



Passing The Arctic Council Torch
Okalik Eegeesiak, ICC Chair | Washington, DC | September 30, 2014

The Canadian Chairmanship – The Story So Far

(check against delivery)

I would like to thank the organizers for arranging this event and for the opportunity to participate. As many of you know, I was elected as the international Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) in July of this year. Inuit are an international people. ICC International represents more than 150,000 Inuit in Chukotka, Alaska, Canada and Greenland.

Our relationship at ICC is based on a common culture and language. So I am new to the processes of the Arctic Council and this will be a learning experience for me. Conferences like this one are very good opportunities for me to hear from people who have been close to the work of the Council over the past few years. I am also very pleased to have a chance to meet some of the American team who will very soon be taking leadership of the Council.

Even though I am new to the Arctic Council, I am not new to Arctic issues affecting Inuit. My comments today are therefore not intended to review and analyze the Arctic Council meetings that have taken place over the past 18 months. I want to focus more on matters of importance to Inuit into the future—including our role in the Arctic Council. The Arctic today is experiencing unprecedented attention. As we face unprecedented globalization, I often think about how Inuit envision the Arctic in 2020, 2050 and beyond. Of course this is why ICC was established.

To a lot of people, the Arctic is a remote and empty place. Many interested parties are trying to design new ways to govern the Arctic, new ways to extract its wealth and new ways to travel through the region. Inuit give the Arctic a human face. But we constantly have to remind the world that we are here. We have our own systems of governance already. Inuit in Alaska, Canada and Greenland have negotiated with our respective national governments to secure a range of political, social and economic rights. Things have not progressed as much in Chukotka.

In any case, we don't see a governance vacuum in the Arctic.

In the Arctic Council there is a lot of important work going on. Working groups and task forces are thinking about issues like climate change, marine transportation, nonrenewable resource development, trans-boundary pollution and arctic biodiversity. But as Inuit, we do not think about these issues in a detached, scientific way. These issues and many others affect us day to

day. We look at these issues from the perspective of what impact they will have on our language, our culture and traditions, and on the future of our children and communities. In order for us to contribute to the sustainable development of our communities we need to ensure a healthier, housed, and experienced Inuit labour force. The potential of a diversified Arctic economy in nonrenewable and renewable resource development must be matched by educated and trained Inuit. And it is critically important that Inuit are grounded by our culture and our respect for the lands and waters where we live. I think this represents a very different perspective than the one taken by many of the government officials and scientists who participate in Arctic Council activities.

So now let me say a few things about my impressions of Canada's chairmanship of the Arctic Council so far. The theme of Canada's chairmanship program is "Development for the People of the North" and Minister Aglukkak has stressed that Canada wants to put the interests of Northerners first. It is probably too early to tell whether Canada has accomplished its goal to its own satisfaction. Over the next few months there will be lots of negotiation around deliverables for the Ministerial meeting in Iqaluit next spring. I took part in the inaugural meeting of the Arctic Economic Council as Tom reported. I know this was a priority issue for Canada; however, Inuit will need to carefully watch developments in this new organization and determine how we might want to engage with it.

From the perspective of Inuit, there is an almost overwhelming amount of important work going on in the Arctic Council. With our limited resources we struggle to keep up. We don't currently have the capacity to attend and contribute in all working groups and activities as much as we would like. So we are watching to see if there is substantive progress on issues like the Permanent Participant capacity building workshop that will take place in Yellowknife in October. In my view it is critically important that ICC continues to play a strong role in forums like the Arctic Council.

As an organization, ICC predates the Arctic Council by about 20 years. In the 1970s our Inuit leadership saw the need for us to come together to deal with exactly the kinds of challenges we are facing today. But as Inuit we have always understood that change in the Arctic brings opportunities as well as challenges. As the International Chair of ICC it is my duty to stand up for sustainable Inuit communities with organizational capacity. Inuit have always been incredibly resilient and capable of adapting to challenging environments and successive governments.

Thank you.

Okalik Egeesiak