

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami - Origins

As Canadian Inuit we are proud of our cultural heritage and of the many accomplishments that mark the course of our 5000 year history. For all but the last 250 years or so of this history, we were free to govern our lives and manage our territory and resources according to Inuit needs and ways of doing things. With the arrival of outsiders first from Europe and later from North America, the Inuit way of life started to change, and we have had to struggle very hard to maintain control over our culture, territory and resources.

Unlike many indigenous peoples in other parts of the world, Inuit were not directly threatened with guns or violence, yet we certainly suffered as a result of policies and actions imposed on us by whalers, fur traders, missionaries, government and, most recently, developers. As a result, we were expected to abandon important cultural traditions and accept new ideologies. Groups were expected to relocate their traditional territories if deemed in the best interest of Inuit and we had little control over our economy or conditions of our day to day life. Although the intention may not have been to destroy us, it was certainly to change us. We have come to understand that outside interests, whatever they represented, were not prepared to deal with us based on an understanding of our rights as aboriginal people. It was a reaction to this situation that eventually gave rise to an Inuit political voice.

By the late 1960s it became clear that if there was to be real change in the lives of Inuit, we had to become involved in the political process. We had to do this to protect what our ancestors had left us in trust. If we did not, there would be nothing to pass on to future generations. But we also had to engage in the political process as a means for developing new opportunities for securing our and our children's future. The first step of involvement was to establish a structure that would enable us to unite as Inuit with a common voice. And that is where the story of ITC begins.

The events leading to the establishment of ITC go back to the mid 1960s when Inuit students were brought together at high schools established at Churchill, Manitoba and Yellowknife, NWT. Regardless of what the academic and vocational objectives were for these schools, they provided an opportunity for young Inuit men and women from different regions to start discussing the types of problems all Inuit were facing. From these gatherings and discussions sprang a commitment to the politics of change.

At about the same time, an organization called the Indian and Eskimo Association (IEA) was created. It had two primary objectives. The first was to conduct research on the rights of indigenous peoples in Canada. The second was to assist newly formed aboriginal organizations across Canada in becoming involved in the political process concerning the recognition of aboriginal rights especially as these rights applied to our territory and resources. In 1969, Tagak Curley who was later to be one of the founders of ITC, was asked to represent Inuit as a member of IEA.

The IEA provided a starting point for organizing Inuit, but from the outset we felt it was important to have our own organization to reflect the particular cultural, historic and geographic position of Inuit within Canada. We faced problems that were very specific to Inuit concerning land use and land title; resource management; language, education and health; types of proposed development; and relations with government and other outside institutions.

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In 1970, IEA sponsored a conference in Coppermine, NWT to discuss what Inuit delegates identified as critical issues to ensure that our culture would not simply survive, but once again flourish. This conference was followed by a meeting held in Toronto in February 1971. The seven Inuit who attended the Toronto meeting stressed the need to have an independent Inuit organization working alongside Indian organizations. Tagak Curley summarized the importance for establishing an Inuit run organization that would be responsible for both coordinating and supporting regional Inuit concerns and interests at the national level:

"The situation right now as far as Inuit are concerned is that communications are very poor. The Inuit at this moment are split into five regions - the Mackenzie Delta, Keewatin, Baffin Island Labrador and Arctic Quebec - and have never attempted to unite with each other. We should no longer let this lack of unity among Inuit continue; we must now unite and support each other as Inuit. Just because Quebec is not a part of the Northwest Territories, we should not overlook the Inuit there. We must all become one group; the Inuit.

..... we should not let any problems or anything interfere with our future. If we are to only concern ourselves with our own regions, we will never grow or become self-supporting people. The Inuit first of all must join together."

Jacob Oweetaluktuk from Inukjuak in Nunavik (northern Quebec), provided yet another perspective:

"At this very moment there is need for a close look at our own situation in our communities, because in the past only the government has been handling our affairs.

During the early stages when the government first came into our communities, it was quite all right for them to look after our own problems, administration, and so on. In the past there was nothing bothering us, but right now at this very moment there is something interfering with us Inuit.

Our culture is still here, but in the near future it is not going to be the same as it used to be. If this continues too long from now into the future, there won't be any power left in us. The white people will be just overflowing our culture and there won't be anything left that we can do if it continues this way. But if we say right now that we want the government to handle our problems, our affairs and our lives, we will never be able to do things on our own, like decision making, if we let the government continue to look after us.

So we have to find an organized voice amongst ourselves so we may direct our lives the way we want them to be. Maybe we should have something like an Inuit organization. Right now is the time to act so we may control ourselves in the kind of life we would like to have in the future. It is for these main reasons I think we are here at this very moment."

The discussions at this first meeting identified many of the core issues that have defined the mandates and activities of ITC since its founding in 1971. These issues included: aboriginal rights; concerns about both large scale development, especially the potential of oil exploration,

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and smaller scale or local development such as the establishment of northern tourism by outside interests; the need to formalize Inuit rights with respect to development and to establish appropriate mechanisms for Inuit participation, consultation and decision making powers; formulating policies, programmes and research for dealing with rights to territory and resources and concerns about the right to maintain traditional land use and harvesting practices.

Looking back on these events, we now realize that this first generation of new political leadership made incredible progress against very difficult odds. What this first generation of our new political leaders could not possibly know at the time, was that they were about to set in motion a process that would eventually lead to land claims and to the creation of strong self governing regions; even to the extent of redrawing the political map of Canada.