

Through Cultural Eyes: Perspectives on Aboriginal Governance
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At the end of last summer, I moved from Iqaluit, Nunavut to Regina, Saskatchewan, where I now live and work. A couple of months later, a former colleague from the Nunavut Government came to Regina to make a presentation. Regina is going to host the Canada Summer Games this coming summer, and the organizers had asked for someone to come and provide orientation for Games volunteers so that they would be able to work effectively with the athletes who will attend the Games from Nunavut.

I went to hear my friend give her presentation to the volunteers, and it was an excellent one. Most of the people in the room knew little or nothing about Inuit culture when they arrived, and they would certainly know quite a bit more by the time they left. Sitting as an observer though, it really struck me: my Nunavut colleague had been given an hour to summarize the history of her people's civilization for the past 5000 years and to describe all aspects of their culture.

This is something that we do all the time. We look for short form versions of someone else's culture. We're just trying to understand better where the other person is coming from. There is no way

around it really, when we are looking at someone else's culture, we always have a tendency to oversimplify.

Sometimes we misunderstand things that we see or hear about another culture. That is natural too: we are seeing those things through our own eyes, and filtering what we see through our own cultural understandings.

All of this is to tell you, right at the beginning of this talk, that I am no expert on Inuit culture, or First Nations Culture, or Metis culture, in Canada. I have come to understand myself and my own culture more as I have recognized things about me that are not universally shared, but in fact represent my cultural background. I have gained some understanding of aboriginal cultures through things I have observed, things I've been told, and discussions I've had with work colleagues and friends. Whatever I tell you though, will be from my perspective, and limited by the boundaries of my understanding.

I'm going to talk about some of my perceptions about the influences that aboriginal culture and aboriginal perspectives have within Government, and within Canadian society.

There is no doubt that when aboriginal people assume governance roles, they bring with them their own set of assumptions about the world, and their values based on culture and experience.

Recognition of these values, culture, and experiences makes for a stronger governance process, and a richer policy base.

Some of the differences in approach through aboriginal leadership are a result of cultural backgrounds, and some are rooted in the experience of colonization and the various forms of disempowerment that it perpetrated over the years. Both of these shape the contribution that modern aboriginal people bring to public life.

There are several ways in which cultural values, and cultural experiences affect decision making. They are relevant to what decisions get made, but also to how decisions are made, and what topics are chosen as priority areas to make decisions about.

One element that seems to be common to aboriginal cultures everywhere is a close connection to the land and the environment. This isn't surprising, given the dependence on the offerings of the land and water for survival until very recent times.

You hear about this in Saskatchewan, and not only in relation to what might be immediately identified as environmental issues. Here's a small example. Earlier this winter I was at a meeting related to the health care governance model in Regina and the Qu'Appelle Valley. One of those at my table was a Chief from a reserve outside of Regina. He spoke eloquently and forcefully about his belief that activities in Regina have affected the purity of the water in his community, and that this is affecting the health of his people. It wasn't what I had expected to talk about at the meeting, but very clearly it was relevant if we were to address the broader public health

concerns of the region. The Chief's intervention was consistent with a holistic world view, which recognizes the inter-relatedness of things more clearly than their separateness.

During my time in the Northwest Territories, (the NWT), the Berger Inquiry, which had concluded a decade before I arrived in Yellowknife, was a touchstone that came up whenever aboriginal rights or political development were discussed. Not only were many of the leaders in the Government and Aboriginal organizations people who had cut their political teeth during the process of the Berger hearings, but the process itself had come to symbolize the ability of the aboriginal people of the NWT to have their voices heard and to take charge of their future.

The Inquiry was related to the proposed development of a pipeline in the Mackenzie Valley. Thomas Berger did a radical thing: he traveled to small communities along the Mackenzie River to listen to what the residents of those communities had to say about the proposal. They were concerned about how this development would affect their lands and the wildlife that lived there. They were concerned about how this development would affect their people, and their lifestyle, and they felt that they were not ready to participate in the development process in the way that they would like to be able to.

Berger's report recommended that there be a moratorium on this development for ten years, to give the aboriginal people of the region time to develop their capacity to take part in the decisions that would

affect them in such a major way. This was an extremely powerful message to the aboriginal people of the Northwest Territories: they had been heard, and their entitlement to participate in decisions affecting the lands of their region had been recognized. They used the time they were given to prepare well, and now the aboriginal people of the Northwest Territories are the ones making decisions about the development of a pipeline in the Mackenzie Valley.

In March of this year, leaders of several indigenous groups in the far eastern part of northern Russia came together in a congress in the town of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. A shared concern about development in their region brought them together and they formed a council to represent their people in negotiations with the oil companies and the Russian Government. These people are reindeer herders who range across a huge territory with their herds, and fishers whose catch depends on clean water. Their lifestyles stand to be deeply affected by development. There are strong indigenous voices in Russia, but historically they have not had the political opportunities that Canadian Aboriginal people have had. The Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North has created an increasingly strong role for their membership, and this activism is an indication of this. There is common cause between the indigenous people in northern Russia questioning the oil and gas development in their region, and those in the Mackenzie Valley.

Within the circumpolar north there are many bonds. When I visited the Yamal Peninsula in Arctic Russia a couple of years ago, one of

the places I was taken to was the small village of Gornoknyasevsk, along the Ob River. The strong impression I had was of the similarity between this region and the Mackenzie River communities of the NWT. The black spruce, Labrador tea, and other familiar plant life made me feel very much at home. The wooden houses and “chums”, (teepee like tents) looked familiar too, and I saw in the faces of the people, features that reminded me of people back home on the other side of the circumpolar world.

I like to take photographs, and one of my favourites from that trip is one that I took almost by accident. It is of an old woman and her dog standing outside a small wooden house. Actually, the picture only shows a part of the old woman, because she is standing partly behind the corner of the house. When I started to take the picture, she was not there at all, I was photographing the wooden house and the dog, and just then the old woman stepped partially into view. She was looking at me, and there was something about her that made me feel that I was looking back through time, into the eyes of an earlier world. Something of this comes across in the picture.

When I showed my pictures from Russia to a small group in Gjoa Haven, Nunavut, a few months later, Uriash Puqiqnaq, now the Mayor of Gjoa Haven, said that this picture was his favourite one from the slide show. He looked at it for quite some time. Uriash was raised on the land in circumstances of considerable hardship. He said that something in that picture reminded him of his grandmother. I understood that he was identifying something that spoke of the

common experiences of indigenous people on opposite sides of the globe.

The Inuit Circumpolar Conference, (ICC), represents many of the aboriginal people of the circumpolar north. Because of the profound impact of climate change on the lifestyles of Inuit, the ICC has made this an important priority. The President of ICC, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, has worked tirelessly to make the world aware of the effects of climate change, and she has used the experiences of her people to press the point. In April of this year, Sheila, an Inuk from Nunavik who now lives in Iqaluit, was recognized as a “Champion of the Earth” by the United Nations Environment Program. Her work through the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, communicating the concerns of northern Inuit about environmental shifts in their homeland, is shaping public policy on the world stage.

Pressure to consider environmental effects, and to respect the environment in a manner consistent with aboriginal culture, is one of the great contributions of aboriginal leadership in Canada and worldwide. It’s an inspiring example of the important place that aboriginal values and priorities can have in shaping our shared future.

Some time during the year of preparation that led up to the official beginning of Nunavut on April 1, 1999, a small group of Inuit cultural experts from the Office of the Interim Commissioner, and the Nunavut Social Development Council, met in Iglulik. They met to plan how Inuit culture and values could be placed at the centre of the functions

of the Nunavut Government. It was at that meeting that the term Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit was chosen to replace “traditional knowledge”, a term which had been used in the former Northwest Territories Government.

There isn't a day that goes by within the Nunavut Government where there isn't a discussion somewhere, (or several), about what Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit means, and how it is to be understood and incorporated into the Government's practices.

In a video produced for the Nunavut Government on the topic of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, Paul Quassa, who was the President of the Tunngavik Federation of Nunavut at the time the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement was signed, explains that: *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit is the belief that one is connected, supported, and nourished by every aspect of one's life. The relationship of all animate and inanimate things that may appear insignificant, ultimately affects how we interact with the world and how the world interacts with us. It is an understanding that your family is foremost over everything and that the wellbeing of the family is linked to the survival of the community as a whole, and the key to survival is the ability to adapt and innovate proven by our ancestors, something that can only be achieved through respect and support for each other.*

This is wonderful stuff, but it's very broad. This is the big picture view. Like public servants everywhere, many officials in the Nunavut Government want something simpler, a recipe almost that they can

follow to ensure that they have taken Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit into account adequately. Like all attempts at cultural generalization, it will never quite work this way. By their very nature, cultural values will be clearly understood only when they are considered within particular circumstances.

The impact isn't just in the policies that are based on Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: it's in the very fact that it is a stated goal of the Nunavut Government to reflect Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit in all that it does. The message this gives is significant. Each policy that is developed, and each program that is designed, is held up and examined through the lens of whether it is consistent with Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit.

It was clear as we tried to incorporate Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit into the work of the Nunavut Government that these are not simply historical cultural traditions. Like all cultures, aboriginal cultures have survived by adapting themselves to modern times. Principles from traditional life provide guidance in the modern world, although the circumstances in which they are used may have changed considerably. This is the case for Inuit in Nunavut, and I think it applies for other aboriginal groups too, as they seek to follow their cultural values in the modern context.

When we were setting up the Justice Department in Nunavut, we talked a lot about how Inuit in previous times had maintained peace and harmony in their communities. One of the challenges in

considering this was that up until about fifty years ago, Inuit were primarily living in camps, in groups of say thirty people most of whom were members of the same extended family. For reasons related to the necessities of survival, the camp would be led by a strong leader who was probably the best hunter in the camp. Elders would provide advice to others in how to live their lives, and everyone would be expected to abide by quite strict standards. Those who disrupted the order of the camp jeopardized the safety of the others, and the social unit would apply strong pressure to ensure compliance.

It's hard to translate the methods used to maintain order in a group of thirty related people who depended on each other for survival, when you are dealing with a modern community of 500 or 5000 or 50,000 people. One way of understanding customary law is that it does not rigidly follow the past, but takes traditional cultural principles and applies them in modern circumstances. Using customary laws in modern times can also be a way to remind those who may have become caught up in the "modern world", of who they are, and the importance of their community's cultural values.

Oral traditions are central to aboriginal cultures. For Canadian aboriginal peoples, languages were not written down until the arrival of European priests. They wanted to teach the people to read the Bible, and devised a writing system to permit this. This is the origin of the syllabics writing systems used by Inuit, Cree, and other aboriginal people today. In fact many people of a certain age who use syllabics today, learned it from reading the Bible.

I grew up as the child of two librarians. I developed the view that it wasn't really important to remember anything, as long as you knew where to look it up. I don't really think that I understood that this was my view, or that it wasn't everyone's view, until I encountered people who came from oral traditions. I remember Peter Irniq, former Commissioner of Nunavut, who grew up on the land near Naujaat, (Repulse Bay), explaining to me how he remembers things very well, his mind is trained to do that, based on his early childhood experiences where he heard and was expected to retain, the teachings of his parents. This remark gave a simple insight about a fundamentally different way of thinking.

We all know that elders are important in aboriginal cultures. I was raised to respect my elders too, but there is something different about the way aboriginal people view their elders. I think that one of the reasons for this is that in an oral culture, the elders, among other important roles, are the source of information about the past, and about culture. They aren't "a" source, they are "the" source.

Maria Campbell, a Metis writer and scholar, gave a public lecture at the University of Regina recently. She based it on a book she has published recently called, "*Stories of the Road Allowance People.*" Those present were treated to a wonderful evening of listening to stories about the people Maria grew up with, people who found room for kindness and fun in lives that were marked by poverty and unfairness. Some of the stories in her book are stories that Maria

was told by her father or other elders. She said that she had wanted to record those stories, but that she had hesitated to do so, out of worry that committing them to the written page would take something away from them. One of the features of stories passed down orally is that each teller injects something of himself in them, so that they remain living traditions.

The whole concept of oral traditions is central to the understanding of treaties and the place in which they are held by First Nations in Saskatchewan. The treaties were signed, on the First Nations side, by chiefs who did not read or write, and who had the meaning of the documents explained to them through an interpreter.

In one way, the treaties could be considered to be legal contracts consisting of the words written on the pages of the documents that were signed. The broader view, which is advanced by First Nations, is that the words that were said when the treaties were explained were equally important as, perhaps more important than, the written words. The treaties are part of oral traditions themselves, because those who were there when they were signed explained the meaning of them to their communities, and these explanations were passed on to successive generations. Those explanations are a central part of what First Nations in Saskatchewan mean when they talk about the meaning of Treaty.

When non-aboriginal people look at aboriginal culture, there can be a tendency to expect that aboriginal culture of today is one and the same as it was in historical times.

The movie *Attanarjuat* is a wonderfully filmed depiction of an old Inuit story that won the Best Foreign Film at Cannes in 2001. When the movie came out, I went to see its Nunavut premiere at the Astro Theatre in Iqaluit. The place was packed, and the Inuit there were very excited about being able to watch a movie with the soundtrack in their own language. I enjoyed the movie very much, but on the way out another Qallunat (non – Inuit) friend said to me, “Great movie, but do you think it will interest anyone down south?” I tended to agree with that perspective, but we were wrong, it was very popular in southern Canada, and also attracted theatre-goers in Europe, Australia, and elsewhere in the world.

One of the things that puzzled me about the reaction to the movie was that some of the people in southern Canada who mentioned it to me, talked about it almost as if it were a depiction of contemporary Inuit life. People didn’t seem to be able to distinguish between the actors as characters in a historical drama, and as real people. It may be because of how rapidly life has changed for arctic peoples. It’s really only a generation ago that they were living a lifestyle quite similar to the lives of generations of forebears.

Today, Inuit are very much part of the modern age. And in this, they exemplify one of the strong characteristics of their culture, the ability

to adapt. I was struck by evidence of this many times during my time working in Nunavut, and in the NWT for that matter.

Let me read you a paragraph from the excellent book *Saqiyuq*, which records the stories of three generations of Inuit women from the same family. In this part, Apphia, who was born in 1931 in the Eastern High Arctic, is telling her story:

There was one time when we were really hungry. We had no light and absolutely nothing to eat. We were living in a sod-house. We were in Upirngivik. Sod houses are usually cosy and warm, but in this sod-house the ceiling was frosted over, and some of the pieces of wood that held it together were missing. We were really hungry and thirsty and cold, and we had no fat to light our qulliit with. We had no light and no heat. This lasted all of March. In April when the young seals came, that is when we finally got some food. And that time in March, before the seals, I was pregnant with Simon. We were really hungry and we had nothing to eat. We were getting ready to move from our camp at Upirngivik, to move to where we could find food. The men were out hunting for seals to feed the dogs. We wanted to feed the dogs first so they would be stronger for the trip. This was 1953. I was just twenty-two.

We were starving, and that is how I gave birth to Simon. It was really, really really cold, and Simon, he was a big baby!

At the time I read this book for the first time, Simon was working in the next office to me at the Department of Justice. Like me, he was

spending his days in meetings, trying to keep up with hundreds of emails, and when necessary, flying to meetings in other parts of Canada. This is Simon's story, but it's a common one in the north. Fifty years ago, people were born in outpost camps, in families who were living nomadically, moving camp by season as they followed the movements of game. The qulliq, (oil lamp), was their source of heat and light. Today, those same people drive cars, work in offices, eat fast food, and watch satellite tv.

What I'm describing is simply part of modern life. Inuit, and other aboriginal people, live modern lives just like everyone else. There is a teenage single mother from a Baffin Island community living in Regina. Her first language is Inuktitut, and this is her first experience living in a city. On her list of favourite foods you would find both igunaq (fermented walrus meat), and avocado. She's studying cosmetology, and dreams of styling the hair of a movie star. She's a regular visitor at my house and often uses the opportunity to catch up on her email on my computer. She can send digital photos of the baby back to her family in Nunavut. I glanced at her the other night as she was sitting at the computer, her fingers busy at the keyboard, while her baby slept snugly in the amautiq on her back. It was a nice little snapshot of a modern young person, at home with the technology of two different worlds.

In a way, computers are the ultimate symbol of the modern age. They can also be a tool to help preserve traditional culture. The Priruvik Centre in Iqaluit is working with Microsoft to translate the

whole Windows operating system into Inuktitut. As part of this, with the help of a former Language Commissioner of Nunavut, they are developing Inuktitut terminology for thousands of computing terms. This project is predicted to have a major impact on the workplace, making it that much easier for Inuktitut to be used as the language of Government and business.

Solutions that marry traditional aboriginal culture to modern life are equally important in southern Canada. Today, most of the reserves around Regina have more than half their membership living off reserve, in cities, where they must cope with the fast paced urban environment.

The Health Centre on Treaty 4 lands near Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan is a brand new facility. It would be the envy of any community, with all the modern health technology components that one could imagine for a facility of its size. It also has some unique features that reflect the cultural priorities of the First Nations people who developed the hospital. It has an apartment for family members to stay in when their relative is receiving palliative care. This speaks clearly of the importance this culture puts on family relationships. It has a whole section related to traditional healing, with an area for drying and preparing medicinal herbs, a circular room for smudge ceremonies and healing circles, and a sweat lodge. Under one roof, this health centre offers care based on the latest scientific advances, and care based on traditional First Nations cultural practices of

ancient origin. Those in need of care can benefit from the best of both worlds.

Maintaining culture does not mean living in the past. Living a modern life does not require losing one's culture.

First Nations and Metis in southern Canada have lived with the influence of Europeans for well over a century. In some ways, this could mean that the distinctiveness of their cultures are less pronounced, and yet the truly amazing thing is that their cultures have survived. Their cultures have survived despite all those years of official effort to eliminate them. That cultural survival carries a lot of scars, as well as tremendous strength.

I remember a meeting that Jack Anawak, then Interim Commissioner for Nunavut, overseeing the establishment of the Nunavut Government, had with a group of young Inuit some time in 1998. These young people came from a variety of backgrounds, some with a strong grounding in Inuktitut and traditional culture, and others with little knowledge of these things. Sometimes Inuit who lack deep understanding of their cultural roots are looked down upon. The message that I remember Jack delivering to this group was that they were all Inuit, just as much as anyone else, and they were the future of the Inuit, and they were the people who would define what it meant to be Inuit in the future.

In the Nunavut Department of Justice, achievement of the goal of having Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit reflected in our work depended heavily on the guidance of Inuit staff in the Department.

In January of 2003, I lived in the community of Gjoa Haven for a month, part of a Nunavut Government expectation that Deputy Ministers get experience with Nunavut life outside of the capital city of Iqaluit. Simon Awa, whose birth in the outpost camp I mentioned a few minutes ago, was my Assistant Deputy Minister, and he was running the Department in Iqaluit in my absence. One day, I received a call from Simon. He was with Leena Evic, our Director of Policy and Planning, another person very wise about Inuit culture, and they had an idea that they wanted to talk to me about. Their idea was that we should hire an elder, or innaq, for the Department of Justice.

They had someone in mind. Lucien Ukaliannuk was a respected elder from Iglulik, who was living in Iqaluit while his wife took a program at the Arts and Crafts Centre at the Nunavut Arctic College. So Lucien was in Iqaluit, and was available. I forget the actual words that they used, but during the conversation, I realized that they wanted Lucien to do what I had been assuming they did: to provide insights and advice about Inuit culture and values. I was always turning to them for information about Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, and they were telling me that THEY needed someone to turn to, someone older and wiser and with a longer memory, to talk these things over with.

It made me think: what if someone were asking me what my culture meant, and how my people's values should be applied to challenging modern problems? I realized that I would not be up to the task at all: I would want to talk to my mother, or someone of that generation!

It turned out that Lucien Ukaliannuk didn't just become the elder for the Department of Justice. He also served as cultural advisor and professor at the Akitsiraq Law School. Through the unique legal education partnership that is Akitsiraq, a group of Inuit students will graduate with LLB degrees from the University of Victoria next month. Their education has included all of the basics of the law that other law students in Canada learn. They have also learned in detail about the Nunavut Land Claim Agreement, and, under Lucien's leadership, about traditional Inuit law. When those students begin their careers next month they will be equipped to contribute to Nunavut society in exceptional ways.

Staff in the Nunavut Government regularly take part in cultural activities. These help Qallunaat staff understand Inuit culture better, and they are also important to Inuit staff, both as a learning experience for some, and as an indication of the importance of Inuit culture in the Nunavut Government. One of the things I valued on these occasions was the role reversals that took place. Those who were experts in the office on legal topics or other matters, might well be the least knowledgeable when it came to activities on the land. Someone in a support staff role at work might have superior knowledge and expertise when it came to cultural activities. As a

result of this experience, we saw each other differently, and respected one another in new ways.

On one of our cultural days, a group of senior managers and other staff from the Department spent the afternoon at the qammaq which an elder had set up outside of Iqaluit for the summer. Our group, which was mostly Qallunaat, sat and listened and asked questions of the three elders present, with the interpreter also contributing to the discussion. We heard many things of interest about Inuit culture, and the recollections of these elders about earlier times. I think the thing I remember most was the observation that one of my colleagues made afterwards. He noted that in any conversation, we Qallunaat were always trying to jump into the discussion, almost interrupting others just to get our thoughts heard. The Inuit, on the other hand, would wait until someone had finished speaking and then probably leave a pause for thought before someone else would speak. His observation was that these two styles of conversation were not very compatible: if the Qallunaat persisted in this aggressive approach we would never hear what the Inuit had to say.

Many times I squirmed through meetings as I watched fellow Qallunaat dominate the discussion without realizing they were doing so. Sometimes, I was the one doing this, but it's something that took me awhile to recognize. I remember a series of meetings where I was frustrated because my colleague, who I knew had a lot of knowledge about the topic, never said anything. At some point there was a moment of tension about these meetings, that resulted in my

explaining my frustration, and her telling me how frustrating she found it when I did all the talking without allowing her a chance to speak. Once we had identified this, it wasn't immediately solved, but we were aware of the problem and could work on it, and even laugh about it.

These things are related, I think, to different views of leadership. In my culture, there is respect given to people who speak up and get the discussion to go their way. To my Inuit colleagues, this behaviour probably appeared rude.

Amongst aboriginal people, I don't think this is unique to Inuit. The Chief of a Saskatchewan First Nation told me recently that he had been to see the House of Commons in Ottawa, and he was not impressed by the behaviour of the Members of Parliament during Question Period. The rowdy, aggressive manner in which Question Period is conducted wasn't an example he would not want the young people of his community to observe.

One of the challenges of having aboriginal and non-aboriginal people work together is that the concept of leadership is not a universal one. Our sense of who is a strong leader and how that person should behave in a crisis is very closely linked to the culture in which we have been raised.

One time when this became evident to me was during an incident that occurred outside of the office and a long way from the capital city of

Iqaluit. We were in Pond Inlet for a meeting, and arrangements were made through one of our group who had relatives there, for us to go on an outing by boat. It was just an afternoon outing. We were going to go a little ways from town for a picnic. This is one of the most scenic places in the world, with the mountains and glaciers of Bylot Island magnificent across the waters of Eclipse Sound.

The boat was owned by an elder, and his young adult son was with him. There were also a number of other people of various ages going along on the trip: in all, perhaps seven or eight adults and as many again young children and teenagers.

By the time we were ready to leave our picnic spot, it had become quite windy, and the tide had started to go out. The boat motor started up alright, but quite soon after we left shore we ran aground on a sandbar, and the motor stopped. We were too far from shore to get back without the boat, but still nowhere near town. The two men in charge of the boat spent quite some time pulling the chord and fiddling with the motor, trying to get it started again. During this time, no one gave any instructions, no one swore, none of the others asked any questions or said anything, and none of the kids whined.

After awhile, when it started to be clear that the motor wasn't going to start, a couple of the teenage girls picked up an oar that was in the boat and tried to push the boat off the sandbar. No one told them to do this, but they thought of it and tried it. No one commented on it

either, and none of the older people present gave them instructions on how to go about it.

A little later, we saw on the shore a couple of young boys coming along, having walked out from Pond Inlet. They looked out at us, and as we watched they retrieved a small row boat by the shore, a boat apparently with only one oar because they poled their way out to where we were. When they got to the boat, there wasn't really any conversation or discussion, but the next thing that happened was that the younger of the two men in charge of our boat got into the small rowboat with the boys and went in to the shore with them. When they got to the shore, which was some distance away, we saw the man from our boat go off on foot, not directly in the direction of town, but inland.

After the younger man left the boat, the elder whose boat it was went in to the sheltered compartment at the bow. Several of the children were going in and out of this place too, as it was warmer there. By now the wind was quite strong and cold. A couple of us were wearing floater suits, which were pretty warm, but even with that, I was starting to feel the chill. Most of the others on the boat had jackets but not really warm gear. Still, no one complained, no one questioned what was going on, everyone just waited patiently, or chatted about other things. No words of blame were spoken.

We were on the boat, aground on the sandbar, about four hours. It wasn't life threatening at all, but we were at the point where I was

considering the possibility that we would be there all night, and that would have been a miserable night. We were lucky though, eventually a boat appeared in the distance, bouncing over the waves as it approached us. The man from our boat had made it to town, and found someone with a boat to come and tow us in. All's well that ends well.

I have tried to imagine a group of people from my culture behaving this way in similar circumstances. I can't imagine it. Someone would have felt the need to assume command. Someone would have complained or blamed someone else. Others would have made suggestions, and there would have been discussions about proposed courses of actions. None of these things took place, and yet there was co-operation amongst the group, and a successful result was achieved. This kind of leadership could be desirable and effective in many situations, but it could only work if those from the more assertive pattern of leadership were willing and able to step back and give it the opportunity to happen. Where this can occur, it will make available a broader range of options for problem solving.

Rebekah Williams, who worked with me as Assistant Deputy Minister of Justice during the time we were setting up the Nunavut Government, told about the transition to communities this way. Perhaps this was said partly in jest, I'm not sure, but it is one of those things that has a ring of truth to it too. She said that in the camps, the people who could do things, those with hunting skills, were the leaders. When they moved into communities, those people, the

“doers”, became water truck drivers and town maintenance crew, and the people who were better at talking than doing things, became the local politicians. This may not be entirely fair, but it does exemplify how skills that were highly valued in traditional settings may be undervalued in circumstances where different governance practices apply. And it may have something to do with why some people, and it seems to be especially men, those who as hunters would have been the natural leaders, have found it so hard to adapt to office jobs and modern life.

There is a whole other side to Nunavut, a tragic side that is shared to some extent in other aboriginal communities across Canada. Family violence is prevalent, and it fills the jails with men who are struggling with their roles in family life. Some of the victimizers were victims themselves as children or at some time in their lives. Part of this represents the after effects of residential schools, where some students were physically and sexually abused, and most experienced attempts to devalue their culture.

The suicide rate in Nunavut can be described as epidemic. In the five years that followed April 1, 1999, 140 people in Nunavut died by their own hands, all but three Inuit. This is in a population of about 30,000. Although these included men and women of a variety of ages, most of them were young men, people who we should have been able to look to for future leadership.

In the spring of 2003, a national meeting on suicide prevention was held in Iqaluit. A number of Nunavut's political leaders attended and took part. I remember someone from Toronto commenting to me how lucky we were that our politicians took this topic so seriously. That person was right in a way, but what he was not really understanding was that every one of those people was interested in suicide prevention because they had been touched personally by suicide. Everyone in Nunavut has a relative, or someone they know, who has committed suicide. Some families have lost several members this way. Children grow up with this reality, and it is a terrible thing to see how they accept it.

People who come from the south to work in Nunavut often comment on the amount of tragedy that Nunavummiut experience in their lives. It isn't just the suicides. The harsh conditions mean that every year some people perish out on the land. The high levels of poverty, and of the social conditions that breed personal violence, mean that there is a higher than usual incidence of death by disease and by violent means.

These factors affect southern aboriginal people too. Earlier this year, I spent a wonderful day on a reserve near Regina, learning about the programs they have and are planning, seeing the commitment to providing youth with positive futures, and hearing of the plans and dreams the Chief had for his community. One week after that visit, there was a tragedy in the community, with two women killed and

others badly injured, and charges laid against a family member. This is just an example: sadly there are many more.

The exposure to violence is part of the shared experience of Inuit in Nunavut, and of aboriginal people elsewhere in Canada. Aboriginal people fill Canadian jails in numbers way out of proportion with their population numbers, and they are overrepresented as victims too. It is another part of what shapes aboriginal decision makers when they are setting priorities and developing policies.

Processes for making decisions are important, and so is who makes the decisions. Having decisions that affect aboriginal people made by aboriginal people can be significant in itself, whether or not the governance structures, or in fact the decisions themselves, are any different. This is natural, given a recent history where aboriginal Canadians were excluded from making their own decisions.

Many Canadians are almost oblivious to the history of colonialism that aboriginal Canadians feel very deeply. This, almost as much as the history itself affects the way aboriginal people view their place in Canadian society.

A few weeks ago, a man I sat with at a meeting on aboriginal economic development in Saskatchewan told me a bit of his personal story. It gave me a sense of what is driving his determination to work to bring prosperity to the people of his reserve. One thing he told me was that his grandfather fought in the First World War, and his father

fought in the Second World War. They fought for Canada's freedom, and yet neither of them lived to a time when they were entitled to vote in a Canadian election.

That's a part of Canadian history that most non-aboriginal citizens are not even aware of, but every First Nations person knows it. Both the fact of not having the vote until the 1950's, and the general ignorance of this fact within Canadian society, are part of the reality of aboriginal people in Canada. Much of our history is like this, with the stories that are central to aboriginal Canadians being outside the awareness of much of the rest of the population.

A few years ago we were doing consultations to prepare for the development of Nunavut's first Human Rights Act. At the beginning of the first meeting, we spent quite a bit of time talking about the concept of human rights, and participants were encouraged to talk about experiences that related to the topic. One of the stories that has stayed with me was told by a Pond Inlet elder, Rachel Erkloo. She told of a time when her husband, Elijah, had worked for the Federal Government, and they had lived in Ottawa for about seven years. This would have been in the 1960's, during a period when it was Federal policy to encourage people to settle in communities so that their children would attend school. As she described it, before they left Pond Inlet, families were living in outpost camps where their leaders were in charge of their lives, and making decisions for their families. When Elijah and Rachel returned to Pond Inlet seven years later, they were shocked by the change. Families were living in the

community by then, living in houses and eating food from the store. It was a more prosperous life in many ways. There was something different about the people though. They seemed to be no longer in charge of their own affairs. They depended on the Government to do things for them.

It is this kind of history that makes it so important for aboriginal people to be able to have control over their own lives, and their communities' lives.

A decade or more ago, a group of legislators and officials from the Northwest Territories went on a fact finding visit to Navajo country in the American southwest. The delegation was led by Stephen Kakfwi, the Minister of Justice of the time, and a couple of non-aboriginal senior officials from the Department went along. They were interested in seeing the Navajo courts and learning more about how they worked. When they got back, I asked the officials about what they had seen, and got the answer that there were native people in the various positions in the court, but the court model itself was pretty much the same as any court system, so there wasn't really anything radically different. A couple of days later I talked to Minister Kakfwi and asked him what he thought. His sometimes impassive face lit up, and he said something to the effect of, "It was really great, just to see our people in the roles as judges and lawyers. They were doing everything."

What a difference in perspective. It's a difference born in the different life experiences of the observers. The shared experiences of aboriginal people include the experience of being left out of decision making, and of suffering by the decisions of others. The value of being able to make your own decisions is probably never truly understood until you have been denied it.

Last October, there was a meeting of First Ministers from all the provinces and territories and the Federal Government with the National Aboriginal leaders to talk about aboriginal health concerns. At that conference, Premier Lorne Calvert of Saskatchewan spoke about the broad determinants of health, saying: *I believe that we do need to broaden our discussion and our thought about Aboriginal health sincerely to look at the determinants of health as those determinants affect Aboriginal people, whether it is poverty, whether it is lifestyle, whether it is self-determination, which can have a distinct impact on a community and an individual's health.*

The reference to self determination in this context was a big step towards recognition of how central it is to all aspects of well-being.

Having the authority to make your own decisions, and the decisions that will affect your people, counts for a lot. There may still be something missing, though, when the systems or processes used are all designed for someone else, or based on someone else's world view.

This may be a good point to mention one of the huge differences for aboriginal people in southern Canada, compared to their counterparts in Nunavut. About 85% of the people of Nunavut are Inuit. Even though aboriginal populations in the south may be greater in numbers, they form a much smaller percentage of the overall provincial populations. In Saskatchewan, which has one of the highest percentages of aboriginal people of all the provinces, 13.5% of the population were aboriginal as of 2001. 58% of these were under 25, and therefore the percentage is growing. It is projected that by 2045, 33% of Saskatchewan residents will be aboriginal. That's very significant, but it's still a minority.

Being a minority creates an understandable need to assert the distinctiveness of identity. Chief Glen Pratt of the Gordon First Nation near Regina, one of the up and coming young First Nations leaders in Saskatchewan, said it this way in a profile published last week in the Regina Leader Post, "*We're Indian people. We're not white people. It's ok to understand the white man's world, it's ok to get the white man's education. But at the end of the day, we need to be Indians because that's who we are. That's where we get our sense of pride and our heritage from. If we become more holistic as people, we'll become healthy again.*" The wisdom in these words lies in the recognition that it is necessary to be well grounded in one's culture, and to be free to use one's culture, in order to reach out and understand those of other cultures.

Last summer a five year old First Nations girl, Tamra Keepness, disappeared from her home in Regina, sometime in the night. Little Tamra has never been found, and her case remains an active police investigation file. This was a national media story for weeks, as all Canadians were touched by the vulnerability of this child. In Regina, and in surrounding areas, many volunteers searched beyond exhaustion for days and weeks. The searchers came from the child's inner city neighbourhood, from neighbouring reserves, and from all parts of Saskatchewan. They came from all racial groups and all walks of life. One of the First Nations people involved in that search said to me recently that this was an experience that gave her hope for the future, because people had come together and worked together with no distinctions: they just all wanted to help find that little girl.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples will need to find ways to work together in Canada, whether in public governments that apply to all, or through partnerships between governments.

Our success in doing this may depend on our ability to know one another, to value our differences, and to recognize that the wisdom of different cultures can bring greater overall strength. We will need to accept that different processes, and decision-makers from different backgrounds, will result in some different decisions being made. Some people will feel threatened by this, but it can also be seen as a strength of Canadian society.

A couple of years ago an Iqaluit elder, Simon Nattaq, spoke to our management group from the Department of Justice. He was speaking through an interpreter because most of our group could only understand English. He told us many things, but let me tell you the very first thing he said. As he began, he hesitated before speaking, and then said what was interpreted to us as, "It's hard to know how to tell you about these things, because our culture is so much more complex than yours."

As I heard that, I realized that everyone must feel that way. We know our own culture in greater depth than we can know another culture. What we know of the culture of others we understand through our own eyes. Understanding this is essential to living and working with people from different cultures, or we will tend to underestimate the contributions that they make.

Strong aboriginal voices are having an impact on Canadian society. They are helping shape the future of our country, a future that will be stronger because of these contributions.