Nunatsiavut – Canada’s Final Inuit Land Claims

The first Inuit ethnic government in Canada was formed in Labrador on December 1, 2005. This is a key historic moment in North American history that can be used to teach students about successful international minority rights and self-governance movements.

Nunatsiavut, “our beautiful land” in Inuittut (the Inuit language), marks the final of four Inuit land claims agreements in Canada. It is, however, just the beginning of a new era of increased rights and responsibilities for the 5,300 Inuit and Kablunangajuit (people of mixed Inuit/European ancestry) who live in the northeastern most region of Canada’s mainland. Many know of the creation of the new territory of Nunavut, carved out of the eastern half of the Northwest Territories in 1999. While the population of Nunavut is predominantly Inuit, the government is public. Nunatsiavut, on the other hand, will remain part of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, but it will be Inuit controlled. The main objectives of the new government are to preserve the Inuit culture, language and the environment.

Nunatsiavut encompasses over 10% of the northeast coast of Labrador. The Inuit will now have rights to traditional land use and share in the revenues from resource development including in the almost 3-billion dollar Voisey nickel mine project. The land is rocky and barren on the coastline and has some of the highest peaks east of the Rockies at the extreme northern tip of the region in the Torsgat Mountain Range. Nunatsiavut is home to the world's largest caribou herd, rich in marine resources and has some of the most significant iron ore deposits in the world.
“Nunatsiavut ... is the first Inuit ethnic government in Canada, responsible for advancing the aboriginal, constitutional, democratic, social and human rights of the Labrador Inuit.”

— Makivik Magazine, Winter 2005-06

William Andersen III, past president of the Labrador Inuit Association, will serve as head of the Transitional Nunatsiavut Government until the first elections are held.

The entire region of Labrador is approximately the same size as Italy with a population of about 30,000. Thirty percent of the people are aboriginal including the Innu (distinct from the Inuit and formerly known as the Naskapi or Montagnais), Métis and the 5,300 Inuit/Kabunangajuit.

THE INUIT - HISTORY
Indians have occupied Labrador for about 7,000 years — the Inuit came later, about 4,000 years ago. It wasn't until the 16th century that the Inuit came into contact with European cod fishermen and whalers. For the next couple of hundred years trading took place between the two groups and in some cases the Inuit worked for and with the Europeans harvesting marine resources. Relations were mixed but given the rocky Labrador land and harsh climate, there was no competition for settlement lands. The first settlers — the only non-Inuit to settle in the area until the 20th century — were missionaries who founded Nain in 1771. The Moravians (a small Protestant sect) established a total of seven missions in the region.

The Moravians set up a general store at each mission and provided health care to the Inuit drawing the traditionally nomadic people into a settlement economy. The sect also had a high regard for education and taught the Inuit to read and write in Inuititut using the Roman alphabet (syllabics were used by other missionary groups creating a dual orthography in Canada’s North). Because of the services provided and literacy education, the Moravians had a fairly positive impact on Inuit.

Thanks to the Moravian focus on literacy, there are a few early journals and writings by Inuit documenting life in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A fascinating though tragic story written by an Inuk from Nunatsiavut was published this last year — The Diary of Abraham Ulrikab (edited by Hartmut Lutz, University of Ottawa Press, 2005). In 1880 an Inuk named Abraham Ulrikab agreed to go with his family and friends to Germany to be displayed in a zoo in order to pay off a debt he had to the missionaries. The experience turned out to be devastating — the Inuit were poorly treated and all died of small pox within five months. Ulrikab kept a journal that documented the last months of their lives. The journal was later returned to the Hebron mission. The Diary was just translated into English providing an incredibly rare and tragic insight into what was, at that time, a rather common tradition — bringing Inuit to Europe as “specimens” for display.

The Moravians played a key role in the Inuit communities for well over 150 years and until the 1940s, 50s and 60s when the Canadian and new provincial government of Newfoundland (1949) began to take over services. Government interest in Labrador developed as a result of security concerns during World War II and the Cold War as well as the realization that the region held a wealth of resources. During World War II a U.S. military air base was constructed at Goose Bay (the largest airport in the world at that time), radar stations were established along the Labrador coast, and iron ore mines and hydro-electric projects were built. The governments also took over social services including health care and education and imposed English-only in the schools. The sentiment at the time was that the integration of the Inuit into “modern” industrial life was critical to their welfare. In addition, the government closed three of the missions to consolidate services and cut costs. The Inuit, who were forced to relocate, suffered significant disruption and upheaval that would impact the families for generations.
In response to the dramatic changes enforced on the communities, the Inuit began to organize politically forming the Labrador Inuit Association in 1973. By the late 1970s the Association had filed the first land claims to the provincial and federal governments. It would be another decade before negotiations between the three governments would begin and finally, in 2004, the Inuit voted to ratify the land claims agreement. This was the first step in preparing the agreement to become law.

A NEW DIRECTION
On January 23, 2005, the Nunatsiavut Land Claims Agreement was signed by Labrador Inuit Association president, William Andersen III, Danny Williams, the premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, and the federal government representative, Andy Scott, federal minister of Indian and Northern Affairs. In addition to land claims, the Agreement included provisions for self-government. The following June the Labrador Inuit Land Claims was presented to the Canadian House of Commons where it received unanimous support. On June 23, 2005 the Bill was given Royal Assent (signed into law) by Governor General Adrienne Clarkson.

On December 1, 2005 the Government of Nunatsiavut came into being — the Constitution for the new government was ratified, the Labrador Inuit Association ceased to exist and the new Transitional Government of Nunatsiavut began operations. The Labrador Inuit Association president, William Andersen III, assumed the leadership of the Transitional Government of Nunatsiavut.

“We are very proud of the Labrador Inuit today,” said Nunavik leader, Pita Aatani at the ceremony, “... we envy you because we have also been working for a very long time to have a government in our own Nunavik region. We’re getting there but we’re not there yet.” (The Inuit of Nunavik, in northern Quebec, signed the first Inuit land claims in Canada in 1975 and are currently in the process of establishing their own self-government.)

The new Nunatsiavut government has responsibility for health care, education and culture. The Agreement provides the Inuit with co-management authority and/or complete ownership of over a significant portion of the lands of Labrador. The Torngat Mountains were designated a National Park during the agreements and then gifted back to the Canadian government by the Inuit (though the Inuit maintain subsistence harvesting rights in the Park lands). And, the Inuit will benefit from 25% of all provincial revenues for future resource development in the region.

In terms of financial compensation, each Inuk who voted in the 2004 ratification will receive $5,000 over a three year period, $120 million is set aside to establish self-government and the families who were forced to relocate in the 1950s were compensated from a $10 million dollar fund this last December.

SUCCESS ACHIEVED
The Nunatsiavutmiut (the Inuit of Nunatsiavut) have worked for over 30 years to achieve this incredible success. As part of North American history, and the changing “landscape” of our countries, Nunatsiavut is a critical model for students. In studying what can and is being achieved in Canada’s North, students will begin to rethink traditional lines of governance. The Inuit in Canada are playing a key leadership role nationally and globally as they work with the Canadian government to create their own governance models that will protect their language, culture and the environment.

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STUDENT REFERENCES FOR NUNATSIAVUT

- Labrador Inuit Association/Nunatsiavut Government www.nunatsiavut.com
- Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (national Inuit association) www.itk.ca
- Nunatsiaq News – www.nunatsiaq.com
- Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) North www.cbc.ca/north

LESSON PLANS ON THE INUIT


The Nunatsiavut flag is of an inukshuk, the rock formation popular in Canada’s Far North. The colors blue, green and white echo the colors of the Newfoundland and Labrador flag.