

From Kangiqsualujjuaq to Copenhagen: A Personal Journey

MARY SIMON, *Canadian Ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark*
and

Canadian Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs

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Honoured guests, elders, delegates, with a special thanks to Audrey [McLaughlin] and the Steering Committee for the excellent work and leadership in preparing this conference. What a pleasure it is for me to be here with you today. It is quite an exceptional experience to look out over the room and see so many familiar faces from across the circumpolar region. My sincere greetings to all of you.

I have been asked to share with you today some of my experiences, both personal and professional, and how I came to be appointed Canadian Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs, and more recently, Canadian Ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark. As a matter of fact, I just moved and took up my post in Copenhagen only three weeks ago.

To begin I would first like to talk to you about some of background on my “beginnings” in Kangiqsualujjuaq on the western shores of Ungava Bay in Nunavik.

I was born in Arctic Quebec, now known as Nunavik, in the small village of Kangiqsualujjuaq on the western shore of Ungava Bay. My mother is Inuk

and my father, from the south, was managing the local Hudson Bay Company post. I spent my adolescence in the North, living a very traditional lifestyle. We camped, lived on the land, hunted and gathered food, made our own clothes and, most importantly, maintained an active connection with our Inuit heritage and language.

Part of my cultural tradition, as an Inuk, is the strong bonds that are created across the generations. Some of the most influential and most enduring are those that are created between elders and youth. My maternal grandmother, Jeannie, certainly one of the most important people in my life, was my teacher and mentor. My own mother took on that role later in my life and her influence continues today.

They both instilled in me a boundless energy for learning and self-improvement. They also taught me to always be proud of whom I was and at the same time to keep my mind open to other points of view. From my father's side of the family, I had the good fortune of learning about the "south" and the "non-native world" from a man who had a profound love and respect for the North, its people and its natural beauty, but who also recognized and valued what the South could offer his family.

These influences have served me well as my people and I were propelled through a period of intensive and rapid change. In the late 1940s, when I was born, government had just "discovered" us and thus began the move off the land to centralized communities, the relocation of families, the delivery of government health and social support programs—in short the effort to keep us in one place so we could be better administered. Now, fifty years later, Inuit are part of the political fabric of Canada.

As I grew older, however, I quickly found that there was one system in Canada for "white people" and another for Aboriginal people. I learned the words "racism" and "discrimination"—concepts that were totally foreign to me in

my early days.

There are two root words in Inuktitut: *ilira* and *kappia* that were used by Inuit to describe the combination of fear, respect and nervous apprehension they felt about the southerners that came to the North. These feelings permeated our lives and our relationship with southerners and southern institutions. It was many years before I gained the self-confidence to assert myself in the non-Aboriginal world.

I began working on Aboriginal rights issues in the early 1970s. My first real experience was during the negotiations for the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, which grew out of an important legal decision in Quebec. This agreement was the first comprehensive land claim agreement in Canada. Matters of land ownership, rights to resources, compensation for damages and local and regional government were successfully concluded.

We were a rag-tag, poorly funded group of Inuit and Cree up against governments and very powerful industrial interests. When the Quebec government announced that the largest hydroelectric development project in the world was to be built on our lands, we were more or less forced into the world of white politicians and businessmen.

I have these vivid memories of sitting in darkened boardrooms somewhere inside a skyscraper in Montreal wondering “what on earth am I doing here?” I remember walking into those rooms filled with fear. But at the same time we knew that many people back home were counting on us to be the link between them and the powers that were affecting their lives. We had no choice—we had to do it.

We succeeded. We got our agreement. It was painful and many compromises were made. The most difficult was the full surrender and final extinguishment of our Aboriginal rights to the territory covered by the Agreement. There are some of our people, to this day, who refuse to accept these

extinguishment provisions. Nevertheless, with its many weaknesses, this Agreement provided our people with a foundation on which to build new relationships within Canadian society. I am proud to have helped build that foundation during my association with Makivik Corporation, the organization responsible for the implementation of this Agreement, as vice-president from 1978-1982 and president from 1982-1985.

As we worked to implement the Agreement, we gained experience and were able to develop relationships with other Aboriginal peoples in Canada and later with indigenous peoples around the world. Through this international work, I was able to learn more about the situation of indigenous peoples in other countries and better understand and appreciate that our journey in Canada, while painful, by comparison, was infused with hope and optimism as we successfully “prodded” the system grudgingly forward.

From there I moved on to work with the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, particularly on matters related to constitutional reform. This was a period characterized by very intensive and passionate negotiations between all of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples and governments. The main objective of these negotiations was to define the basic right to self-government that we had fought so hard for in the early 1980s and to establish our “political space” within the federation of Canada. The result was a draft agreement, known as the Charlottetown Accord, put forward to the Canadian public through a national referendum.

It was unfortunately defeated. Despite this, the negotiations marked a significant turning point in the history of relations between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians. For the first time, there was unanimous agreement by the provinces, territories and the federal government and the four national aboriginal organizations on several very fundamental and complex constitutional principles regarding self-government, including the principle of an

inherent right to self-government—a huge achievement for aboriginal peoples in Canada. These experiences led inevitably to the United Nations where Canadian Aboriginal peoples have been working for many years now to achieve a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Again, I learned from the experience the extent to which very basic human rights were not available to many of the world's indigenous peoples.

It was at that time that I began working with the Inuit Circumpolar Conference and was honoured to be elected President for two consecutive three-year terms from 1986 to 1992. It was through this work, I might add, that I met many of you who are here today. Advances in communications and transportation since the ICC was created in 1977 brought Inuit from other countries into closer contact. Sharing similar concerns, their leaders sought support and cooperation, first among Inuit of other countries, then from indigenous peoples around the world.

In 1993 I was appointed Co-Director and Secretary to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Working with the Commission provided me with an opportunity to become involved, and better understand the complex political and social issues with which Canadian Aboriginal peoples have been grappling, particularly in the post-constitutional reform period.

Being appointed Canada's Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs in 1994 brought me in closer touch with international circumpolar issues. I have had the opportunity to work directly with the Canadian government in developing new partnership arrangements with other northern governments and northern Indigenous peoples—partnerships based on an emerging recognition of the benefits of working together in seeking solutions to common problems, be they environmental, social or political.

My main responsibility as Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs was to reinvigorate the Arctic Council initiative and work with other Arctic nations and

northern peoples to establish the Council. Many of you here today also have first-hand experience with this new organization and I am sure it will come up often in our discussions during the next few days.

The Arctic Council was inaugurated in September 1998 in Iqaluit at the First Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council. The "Iqaluit Declaration: An Agenda for 2000" emerged from this meeting that identified a wide-ranging program of work, which would benefit from circumpolar collaboration.

Of particular interest to this conference is the initiative on "The Future of Arctic Children and Youth." During the first two years of this project, the goals are first, to improve the health and well-being of children and youth in the Arctic, and second, to improve the basis for sound decision-making by increasing the knowledge and understanding of sustainable development among Arctic youth and children. The long-term objective of engaging and empowering youth will be supported by an internship program and by sharing information, knowledge and experiences relevant to sustainable development by elders with youth and children.

In my continuing capacity of Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs, I am currently involved in an extremely exciting initiative to develop a northern foreign policy for Canada. This new policy will become an integral part of Canada's larger foreign policy. It will be a reflection of Canadian values that are becoming increasingly concerned with human security and with the safety and well-being of those individuals most at risk in the post-Cold War world.

The draft policy document, as it now exists, has resulted from an extensive process of consultation with northern Canadians, particularly Aboriginal peoples and focuses on harnessing Canada's foreign relations to achieve prosperity and human security in the North. It builds on Canada's commitment to a broad definition of human rights, which includes the right to a clean and healthy environment, economic and physical security. This has captured the

attention of northerners and the North's Aboriginal peoples who have always made the link between their rights as a people and their attachment to the land.

It will create a broad basis for sharing experiences with our circumpolar neighbours recognizing that meeting many of the North's challenges and capitalizing on its potential will require concerted international action and cooperation. This approach also offers the best means of achieving cooperative good governance around the broad goals of human security for all the people of the North.

The projection of Canadian values, including respect for democracy provides a sound basis for cooperation to ensure that all northerners enjoy an assured right to the benefits of democracy. This will help in supporting the efforts of all northern indigenous peoples to secure their rights.

Another very important element in Canada's northern history is reflected in the formation of a new political region within Canada known as Nunavut. Many here this evening are aware that this new political reality was tied to the long, tough road of negotiating an Inuit land claim agreement in the Northwest Territories. I participated in the inaugural ceremonies on April 1 of this year and I cannot find the words to describe to you the mixture of excitement, hope and confidence that characterizes the public mood in the new capital centre—Iqaluit.

Now, as Canada's Ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark, I have the opportunity to take all I have learned over these years and reach out to a wider community armed with the knowledge and confidence that the Canadian North, and indeed the circumpolar region as a whole, has much to offer to the global community.

There have been dramatic changes and improvements for Aboriginal peoples in Canada over the past 25 years. I am proud to have been part of it.

There remains much to be done. Set against the backdrop of Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan "Gathering Strength" and its Statement of Reconciliation where Canadians seek to learn from the past and find ways to deal with the negative impacts of government policies and actions, there is a strong basis for continuing improvement. Reaching out and building relationships with people, organizations and governments throughout the circumpolar region will help us create a community of interest for the benefit of the circumpolar region. I am very much looking forward to the discussions over the next few days, to re-acquaint myself with old friends and to make new ones.

Thank you and have a great conference.