

Making democracy work: could Nunavut take the lead?

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Don Lenihan is Vice President, Engagement at the Public Policy Forum in Ottawa, Canada. He is an internationally recognized expert on democracy and public engagement, accountability and service delivery, with over 25 years of experience in the field. He is the author of numerous articles, studies and books. Don's latest book, *Rescuing Policy: The Case for Public Engagement*, is published by the [Public Policy Forum](#).

The Makimaniq Plan: A Shared Approach to Poverty Reduction is the result of a remarkable, year-long process that engaged some 800 of Nunavut's 33,000 people, across the territory. In Monday's column, we saw how, for Inuit, [poverty reduction requires healing through empowerment](#).

The *Makimaniq Plan* recognizes that this, in turn, requires real community engagement. It is at the community level that individuals and families are most likely to mobilize in ways that will begin to rebuild self-reliance and a sense of ownership of the issues.

The Plan calls for the creation of a new kind of collaborative organization to lead community engagement: the Nunavut Roundtable on Poverty Reduction. Members will include the Government of Nunavut, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) — the official steward of Inuit interests in the territory — communities, community organizations and businesses.

If this doesn't sound especially innovative, here is the show-stopper: Premier Eva Aariak has promised that "this Government will introduce legislation for the implementation of the long-term Poverty Reduction Action Plan with the *collaboration* of our partners." (my emphasis)

In other words, the legislation appears to aim at ensuring government's participation in the Roundtable will be as a full and genuine partner.

In practice, this means that, where government's objectives on poverty reduction overlap with those of the Roundtable, it would have a fiduciary responsibility to explore with Roundtable members whether collaboration is a more effective way of making progress than working alone.

From a governance viewpoint, this would break new ground. While several Canadian governments already have anti-poverty legislation, none imposes such a duty on them. This is a line Canadian governments have yet to cross.

Until now, they have assumed no responsibility to pursue community partnerships, even where the benefits to citizens are clear. Even where legislation has established a formal relationship with community organizations, this is sharply circumscribed by defining them as "advisors," which, in effect, means government is free to discount their views, as it wishes.

If the premier is now ready to make a deeper commitment to collaboration, the main reason seems to be her conviction that empowerment is the way to self-reliance and that this, in turn, will require a united effort to mobilize and engage the community.

Having said this, there is another important factor at play. Developing a genuinely collaborative partnership with NTI is — or at least should be — an urgent priority for the government.

NTI has the equivalent of a constitutional responsibility to protect Inuit interests in the new territory. This is a unique feature in Nunavut's system of governance, with no real parallel elsewhere in Canada.

While NTI is not officially part of the government, it has considerable legal and moral authority to influence the development of public policy in Nunavut, as well as to provide Inuit with public programs and services. The exercise of these responsibilities may be about to take a major turn.

In the coming years, Nunavut appears poised for a major surge of economic growth from the harvesting of natural resources, such as oil, gas and minerals. The opportunities are potentially huge.

NTI (and the three Regional Inuit Associations that created it) is expected to receive royalties from these activities that may run into the hundreds of millions of dollars — possibly higher. This is in a territory with only 33,000 permanent residents, 15% of whom are not Inuit.

While the Inuit organizations are obligated to manage and invest this money in ways that promote Inuit interests, such investment could take many forms.

Will Inuit invest in new programs, say, in education, community health or local business development? Will they build new transportation or communications infrastructure? Will they help revitalize communities with major cultural initiatives? Will they provide direct transfers of money to individuals? Will most of the money be placed in trust?

Such questions are yet to be decided, but they raise a critical question for the Government of Nunavut: how will the actions of NTI and the other Inuit organizations align with the government's efforts to provide its own services and to govern well?

Will Inuit organizations see themselves as close partners of the government, who are working with it to plan initiatives that complement and enhance their mutual goals? Or will there be tensions and competition between them?

Seen from the viewpoint of conventional parliamentary government, an organization like NTI could appear threatening. Parliamentary governments are based on the principle that, when it comes to public policy, they are supreme. In this view, an organization like NTI could be seen as a challenge to this authority, possibly even a kind of shadow government.

Fortunately, this is not the only way to look at the situation. The alternative is to see the principle of collaboration as something that has been built into the foundations of Nunavut's system of

government, as evidenced by [Article 32 in the Land Claims Agreement](#), or the [consensual system of governance in the legislature](#).

From this viewpoint, initiatives like the Roundtable or the proposed legislation to support it appear as part of an ongoing effort to find a better balance between the parliamentary system and traditional forms of Inuit governance. Forming a successful partnership with NTI may be a critical test.

Canadian governments should take note. They, too, are finding it increasingly difficult to operate within the conventional boundaries of parliamentary democracy.

Citizens are unsatisfied with their traditional status as passive consumers of government policies, programs and services. They not only want greater transparency and accountability, but often insist on a greater say in key decisions.

On Friday, in the third and final column in this series, I will look at how Nunavut could emerge as a leader in government transformation, pointing the way forward for other governments.

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

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