

THE DISASTER OF NUNAVUT

Nunavut cannot be the answer to Inuit social problems because it is economically and culturally unviable. The racially defined territory's existence will depend almost entirely on federal transfers, and attempting to artificially retain Inuit culture will isolate Inuit people further from the modern world. Nunavut will even harm the privileged native elite who benefit financially from the new arrangements, since Inuit social pathologies can be solved only through policies that facilitate their participation in an increasingly global economy and society.

Le Nunavut ne saurait être la réponse aux problèmes sociaux que vivent les Inuit, car il n'est pas viable aux plans économique et culturel. Fondée sur l'appartenance raciale, la nouvelle entité territoriale sera presque complètement dépendante des transferts fédéraux. Par ailleurs, les tentatives de conserver artificiellement la culture Inuit ne feront qu'isoler davantage ce peuple de la modernité. Le Nunavut aura même des effets négatifs sur l'élite Inuit qui bénéficie financièrement du nouvel accord avec le gouvernement fédéral, puisque les problèmes sociaux que vivent les membres de cette communauté ne pourront être réglés que par des mesures qui favorisent leur participation à l'économie et à la société globales.

Albert Howard and Frances Widdowson

On April 1, 1999, Canada's newest territory — Nunavut — came into existence. The celebrations for “Nunavut Day” were in the planning stages for over a year, and the formation of the new territory was enthusiastically welcomed by the federal government and various Inuit leaders. Ottawa maintained that the new territory would spark a renaissance for Inuit people by enabling them to gain control over their political destiny. Inuit leaders argued that such control would put their people on the road to solving the terrible social problems that plague the region. As Jose Kusugak, president of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, put it: “When you have a totally different race of people running your lives, it can create a terrible feeling of uselessness.”

The celebration of Nunavut's formation is bound to be short-lived, however. Contrary to popular belief, the advent of Nunavut will not enable the Inuit to assert more control over their lives and thereby improve social conditions in their communities. In fact, it will exacerbate the Inuit's problems and their dependency on federal transfers. The reason is that the territory is fundamentally unviable.

Both the federal government and the Inuit leadership assume that the preservation of Inuit culture will

help create an economy in Nunavut, but how or why this will occur has never been explained. No feasibility studies have been done for the territory, and there has been no attempt to investigate whether a culture rooted in subsistence practices is compatible with participation in a modern economy and society. Contrary to popular belief, artificially resurrecting Inuit culture by means of a new territorial apparatus will actually isolate Inuit people further from the rest of the world, thus perpetuating the “feeling of uselessness” to which Kusugak refers.

Nunavut is unviable because eastern arctic communities did not arise out of particular economic enterprises or industries. They were artificially developed over the last 50 years by the federal government for the purposes of defence and the convenient provision of services to the nomadic Inuit population. The communities have no economic base and are unlikely to acquire one. Elementary market research would eliminate the Nunavut territory as a prospect for economic ventures. High living expenses, a lack of job skills, the absence of markets, difficulty in obtaining raw resources and punishing transportation costs are the economic reality in Nunavut. The territory cannot compete with other areas of Canada in the production

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of goods. With the exception of two mines, the territory exists solely for the purpose of providing services for the Inuit population in the communities. Because this population is increasing at a rate four times the national average, such dependency can only worsen with time. As Goo Arlooktoo, an Inuit cabinet minister in the Northwest Territories, explains "... unless the Nunavut government is able to come up with some major economic prospects ... The population growth will exceed the amount of money the territory will have to spend on its programs, especially housing."

The optimism surrounding the formation of Nunavut is mainly a result of disinformation. The Inuit have been misled about the benefits they will receive after territorial division. The federal government, territorial bureaucrats and lawyers working for Inuit organizations have argued that government payouts distributed from the land claims settlement will benefit all Inuit, while the new territorial government will create many new jobs in the communities. As a result, there was no questioning of the economic viability of Nunavut in the recent election or in the years leading up to it. Inuit voters were not exposed to analysis or inquiry into the feasibility of this initiative — just the promise of an ethnically-cleansed utopia where, free from a "totally different race of people" running their lives, they would receive money without producing anything.

What the Inuit have yet to realize is that the land claims money will not be distributed to Nunavut's population. Instead it will be used to set up "economic development" corporations in the new territory. Any new jobs that are created will be sinecures in government departments, boards and committees. Such employment is not productive in any way; it is essentially just a monetary transfer from the federal gov-

ernment. The "jobs" in question will not sustain a productive and self-sufficient economy, and survival of businesses in the territory will depend on government patronage.

The function of these sinecures and artificial businesses is to maintain what is actually the primary industry in Nunavut — getting more money from the federal government. The existence of this industry was recognized openly by Jose Kusugak in the territorial newspaper, *News/North*, on March 1, 1999: "If you're going to run for Nunavut politics, you've got to have that ability to fight. You're not going to love your way through politics. If you're going to approach Ottawa, whose immediate goal is to say there's not enough money, they're not going to hand it over because you're such a nice guy."

Those who do not wish to admit that Nunavut will be almost entirely dependent on federal transfers customarily resort to the argument that the land claims agreement will enable the Inuit to collect royalties from resource developments, thereby lessening their dependency. But Article 25 of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement states that the Inuit are only entitled to 50 per cent of the first \$2 million of resource royalties received each year by the federal government, and five per cent of any additional royalties. On average, the federal government has collected only \$2.2 million a year in royalties from mines in Nunavut, so any financial benefits to the Inuit will be miniscule. Applying the Nunavut land claims formula to the royalties received results in a pay-out of only \$46/year to each beneficiary — hardly a sum to set the Inuit on the road to self-sufficiency.

But even if more resources were extracted and the share of royalties increased, such developments would still not solve the problems of the Inuit. The social problems in Nunavut stem from the fact that Inuit are encouraged to remain marginalized and isolated from the global community. They are dependent because they continue to retain cultural attributes that are suited to an earlier historical period, and as a result, are unable to participate in Canadian society. The adoption of post-Enlightenment scientific methodology is seen as a form of "cultural loss," resulting in shockingly low levels of educational achievement in the territory. Fewer than 20 per cent of Inuit children in Nunavut graduate from high school, and half the population has not reached a grade nine level.

The promotion of cultural characteristics associated with subsistence living also inhibits the development of attitudes and values necessary for employment in modern society. Tardiness, absenteeism, and difficulty in working without supervision are common

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problems for most Inuit workers. Their culture is based on a life dominated by nature, while modern production is rooted in the efficient organization of human labour resources, sophisticated technology and a much greater control over the environment and society. The disciplines of industrialization are alien to aboriginal culture. Attitudes and values arising from a subsistence lifestyle are therefore a barrier to the social and political development of Inuit people. Their subsistence-based culture poses an obstacle to their ability to make credible political demands, since their non-participation in the Canadian work force renders them unable to threaten a withdrawal of productivity.

The problems created by artificial retention of Inuit culture are exacerbated when Inuit are encouraged to look backward for solutions by focusing on the traditions of elders rather than the aspirations of youth. While Nunavut leaders constantly argue that elders should be involved in the policy-making process, Inuit youth are either ignored or encouraged to return to their hunting and gathering roots. But Inuit youth in Nunavut are bored because they lack intellectual stimulation in the settlements. Inuit culture, which was associated with eking out an existence on an ungenerous land, is unable to meet the needs of young people living in a rapidly changing world with a great deal of leisure time. The policy of promoting traditional skills instead of educational achievement has denied Inuit youth access to

ideas and pursuits that would help them to understand and become producers in the modern world. As a result, they have no vision or comprehension of how they will fit into the future, and, not surprisingly, they often resort to substance abuse and even suicide to escape anomie.

The formation of Nunavut is advocated on the grounds that it will help the Inuit restore their cultural identity, raise their collective self-esteem and consequently reduce the social dysfunction that exists in the communities. But the survival of a culture depends on what it has to offer the rest of the world. Inuit culture was necessary for survival in an age characterized by polished stone implements — a stage of history that was gradually phased out in other parts of the world with the development of iron metallurgy 5,000 years ago. It is based on a subsistence economy, a minimal understanding of the material forces at work in the universe, and kinship loyalties, rather than wider conceptions of social justice and human rights. Apart from a few pieces of technology specific to the arctic — such as the kayak — no aspect of Inuit culture can

be applied in a modern economy in which large labour surpluses are extracted, accumulated and distributed. The knowledge of Inuit elders is based on a world that changed very slowly. It provides little understanding of how Inuit people can participate in a rapidly developing global economy and society. As a result, “listening to the elders” cannot provide the basis for eradicating social pathology in the communities, or helping the

Inuit to overcome their marginalization.

The function of the Nunavut government is to maintain Inuit culture in the neolithic period, preserving it as a museum piece for the rest of the world to observe. This will have disastrous implications for all Inuit people living in the territory. Inuit people need the same things other human beings do: comfort and security, health care, education and inclusion in the global community. They require par-



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Culture clash?

ticipation in, not isolation from, the ongoing progression of humanity.

But the promise made with the formation of Nunavut is free money for all Inuit and no obligations to humanity as a whole — with no participation beyond getting money from land claims and other legalistic or bureaucratic procedures. The Nunavut land claim was negotiated over a period of 20 years. (One can only speculate about the extent of the legal fees that were generated.) The new Nunavut government will require \$650 million a year from the federal government — for a population of 22,000 Inuit. Much of this money will be spent on unviable economic initiatives, the maintenance of needlessly complex political structures, and fees for legal and anthropological “advisors” who will be responsible for developing a wide variety of “culturally sensitive” programs in the new territory. This will provide privileges for a few powerful community members and entrench an old boys’ network of consultants and bureaucrats, while the next generation of Inuit languish in poverty and despair.

The federal government’s enthusiastic support for Nunavut is a continuation of its longstanding policy of avoiding responsibility for the Inuit and for other aboriginal peoples of Canada. In the early days of contact, Ottawa encouraged the Inuit to remain hunters and gatherers because it wanted to discourage their dependence on relief payments. It abandoned this strategy only when the Inuit were near starvation, and it even tried to relocate some communities in an attempt to prolong their subsistence lifestyle. When Ottawa did eventually begin to provide services to the Inuit, it transferred the responsibility for health care and education to missionaries, who were more interested in converting the Inuit to Christianity than in helping them understand and participate in the modern world.

With the formation of Nunavut, the federal government is again trying to off-load its responsibility. But this time it is transferring it to a privileged native elite and the parasitic aboriginal industry that has grown up around the land claims settlements. The federal government has always stressed that Nunavut will allow Inuit to control their own lives and improve their social circumstances. So when Nunavut fails to solve Inuit dependency or the terrible social problems plaguing the communities, it will be the Inuit themselves, not the federal government, who will shoulder the blame for the fiasco.

Commentaries on the creation of Nunavut range from unabashed cheerleading to concerns that solving Inuit problems will be a “challenge” for the new territory. No one states the obvious — that Nunavut is economically unviable and culturally isolationist, and

therefore cannot possibly solve Inuit problems. Despite the disaster looming, there is a widespread reluctance to criticize the creation of Nunavut, for fear that this will be deemed hostile to Inuit aspirations. But it is the aboriginal industry, not Inuit people themselves, who are spearheading the initiative. In the 1960s, when the idea of dividing the territories was first raised, the Inuit had no interest in the initiative. It was not until various lawyers, linguists, anthropologists, consultants, bureaucrats and accountants convinced the Inuit that they would benefit collectively as shareholders in a racially determined economy and society that the idea gained popular support.

The reality, however, is that Nunavut will be harmful to all Inuit, even the privileged leadership who will share in the spoils of the land claims monies. It will force them to live the lie that they have inherent “differences” that justify their separation from the rest of humanity. This fundamental axiom of racism will be a constant source of frustration for Inuit people, perpetuating the resentment and contempt that already exist towards non-aboriginals. It will encourage Inuit people to continuously blame “whites” for their problems, thus preventing them from recognizing the commonalities that they share with all peoples who are marginalized and exploited by the current economic system.

The formation of Nunavut is just another attempt to warehouse the Inuit and to pretend that something is being done to improve their circumstances. Instead of helping to bridge the gap between the neolithic period and the 21st century, the creation of Nunavut institutionalizes Inuit separation from the modern world. Inuit people need improvements in education, health care and housing, but these services are being given up in exchange for atavistic programs that encourage a return to “the land” and “traditional values.” The Inuit have as much capacity to become producers of economic value as everyone else, but first the federal government must ensure that they are given access to quality services tailored to their historical circumstances and marginalized position in society. But initiatives such as Nunavut deny them access to the resources they need and perpetuate their dependency on the very people who profit from their misery.

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