in institutional endurance. In short, what is needed is the formation of circumpolar North Corps, a global program to catalyze the full economic and social development of the North, and help unite the two solitudes of north and south in a manner that is both enduring and uplifting.

North Corps would require the investment and commitment of all the Arctic states, and like the Peace Corps would rely on the voluntarism of our best and brightest students, our mid-career professionals, even our active retirees, who would venture north for a year or two, and whose knowledge and skills will help stimulate a wave of growth and development much as we have seen in the “Far
South” ever since President Kennedy proudly unveiled this innovative army of educators in 1961.

Like the Peace Corps, North Corps would not need expensive salaries and benefits packages as demanded by the growing civil services of the northern territories, whose unions are adept at padding wage and benefits packages, straining the capacity of northern governments to remain self-governing. It would not rely on antiquated job descriptions from the failed bureaucracies of yesterday, but instead would infuse the North with new talent, new skills, new insights, a spirit of innovation, not bureaucratization. It would help reduce dependency on what Widdowson et al. describe as a self-aggrandizing “Aboriginal Industry” and instead foster a spirit of true self-reliance, and dare say even a spirit of independence. But this independent spirit would be one that could and would readily co-exist with the generosity of the Arctic nations whose youth donated their time and freely shared their skills to help the North achieve its full potential, thereby strengthening the bond that unites north and south.

With the formation of the North Corps program, we will be able to shatter the constraints of the old mold, and help transform the North, harnessing the spirit of independence while healing the very sources of despair. In this way, the spirit of Inuit independence can be rekindled, but without the risks or dangers of a true movement for secession—making Canada that much stronger along the way.

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