

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE ARCTIC

An Address By

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Ladies and Gentlemen, a little over a month ago representatives from the eight Arctic countries and three international indigenous peoples' organizations met in Ottawa to inaugurate a new organization called the Arctic Council. There was little publicity surrounding the inaugural meeting which was attended by three Canadian Ministers and their counterparts from the Arctic states. Even though, in time this organization stands to help bring about sweeping changes across the Arctic region. For all of us who were in attendance, there was a strong collective feeling of high hopes, expectations and enthusiasm.

As Canada's Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs, and as someone who was born in the Arctic and whose heart remains there, it is a great pleasure to be with you today to share my thoughts about the new Council, and my hopes concerning how it will help secure the future of this part of the world.

Yes, the north is my homeland, but it also lies at the very heart of Canada's heritage and identity as a nation. I must tell you that as I have travelled across Canada, whether as President of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference or now as Canada's Arctic Ambassador, I find that Canadians living in the south are stirred by their sense of northern identity. Even if they have never had the opportunity to travel to the north, they feel a sense of stewardship toward it.

In our Inuit culture, we believe that we have inherited our Arctic lands -- that we are an integral part of the polar ecosystem, and that the land is our aboriginal birthright. But we have always promised the land to our children and to their children. And for thousands of years, we have kept our promise and left the land and the northern environment basically as we have found it.

Today, it is getting harder and harder to keep this promise, yet we are determined to keep it. And so the Arctic's peoples...we...are reaching out now, and asking southerners -- you, to join us in protecting the Arctic environment and preserving the indigenous cultures that have grown up there.

For over 40 years, Arctic relations were blocked by the Cold War -- indeed the Arctic was one of its chief battlegrounds, both in the skies and beneath the ice. Now, the terms "East" and "West" have come once again to possess only geographic meaning, and no longer political significance. The constraints that the Cold War divide imposed for so long on cooperation in the Arctic have ceased to be relevant. With the end of that conflict, the Arctic has begun to emerge as a region in its own right, with its own unique problems, aspirations, needs and opportunities for cooperation.

Here is Canada, the northern map is changing too. The process of political devolution has been accelerating, with territorial governments taking a growing role in all manner of northern affairs. The establishment of Nunavut in three years time will take this trend further still. At the same time, improved communications have brought the north more into the mainstream of Canadian life. Southern Canadians are much more aware than in the past of threats to the Arctic environment, of the social and health problems facing northern Aboriginal peoples, and of the enormous riches and beauty of the north. Meantime, northerners are more engaged than ever before in the public affairs of their region and of their country.

These broad changes in the Arctic have taken place against a larger global background, in which it is increasingly evident that problems and their solutions are inter-dependent. Events in one country can seriously affect the interests of other countries, sometimes over great distances. The Arctic, a fragile region in many respects, is particularly vulnerable to these transboundary effects.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to dwell on just a few of the major challenges facing the Arctic region today as a means of explaining why Canada took the step of calling for the establishment of an Arctic Council, and why its circumpolar neighbours agreed. And it wasn't an easy challenge, I'll tell you. But for the seriousness of the many threats facing the Arctic, it is unlikely that the Council would have been formed at all. These days governments, including Canada's, are extremely reluctant to agree to setting up new bodies that will place demands on time and resources.

First, of course, there is the threat to the Arctic environment. You will all recall the reports of environmental devastation in the Russian North in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. These reports were accompanied by photos of decaying nuclear submarines in harbours along the Arctic Ocean, of Russian rivers spilling toxic contaminants out into the northern seas, of plumes of airborne pollution pouring out of northern Russian cities. You will have read about Arctic haze, the results of airborne pollution from as far away as India, and you will have heard of Inuit people having unexpectedly high levels of contaminants in their bodies as a result of having eaten toxic marine mammals and fish.

The magnitude and severity of this pollution, moved the Arctic governments in 1991 to establish the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (or AEPS), a process designed to monitor, measure and take cooperative steps to reduce these grave environmental threats to the Arctic environment and peoples.

Another key challenge facing the Arctic countries is achieving sustainable and equitable economic development. Across the region, levels of unemployment are high, much, much higher than in the south. This has exacerbated the social disaster we periodically read about on teen suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, family violence, that has reached epidemic proportions in northern parts of all the Arctic countries.

To focus on just one aspect of this problem, the data show clearly that unemployment is particularly high in the hundreds of small isolated communities to be found across the north. How are people in these communities to live? One of the most important sources of income for these communities is the renewable resource sector, including fur trapping, reindeer herding, forestry and fishing. This sector is not important only as a source of income, but founded on traditional lifestyles, it is one of the important ways in which the diverse cultures of northern Aboriginal peoples are maintained.

Yet, this source of sustenance for northern peoples has proven highly vulnerable to forces outside the north. For instance, in 1983, the European animal rights movement launched a political campaign that has devastated the northern fur industry, particularly the seal products. Northern indigenous peoples have organized in response, pointing out that most seal populations in the Arctic are currently being hunted below maximum sustainable levels, that no populations are endangered, and that some have

even increased to the point that they threaten other resources, including fish stocks. National governments have responded in various degrees as well, some trying to counter the animal rights movement, others subsidizing their own seal hunters. Yet so far, the full weight of the Arctic community has not been brought to bear in support of the Northern fur industry.

Finally, to mention just one further challenge facing the Arctic region, is the difficult situation facing northern Russia. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition to a market economy, the state subsidies that helped support hundreds of cities, towns and small communities across northern Russia have been drastically reduced or in many cases abruptly terminated.

This has created severe hardships for northern communities and peoples. While some northern areas such as diamond-rich Sakha (Yakutia) have become wealthy with their old ties with Moscow loosened, other regions have experienced more difficult economic and social conditions.

Clearly, it is in no one's interest to see northern Russia left to stagger and fall by the wayside like this. Apart from the terrible impact on individuals, families and communities, the economic and social collapse there threatens to obstruct efforts to stem the flow of contaminants out of Russia in to the Arctic Ocean and skies and onto our northern shorelines.

So for all of these reasons, and many others still, in the aftermath of the ending of the Cold War, the eight Arctic countries began to make genuine progress in regional cooperation. They established an International Arctic Science Committee; the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy I mentioned earlier, a Northern Forum linking territorial and regional governments around the Arctic, and a variety of other bodies concerned with specific issues. On a non-governmental level, an Aboriginal Leaders' Summit was set up to facilitate cooperation among the Indigenous peoples of the region.

It was evident to some Canadian observers of Arctic affairs though, that a higher level of cooperation would be needed if these threats to the region were to be tackled effectively. As a result, the concept of an intergovernmental organization was first proposed formally by the Federal government in 1989. In 1990, a private foundation here in Toronto, the Walter and Duncan Gordon Charitable Foundation, established a Panel to promote the establishment of an international Arctic Council that would act as a political body to foster and guide circumpolar cooperation across a wide range of Arctic issues.

This private sector initiative helped the Government of Canada in 1991 in adopting the establishment of an Arctic Council as a formal policy objective, at which time a series of discussions began with Canada's seven Arctic neighbours about the idea. Beginning in 1995, these talks intensified, leading finally to the Council's inauguration on September 19 of this year.

Thus, I am proud to say that Canada played an important, in fact a decisive role, in bringing the Arctic Council into being. The challenge now, of course, will be to make something of this organization. As host and chair of the Council for its first two years, Canada will have the opportunity to get it off on the right foot. Given the breadth and magnitude of the problems facing the Arctic, I suspect that guiding the Council during this all important formative period will be just as challenging as getting it established was to begin with.

The Arctic Council's members include the eight Arctic states: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States. In addition, three international indigenous peoples' organizations have the status of permanent participants in the Council's work.

The inclusion of these indigenous organizations reflects the acknowledgement of the Arctic governments that policy on Arctic affairs must meet the needs of the people who live there, particularly the aboriginal peoples who have made this region their home for thousands of years.

As Ambassador, I had the privilege and responsibility of representing Canada during the negotiations of the Arctic Council. The issue of indigenous participation was very contentious, and to be honest, the final outcome was not completely satisfactory to the indigenous representatives at the negotiations. While they had hoped to gain as close to equal status as possible to member countries, there was resistance from some governments. The final results were, of course, a compromise. However, for the first time to my knowledge, indigenous peoples have a status in an international agreement which is stronger than the typical commitments to "meaningful participation" or "full consultation". The basis for true partnership is respect, and I am confident that by creating the Arctic Council, we have taken a solid step in that direction.

In proposing the Arctic Council, Canada was asking its Arctic neighbours to acknowledge that a body is needed for the region that is mandated to deal at a political level with the full range of problems facing it, not only environmental or scientific

issues, but economic, social and cultural issues as well. Thus, over the next two years, the Council will take over the AEPS, developing programs to reflect the expanded mandate.

In very practical terms, a critical challenge for the Council will be to strike a balance between the sometimes competing values of environmental protection and economic development. As I mentioned earlier, unemployment levels are high across the north, and the need to find productive work for northerners, particularly the growing numbers of young people, is urgent. In some places, non-renewable resource development offers significant prospects of economic growth if carried out in a manner that is respectful of the rights and concerns of Arctic Peoples.

As desperately as northerners want work, all too often the pattern has been for southern companies to exploit northern resources using southern labour, removing the north's wealth and leaving little behind them but environmental damage.

A critical challenge, and one which the Arctic Council must rise to if it is to earn the enduring support of northerners, is to develop practical means by which economic activity in the north can be stimulated while producing tangible and lasting benefits for the area, and protecting the natural environment. This will entail tackling a wide variety of issues, including encouraging expansion of circumpolar trade, exploring ways to rationalize transportation and communication systems, respecting Arctic Indigenous cultures, providing increased training for northerners, and enhancing cooperative management of renewable resources.

At another level, the Arctic Council will for the first time bring senior ministers of all eight Arctic countries and Indigenous Peoples' representatives together on a regular basis to discuss specifically Arctic issues. The importance of this should not be underestimated. By means of this function, the Council will act as a means of getting the Arctic governments to focus on their own priorities for the region, and to discuss these with one another, with a view to identifying common objectives and drafting joint plans. This political role for the Council has the potential to help Arctic states arrive at longer-range planning for regional cooperation, a critical requirement for dealing with such threats as the long-range transport of contaminants, or sensitive proposals such as opening up the Northeast Passage to maritime shipping.

At another level still, the Council could, in time, have a role in conveying Arctic regional concerns to global bodies such as the United Nations, where it is felt that regional interests are being infringed by activities elsewhere. It could bring its collective weight to bear in countering the anti-fur lobby in Europe. Or, the Council could have a part to play in initiatives to devise global standards, such as through agreements as the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21 or the Convention on Biological Diversity.

A critical issue that cannot be avoided in considering the issues I have raised here, is financial resources. Taking on any one of the problems with which the Council has been created to deal -- whether environmental protection, economic development, preserving social and cultural values -- can often require extensive financial resources. The Council itself will not be endowed with more than a very modest budget to operate a secretariat and other maintenance functions. It will be up to the member governments to commit to spending on agreed activities.

Yet despite what some might regard as a weakness, the Arctic Council represents a significant step forward from a resource perspective. Up until now, the eight Arctic countries have mainly been tackling in parallel, such tasks as weather forecasting, cold-regions technology, parks creation, air and vessel traffic control, and so on. The Council offers a vehicle for developing collaborative efforts, and thereby achieving cost savings, in many areas. The potential for this has barely been scratched so far.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Arctic Council is a concrete product of Canadian efforts to forge a new partnership arrangement with its Arctic neighbours and with residents of the region. It is a partnership based on shared values, shared problems and shared aspirations for the region.

Yet I must tell you, that achieving the great promise inherent in the Arctic Council, will require patience and determination. While the 'Arctic 8' have agreed to establish the Council, many differences remain over its priorities and the pace of its work. Some countries want to forge ahead on establishing tight standards for environmental protection. Others see sustainable economic development as the priority. Forging a consensus on cooperation that does not merely reflect the lowest common denominator, the slowest ship in the convoy, will pose an ongoing challenge.

Canada believes, however, that a first important step has been taken in establishing the Council. Again, we will be hosting its secretariat over the next two years, giving us considerable scope to guide discussions and encourage agreement on perhaps modest, but forward steps on these various priority issues.

For instance, at the Council's inauguration, Canadian Indian and Northern Affairs Minister Ron Irwin announced Canada's proposal to hold a conference on sustainable development in the Arctic, a conference involving practitioners. We see this as the kind of practical step that can be taken to foster consensus on important issues.

I am pleased to have had this opportunity to speak with you today about the new Arctic Council. It is my hope that you, and many other Canadians, will come to see that Canada's northern-ness is not simply something nice we like to think about ourselves, but instead is something highly concrete and important. Moreover, Canada's northern identity is something we can nurture through practical activity. Remember, just six or seven years ago, the Arctic Council was just an idea some private citizens had. Today, its establishment has placed Canada on the forefront of international efforts to protect this beautiful part of our world.

Thank you!