

# **Lessons Learned on Leadership**

**Mary Simon  
President  
Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami**

**Ottawa  
June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008**

It is a great honor for me to be here today. I thank the organizers for having the vision to invite an Aboriginal leader to share ideas with you on building tomorrow's public service. So, I was delighted to accept the invitation to your annual symposium where the focus of some of your discussions is on "current and future challenges associated with good policy development".

For example, you spent time yesterday examining the implications of today's youth culture and behaviour. As many of you know, today's Inuit population in Canada is overwhelmingly young. In fact, the demographic profile of Canada's Inuit today resembles what Canada's population looked like in the post-war baby boom.

So, while many of you are faced with the challenges of providing public services to a bulge of aging baby boomers

... in Inuit Nunaat... the four areas of Canada straddling two provinces and two territories which are home to Inuit... ... we have the opposite challenge to the rest of Canada: planning for a bulge of young people in our schools and entering our work force.

I was also interested to see that this Symposium would be discussing the results of the study on Canada's Public Service in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how the public service has to adapt itself to rapidly changing conditions.

In reflecting on this year's symposium theme of "Building Tomorrow's Public Service...Today" I noted that your President, Simon Coakeley wrote that "learning from the past is always an important aspect of building the future".

I agree.

So, to begin my remarks today on Leadership, I would like to take a moment to reflect on the past, because throughout my

career I have been strongly guided by my early years in northern Quebec.

Though many of you here are likely familiar with aspects of the Arctic, I am guessing not everyone is. So permit me a few minutes to provide some background.

With a heightened focus on Canada's north in recent years, ITK has been active in issues surrounding climate change, environmental containments, land claims, language, residential schools, Inuit health, and most recently, improving the educational outcomes of Inuit.

Undoubtedly a number of you here today have worked with ITK on issues because a great deal of our effort goes into ensuring that the Government of Canada creates policies and programs specific to the realities of Inuit within Canada today.

There are approximately 55,000 Inuit living in Canada, spread from Labrador in the east to the Northwest Territories

in the west. The Arctic is one third of Canada's land mass with 50% of Canada's shore line.

Inuit are the vast majority of the permanent population in Arctic communities, with the exception of Inuvik and Iqaluit. Inuit are also becoming more numerous in some southern cities, such as Ottawa, Montreal, Winnipeg and Edmonton.

The Arctic is our homeland. We call it Inuit Nunaat. We have occupied this vast territory for thousands of years. We have developed a culture and language deeply rooted in our physical surroundings. The Arctic defines who we are. In turn, our presence and way of life help define the Arctic.

We are as strongly Canadian as we are Inuit. We pay the same taxes as other Canadians. We carry Canadian passports. We follow hockey standings as closely as everyone else and are very proud of young Jordon Tootoo's achievements in the NHL and were thrilled when he re-signed with the Predators.

There are 53 Inuit communities ranging from populations of more than a 1,000 to as small as 200. Unlike many First

Nation communities, Inuit do not live on reserves. We have chosen municipal status within our respective territories and provinces.

With few exceptions, there are no road connections to the rest of Canada. Transportation is by air and sea. While jet travel shrinks these distances, Inuit communities are still very isolated from the rest of Canada.

The cost of living is staggering. I can fly economy class at least twice from Ottawa to Hong Kong for the same price as flying from Ottawa to Pond Inlet. Essential foods and commodities are also very expensive. A loaf of whole wheat bread in Paulatuk, Northwest Territories is \$11.00, while 2 litres of milk in the same community costs \$18.00.

Country foods continue to be a very important part of our culture and daily lives. Hunting, however, has become very expensive. Tens of thousands of dollars are required to be properly equipped as a hunter. Gas, as you can imagine, continues to skyrocket. Incomes are often shared in order to support a hunter within a family in order to assure access to country food.

Despite the tremendous distances, the Arctic is now connected by modern communications to the rest of Canada and the world. All Inuit communities have some level of broadband access. Further investment, however, will be critical to harness new and emerging communications technologies to offset isolation, and reduce the high cost of living.

All our Inuit regions have achieved comprehensive modern-day land claims agreements. These are Constitutionally-protected treaties between Inuit and the Government of Canada and have formed the basis of a foundation relationship with the Government of Canada.

These modern treaties have opened a new chapter in northern development. They govern how development will take place and define a role for us. They provide a more predictable and inclusive business environment. There is a great desire in the Arctic to achieve economic self sufficiency in ways that build our cultural values into the new economy.

Despite important new economic opportunities, social realities can be startling. Hardly a day goes by without a news story about a social calamity in a northern community. Drugs, abuse, suicide and violent crime, saddens all Canadians, and continues to persist in the Arctic.

Here are some basic facts drawn from recent data provided by government agencies.

- The suicide rate for Inuit is more than 11 times the overall Canadian rate, the highest among aboriginal peoples. Most of the victims are young.
- The recent Statistics Canada report provided the shocking news that life expectancy for Inuit has declined by 1 year from an already unacceptably low rate of 67.8. We are at the level the rest of Canada was in 1946.
- The Tuberculosis rate for Inuit is 14 times the overall Canadian rate.

- Inuit households are the most likely to be crowded and 20% fall below the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation's crowding standard.
- 57% of the Inuit population is under the age of 25 and many are undereducated and poorly equipped to take up employment opportunities.
- While Inuit have made gains on the education front. However there is still a huge gap between Inuit and other young Canadians. 63% of Inuit between the ages of 20-24 have not completed high school as compared to 16% of Canadians in the same age group.

Like everything in life, there are many sides to a story and one must not linger solely on the negatives. In my own travels and experiences in the Arctic I see many positive signs that parents and communities are taking charge and working hard to set a new course for themselves and their children.

While it is important for everyone to understand the scope of the challenges facing us in the Arctic, it is not helpful to

linger on the negatives. As a leader I fully intend to direct my energies to building on the positives.

Over the years, the objectives of Inuit in their negotiations with leaders and decision-makers has always been quite straightforward.

We begin by asking Canadians to recognize that even though our living conditions in our homelands are vastly different from the majority of Canadians, we are proud Canadians too...full tax payers... and happy to contribute to our country.

Our goal is to be treated with respect and afforded the same services that are standard for other Canadians.

So one of my biggest projects right now and an important initiative as National Inuit leader is to build national support

for the renewal and rebuilding of our education systems - designed and developed by and for Inuit...to a standard all Canadians would recognize and expect.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now let me move on to some personal background and how I came to be speaking to you today.

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 was 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, 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 their influence on me 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, including, very importantly, education.

These influences have served me well as my people and me were propelled through a period of intensive and rapid change.

In the late 1940's when I was born, government had just "discovered" us and thus began the traumatic 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.

As I grew older I quickly learned that there was one system in Canada for "white people" and another for Aboriginal people. I learned the words "racism" and "discrimination" - concepts that honestly were totally foreign to me in my early years.

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 we felt about the southerners that came to the north. These feelings permeated our lives and our relationship with southerners and southern institutions.

It would be many years before I gained the self-confidence to insert and 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.

When the Quebec government announced that the largest hydroelectric development project in the world was to be built on our lands, the Inuit of Nunavik were catapulted into the world of white politicians and businessmen.

We were a small rag-tag group of Inuit and Cree. Our credentials were some formal education, some basic 'street smarts' because we had spent some time in the south, and fluency in English. Our elders and families put huge faith in us because of this.

I have 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 I knew that many people back home were counting on me and others to be the

link between them and the powers that were altering their lives. We had no choice - we had to do it – and we did.

But let me say here, for some of us, the price was huge. There were personal and family breakdowns and, very sadly, suicides. It was very, very hard on all of us.

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

I have returned to domestic matters and taken up the responsibilities of leading our national Inuit organization during what I consider to be a very critical time. Urgent issues, such as climate change, sovereignty and the unprecedented interest in exploiting minerals and

hydrocarbons are causing the Arctic to be situated in the daily political agenda.

Now how does all of this translate into today's challenge of defining the essential characteristics of tomorrow's public service?

It will come as no surprise that I see the Arctic as a big part of Canada's "tomorrow" and I will be using this venue to provide my views on what I see as important leadership qualities in support of the Arctic and its peoples.

Last month, during the visit to Inuvik by the Governor General, I was chairing a National Summit on Inuit Education. During the Summit we heard from a representative of New Zealand's Maori people, on how they reformed and rebuilt their education system for the Maori people.

What caught my attention was that this major initiative in educational reform in New Zealand, involved a national

commitment and resolve by both elected leadership and public servants, to improve the educational outcomes for Maori.

It involved an acceptance by decision makers that the path forward in the delivery of services had to be radically different from the past, and that this would necessitate taking risks.

Secondly, and this is where reforms in the public service played a pivotal role, the transformation of the Maori education system began when they returned the focus of education to the health of the family.

Rather than loading the entire responsibility of reforming an education system on one education department, the New Zealand government took a holistic view of education through the eyes of a family and its needs.

Today, we estimate that less than 25% of our Inuit students who enter school...graduate. The health of our Inuit education system weaves its way through all sorts of boxes that our governments have created Human Resources Canada, Heritage Canada, Indian Affairs and Northern Development, and across 2 provinces and 2 territories.

The future of Inuit education... or Inuit health... or Inuit participation in the Canadian economy lies with seized opportunities to break from the past patterns of service delivery into creative and innovative experiments that involve bundling initiatives across departments, and across levels of government, toward a larger vision.

In my observation, the legacy of a generation of split services across many departments has been one of limiting the thinking of public servants rather than encouraging

innovative and collaborative problem solving across departments.

In thinking back on my own career, whether as a Ambassador to Denmark., Ambassador of Circumpolar Affairs, or Chancellor of Trent University, or even today as national advocate for Inuit, the so-called 'breakthrough' moments almost always involved decision makers thinking across boundaries.

And in this age of connectivity, we need governments that reward cross-boundary thinking.

In my opinion the most valuable public servants of the future will be those who have expertise in multiple policy areas so that they can foster these connections across boundaries.

Nothing is more dampening in pursuing a vision, or even exploring the early days of a promising idea, than to meet with a decision maker who quickly determines that the idea falls to the mandate of another Minister and refers me there... rather than saying “let me try to arrange a conversation between my office and the other Minister’s office to see if we can explore this idea to its next phase”.

I think leadership, whether it is at the political level, or among the public servants, involves a constant process of building and fostering relationships, and calling on these relationships to put innovative ideas to work.

Leadership involves opening the space to create communities of people who support each other in a common goal, and we need people, like you to facilitate that process.

I want to end my remarks by briefly talking about the role of leadership in organizations whether they are NGO's or in government departments.

And here I must return to the simple wisdom that I gained from early days in northern Quebec.

Inuit have a very short modern history. There are many people still alive in Inuit communities who began their life as I did... in camps...among a small group of families... who valued the contributions of individuals, and shared their contributions for a higher purpose... sustaining our families.

We are fortunate in many ways, to be able to draw up this recent history because it informs us on how effective organizations work.

My approach to leadership in any organization draws from these early experiences of community. I treat everyone as I expect to be treated - with respect.

I recognize that the no job can be done alone, and that jobs get done when leaders build and nurture relationships that produce desirable results for the organization.

I also encourage people to be curious - to seek out an understanding of other perspectives, and where conflicting or contradictory perspectives arise...mediate solutions.

Leadership involves empowering your employees to understand how your organization functions top to bottom and no where is this more important than in government.

These are the simple truths of community.

I believe that leaders need to consult well and communicate often and this applies as much to Ministers as it does to the public servants who are tasked with carrying out their initiatives.

Consultation should mean consultation - not communicating pre-determined results.

And communication means explaining to ordinary Canadians how Government works. I have a familiarity with Government processes due to my past postings in Foreign Affairs, but I will often seek advice on next steps within Government, as will my staff.

We rely on public servants to know how policy processes work and communicate this to us.

Communication also means understanding how to reach specific audiences.

I have seen federal public servants arrive in our Inuit communities totally ill-equipped to communicating their messages to an Inuit audience. There are very few Inuktitut speaking public servants, there is no translation of the documents, and the concepts fail to incorporate messages appropriate for an Inuit audience.

No doubt many of you are seasoned veterans of communications training, so I am urging you to build on that training and hone your skills for communicating with aboriginal Canadians.

I want to conclude by reading this quote on leadership:

(Quote) “The ultimate task of a leader is to take his/her society to where it has never been.

But this requires a willingness to travel on the difficult road between a nation’s experience and its destiny.

She is bound to be alone at least part of the way until experience catches up with possibilities.” (End Quote)

That difficult road between a nation’s experience and its destiny involves you.

It involves public servants exploring the outer reach of possibility - inspired by determination... curiosity... and the courage to think creatively.

Thank you. I will now take questions.