

Memo to the Prime Minister: Overcoming Poverty in Nunavut

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Last Monday I was already in Iqaluit when I heard that Prime Minister Harper was also planning a visit. Unfortunately, he arrived the day after I left. Too bad. There was much I wanted to tell him.

I wanted to say that something is happening in Nunavut — something that should make us all think long and hard about government as we know it. Alas, I have missed Mr. Harper, so instead I've decided to use this series of columns to talk about what I have seen and heard in Nunavut over this last year, and what those of us down south can learn from it. First, some context.

Nunavut was established in 1999 from the Inuit claim to their territorial lands. At the time, some wanted a different form of government — a more ethnically based self-government. In the end, however, Inuit didn't choose this path, as did, say, the Nisga'a people in northern British Columbia. Instead, Inuit agreed to form a public government, but with two qualifications.

First, the Tunngavik Federation of Nunavut — a federation of the three Inuit organizations that originally negotiated the claim — was assigned a special role in the new territory. Today, as Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. it acts as a steward of Inuit interests in the future of the territory, from the preservation of language and culture to protection of their rights over resources on Inuit lands.

Second, the land claim agreement, which is effectively Nunavut's constitution, contains a clause — Article 32 — that guarantees Inuit a say in government decisions on the policies and the design of programs and services that affected their language and culture. Article 32 states that:

...Inuit have the right...to participate in the development of social and cultural policies, and in the design of social and cultural programs and services, including their method of delivery, within the Nunavut Settlement Area.

So the promise was that Inuit could have "Inuit government within a public government." A decade later, however, many Inuit feel this promise is unfulfilled.

In 2009, a major review of the government's performance surveyed 2,100 people from 25 communities and found that:

Often people described governance in Nunavut as a vision not yet realized and, at times, a vision derailed. Without doubt, the [expectations most people had of Nunavut at its inception have not yet been met](#).

Premier Eva Aariak has staked her government's credibility on turning this around. A major step was the [Poverty Reduction Process](#), a year-long initiative that directly engaged some 800 people in 22 communities across the territory.

This was much more than a government "consultation." It engaged communities in a searching discussion of how poverty is affecting their families, friends, neighborhoods and workplaces, and how they can work together to solve this.

As I watched the process unfold, frankly, I was not prepared for what I heard. Many Inuit and Inuit leaders feel their people have become too dependent on government and that this has to change. They have lost their traditional sense of self-reliance and must get it back.

There is more. In the community dialogues, this theme of empowerment and self-reliance often shifted seamlessly into a second theme: healing. Participants felt that to overcome poverty, first the people — as individuals, families and communities — must feel healthy, strong and well.

Yet issues around mental health, self-esteem, and the loss of personal and cultural identity, are everywhere. They strain relationships, undermine efforts at education and personal development, discourage employment, and weaken the ability to engage in community life.

In Nunavut, life expectancy is 10 years below the national average for men and 12 years for women. Infant mortality rates are two and a half times the national average. Unemployment is chronic. People live in over-crowded, public housing. Nunavut has, by far, the highest suicide rate in the country, sometimes reaching nine times the national average. Only a few years ago, the suicide rate for Inuit youth was 11 times the national average.

Today, poverty and powerlessness are a permanent presence for many Inuit. If the participants were clear that self-respect, self-reliance and community participation are critical conditions of well-being, they were equally clear that healing is connected to a sense of empowerment.

But many Inuit do not feel empowered. On the contrary, they feel trapped in their own land, their communities, even their homes.

So what is the answer?

A key result of the process is a call for government that invites and allows people to assume new responsibilities for their own well-being, while supporting them in their efforts.

This should not be confused with a call to downsize government, much less to abandon the people. It is a call for government to reach out to citizens and communities in new ways and to work together with them to forge a new relationship.

In practice, this means real action on housing, food security, education and economic development must do more than alleviate these needs. It must do so in a way that addresses the more fundamental question of dependence by promoting empowerment. It must lead to healing.

In his visit to Iqaluit last week, Prime Minister Harper announced \$27 million for adult literacy in the North, an important and laudatory initiative. My next column will look at how the Poverty Reduction Process is challenging the Government of Nunavut to use such resources in ways that not only promote adult literacy, but also healing, self-reliance and empowerment.

To view other columns by Don Lenihan, click [here](#).

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