

Arctic Frost? Understanding Inuit Ambiguity towards Idle No More

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Abstract

This chapter explores apparent Inuit ambiguity towards Idle No More. The Indigenous movement was founded in Canada in 2010 to protest the Conservative government's attempts to erode Indigenous sovereignty and reduce federal environmental protection, including in the Arctic, through omnibus legislation. Inuit perspectives on the movement are complex and reflect Inuit culture, priorities, and pressing realities.

1. Introduction to Idle No More

Idle No More is a global social movement founded in Canada in 2010, committed to peaceful protest grounded in Indigenous activism. Its vision is to *honour Indigenous sovereignty, and to protect the land and water*.¹⁶⁸ The Jobs and Growth Act, an omnibus bill introduced by Canada's former Conservative federal government, triggered an escalation of Idle No More activities in 2012. The Act dismantled much of Canada's environmental protection legislation, including in the Inuit Arctic, and increased Ottawa's ongoing attacks on Indigenous autonomy and sovereignty.

2. Inuit Ambiguity toward Idle No More

Despite the new legislation's potential adverse effects on the Arctic, Inuit demonstrated an apparent reluctance to engage fully with Idle No More. Some Inuit, however, supported the movement. For instance, on December 21, 2012 an Idle No More flash mob at Iqaluit Airport, Nunavut drew twenty-five people who drummed and sang.¹⁶⁹

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¹⁶⁸ Idle No More, "Vision," <http://www.idlenomore.ca/vision>.

¹⁶⁹ W. Bernauer, "Idle No More Comes to Nunavut," The Media Co-op, January 26, 2013, <http://www.mediacoop.ca/fr/story/idle-no-more-comes-nunavut/15924>, Accessed Feb. 15, 2016.

Almost a month later, an outdoor rally of forty people took place in Iqaluit and an Inuit public interest group called Makita announced its solidarity with Idle No More.¹⁷⁰ Further, representatives from Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), the entity that manages the Inuit land-claim agreement in Nunavut, met with the hunger-striking chief of Attawapiskat First Nation, Theresa Spence, who was linked to Idle No More. NTI also issued a media release that criticized Ottawa for failing to live up to its obligations to Indigenous people, including environmental monitoring in the Arctic.¹⁷¹ In 2006 NTI had sued the Crown on the same basis; NTI won the case along with almost \$15 million in damages.¹⁷² NTI president Cathie Towtongie said, *In Nunavut, the government of Canada has failed to implement our modern day agreements in many respects.*¹⁷³

Yet there was considerable evidence of Inuit ambiguity toward Idle No More. NTI's public statement in support of Idle No More masked its support for legislative changes made by the Conservative government. NTI stood with Ottawa as it amended the Nunavut land-claim agreement in 2008, effectively removing the territory from the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act. NTI also supported a further streamlining of the environmental review process in the Arctic through the Nunavut Planning and Project Assessment Act, an omnibus bill known and marketed as the Northern Jobs and Growth Act.

Pointing out that Inuit are not First Nations,¹⁷⁴ Terry Audla, president of the national Inuit organization, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), expressed his reluctance about Idle No More in a commentary in the *National Post*, a right-leaning southern Canadian newspaper with wide distribution. He wrote *As with our modern Inuit land-claim agreements, we believe that the Crown should better honour the historic numbered treaties signed with First Nations.* . . . Then he added: *As the national Inuit leader, I could be in permanent outrage mode with the Crown. But instead of casting the relationship between the Canadian government and its indigenous peoples in black-and-white terms, I would prefer to commend Environment Canada officials, and our Canadian ambassadors abroad. They are helping battle Goliath, both in our attempt to challenge a European Union seal ban in EU courts, and to counter*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷² Author unknown, Inuit side with Idle No More, say movement an opportunity to honour land claims, *Metro Ottawa*, January 10, 2013, Accessed <http://www.metronews.ca/news/ottawa/2013/01/10/inuit-side-with-idle-no-more-say-movement-an-opportunity-to-honour-land-claims.html>.

¹⁷³ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷⁴ First Nations are formerly known as Indians and are not related in terms of culture or descent to Inuit, the Indigenous people of the Circumpolar region.

efforts to list polar bears as endangered. . .For Inuit, that means putting food on the table. . . Inuit support the movement but we're a pragmatic people.¹⁷⁵ Some of Audla's sentiments were shared by the editors of the Nunavut newspaper Nunatsiaq Online who opined: *Idle No More's unifying principle is the idea that aboriginal people are sovereign nations who have yet to surrender their sovereignty to Canada. . .But no officially recognized Inuit organization within Canada asserts such an ideology. . .That's no commonality. It's a stark, irreconcilable difference.*¹⁷⁶ Nunatsiaq Online went further, labelling Idle No More *incoherent and chaotic* and calling Chief Spence's hunger strike *a bizarre sideshow*.¹⁷⁷

3. Legislation and Protest: Understanding Inuit Dilemmas in the Canadian Context

It is unreasonable to expect Inuit to speak with one voice. At first glance, it seems that many grassroots Inuit, especially those who live in southern Canadian cities, saw Idle No More as a good opportunity. Leaders like Terry Audla seemed to have a more negative view of the movement and NTI gave out mixed messages. The conflicting messages from Inuit organizations and groups about Idle No More were striking, especially as compared to the near consensus among First Nations organizations and groups.

How do we understand apparent Inuit ambiguity to Idle No More? Clearly, Inuit quite rightly expect their land-claims agreements to be respected, which is a similar goal to that of most First Nations Idle No More supporters. The aspirations of both Inuit and First Nations are political in nature, reflecting a desire to return to some form of self-government, but there is a philosophical difference too large to ignore. For Inuit, autonomy can happen within Canada; for many First Nations, the aim is self-government *alongside* Canada with citizenship linked to, for instance, the Oneida, Mohawk or Cree nation.¹⁷⁸ In contrast, ITK's slogan is *Canadians First, First Canadians* and Inuit from the Canadian Arctic and sub-Arctic see themselves as "Canadian Inuit" when they meet with Inuit from elsewhere in the

¹⁷⁵ T. Audla, "Terry Audla on Idle No More: The view from the (far, far) North," National Post, January 29, 2013, <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/terry-audla-on-idle-no-more-the-view-from-the-far-far-north>, Accessed February 15, 2016.

¹⁷⁶ Editors, "Idle No More: not yet relevant to Nunavut," Nunatsiaq Online, http://www.nunatsiaqonline.ca/stories/article/65674idle_no_more_not_yet_relevant_to_nunavut, February 13, 2013, Accessed February 24, 2016.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁸ G. R. Alfred, *Peace, power, righteousness: An indigenous manifesto*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2009.

Circumpolar region.¹⁷⁹ With Idle No More making its opposition to the Canadian state abundantly clear, Inuit leaders had little choice but to critique the movement and refrain from wholeheartedly embracing it.

Another related reason for Inuit ambiguity lies in high-context Inuit culture, specifically methods of dealing with conflict. Inuit respond to conflict by privileging necessity and *actions determined by the demands of what we could call honour*.¹⁸⁰ Thus, Inuit deal with conflict by considering what can be done and what needs to be done and then *using ritual communication based upon feelings and aesthetics*. When conflict occurs, even if it is of criminal nature, an important goal is to *restore harmony and peace in the community*.¹⁸¹ Reflecting these values, the government of Nunavut, while a public, rather than Inuit, government is a consensus government, which means that members are independent of political parties and the tone of debate in the House should be courteous. According to former member Hunter Tootoo,¹⁸² *Although unanimous agreement is not required for decisions in the Legislative Assembly, unanimity is a desirable outcome*.¹⁸³ As Terry Audla said with reference to Idle No More, Inuit are pragmatic. Litigation sits uneasily with Inuit culture, as does protest. While this may look like simple conflict aversion to observers, it is more complicated than this.

As ITK leader Terry Audla said with reference to Idle No More, Inuit are pragmatic. One of the things that makes Inuit responses complex is the health status, in the broadest terms, of Inuit in Canada. Inuit health status, reflecting multiple multi-generational trauma caused by loss of land, loss of language, forced residential schooling, and myriad other assimilationist policies, is alarmingly low. Inuit have higher total cardiovascular mortality than Europeans and other North Americans.¹⁸⁴ Injuries, intentional and unintentional, are *an important cause of death*¹⁸⁵ and there is a *prevalent pattern* of adolescent suicide.¹⁸⁶ In

¹⁷⁹ Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, *First Canadians, Canadians First: National Strategy on Inuit Education*, 2011.

¹⁸⁰ K. Sevón, "Identifying the communication of the other: The example of communicating conflicts to Greenland," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 6, no. 2 (1993): 147-162, p. 153.

¹⁸¹ P. Rousseau, "First Nations and the Canadian Legal System: Conflict Management or Dispute Resolution?," *11-15 August 2004 The Arctic Institute of North America University of Calgary Calgary, Alberta, Canada* 11 (2004): 275-283, p. 282.

¹⁸² Tootoo, an Inuk, is now the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard in Canada's new federal government.

¹⁸³ H. Tootoo, "Nunavut: An Example of Consensus Government in the Canadian Arctic," *Canadian parliamentary review* 35, no. 4 (2012): 2-5, p. 3.

¹⁸⁴ P. Bjerregaard, T. K. Young, E. Dewailly, and S. O.E. Ebbesson, "Review Article: Indigenous health in the Arctic: an overview of the circumpolar Inuit population," *Scandinavian journal of public health* 32, no. 5 (2004): 390-395, p. 392.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

addition, many Inuit are exposed to food and water contaminants, including lead and mercury,¹⁸⁷ and many experience chronic water insecurity¹⁸⁸ and, related to this, food insecurity.¹⁸⁹ Added to this is the mental health burden resulting from climate change.¹⁹⁰ These things interrupt the Inuit relationship with the land and sea, from which Inuit identity and health are derived. So, given the number and extent of these problems, at times Inuit are forced to resort to litigation, as NTI did in 2006. They take part in the adversarial British-Canadian justice system with the full knowledge that their preferences lie elsewhere; extrapolating from Terry Audla, we learn that Inuit eschew overt conflict and would rather concentrate on whatever needs to be done to put food on the table. In promising improved socio-economic conditions through industrial development with enabling legislation as a starting point, Canada's Conservative government forced NTI's hands more than once.

4. Conclusion

The National Post and other right-leaning media outlets in Canada attempted to exploit alleged divisions between Indigenous people over Idle No More as a way of discrediting the movement. But they failed to understand the complexity of Inuit responses to the realities of life in the Arctic. In addition, given the Canadian tendency to conflate Inuit with First Nations, who are much more numerous and visible, Inuit have to assert themselves through emphasizing differences in culture, priorities, and goals. Thus Inuit ambiguity toward Idle No More can be explained not in terms of political agendas but in terms of cultural differences, preferred strategies and priorities, given the urgencies in the Arctic.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 393.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 394.

¹⁸⁸ M. Hanrahan, A. Sarkar, and A. Hudson, "Exploring Water Insecurity in a Northern Indigenous Community in Canada: The "Never-Ending Job" of the Southern Inuit of Black Tickle, Labrador," *Arctic Anthropology* 51, no. 2 (2014): 9-22.

¹⁸⁹ A. Sarkar, M. Hanrahan, A. Hudson, "Water insecurity in Canadian Indigenous communities: some inconvenient truths," *Rural and remote health* 15, no. 3354 (2015); J. D. Ford, and L. Berrang-Ford, "Food security in Igloolik, Nunavut: an exploratory study," *Polar Record* 45, no. 03 (2009): 225-236.

¹⁹⁰ A.C. Willox, E. Stephenson, J. Allen, F. Bourque, A. Drossos, S. Elgarøy, M. J. Kral et al. "Examining relationships between climate change and mental health in the Circumpolar North." *Regional Environmental Change* 15, no. 1 (2015): 169-182.

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