

Opening Remarks of President Mary Simon,

2010 ITK Annual General Meeting

Good morning, and welcome to this, our 2010 Annual General Meeting.

As always, it is a pleasure to be in Iqaluit.

And it is similarly a pleasure to be in Nunavut.

At ITK's birth in 1971, the idea of a stand-alone territory in Canada organized around a solid Inuit majority was just a brave idea.

... And some would have said a pretty far-fetched one.

Nunavut is proof of the power of ideas, and their potential to motivate people and drive events.

And also proof that ideas only come about through hard work.

Of course, the creation of Nunavut, and the conclusion of our chain of comprehensive land claims agreements from Alaska to Labrador, has not overcome the need for hard work.

Indeed, we all have come to realize that the really hard work begins when the ink on agreements goes dry, and the job of implementation begins.

... When we have to remind Her Majesty's servants to act with honour, and, occasionally, a little bit of speed if not enthusiasm, to deliver on the promises made to us in writing.

But it is important to remember that we now work from our own agendas.

... We build up our own structures and institutions.

... We make seize our own opportunities.

... We are not minor actors in someone else's play.

The last year has been a busy year for ITK, just as it has for regional and other Inuit organizations.

And an eventful year in the history of Canada and of the globe.

We named 2010 The Year of the Inuit. We took the pulse of the nation with "The North Poll" and discovered most Canadians had only passing knowledge of us and the Arctic, but we also discovered Canadians have a great desire to know more about us, to visit the Arctic, and that most support us on the sealing issue.

With the Year of the Inuit we are highlighting Inuit accomplishments and ensuring Canadians are aware of the gaps in living standards that need to be addressed throughout Inuit Nunangat.

In reflecting on major developments over the last year, there are four themes I would like to focus on.

These are:

- 1. our connections to the European Union**
- 2. oil and gas development in the Arctic and its links to climate change**
- 3. the continuing social and economic gap between Inuit, and aboriginal peoples generally, and other Canadians, and**
- 4. Education.**

I will speak briefly to each of these four themes.

First, our connections to the European Union.

The EU figured much more prominently for Inuit in the last year than in the past.

Most noteworthy in this respect was the adoption by the EU Parliament of legislation banning seal product imports, subject to a qualified exemption for Inuit.

This resulted in ITK, along with other Inuit organizations and individuals in Canada and Greenland, beginning a court case in the European General Court to strike down the legislation.

We are doing this in alliance with the Fur Institute of Canada and other non-Inuit plaintiffs.

The case continues.

We will know by August 20th whether we can obtain an interim suspension preventing the ban coming into effect.

Our main action to strike down the legislation altogether is expected to be heard by the court in the fall, with a judgement early next year.

While the seal products ban was the most prominent issue involving the EU over the last year, it was by no means the only one.

To their credit, EU countries voted in block at the CITES conference in Doha to oppose upgrading the conservation status of polar bear.

The EU has pushed ... so far unsuccessfully ... for observer status at the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council

European members of the Arctic Council were split with respect the appropriateness of the meetings of Arctic coastal states in Chelsea, Quebec, in March, with Denmark and Norway taking part, and Iceland, Sweden and Finland ... like us ... left out and left unhappy.

Over the last year, I have attempted to make use of various European venues to promote issues important to Canadian Inuit.

For example, I attended the COP 15 climate change meeting in Copenhagen in December to pursue the idea of climate change adaptation funding for the Arctic, and, just before that, a European Economic Development Days conference in Stockholm.

I also delivered public lectures in both London and Edinburgh.

In pursuing these openings, I was not following a fixed existing strategy on Inuit/EU relations.

I suspect, however, that our increased interaction with the EU was not a one-year anomaly.

As the world becomes a more interdependent place and international interest in the Arctic heats up, Inuit will need to think through how we hope to work with the EU where we can, and to resist its policy intentions where it is necessary.

The second theme I would flag to you is oil and gas development in the Arctic and its links to climate change.

Particularly since Christmas, Arctic oil and gas development has been very much in the news.

Consider, among other things ...

- the oil drill blow-out in the Gulf of Mexico with all the ensuing attention to the environmental risks of drilling in the Arctic ...
ITK has supported the public pronouncements of IRC and NTI in this regard**
- the about face in American offshore drilling policy ...
announcement, in the spring, of authorization of extensive new offshore drilling along all coasts, followed, after the Gulf blow-out, with cancellations**
- the Greenland Home Rule Government's determination to go ahead with offshore drilling in Davis Strait, not without internal criticism**

- **the release, many years after it was first expected, of the final environmental assessment report on a Mackenzie Valley gas pipeline, and**
- **the announcement by the federal government of regulatory streamlining on resource development projects, particularly in the three territories.**

Against the backdrop of these and related developments, I have been working to make sure that the Inuit voice is heard.

For example, in a speech I delivered in May at the Economic Club of Canada in Toronto, I balanced a number of messages

- **non-renewable resource development is needed in Inuit Nunangat as part of building up Inuit economic self-sufficiency**
- **all economic activity carries with it a degree of environmental risk, but the lessons of the Gulf of Mexico blow-out must be learned and applied in the Arctic ... this will require both a time out and a determination to use best practices from around the world**
- **the old days of Inuit being passive observers to fundamental decisions being made about our homeland are dead and buried ... no approach to resource development in the Arctic will be successful unless we are full partners and we draw direct and substantial benefits.**

Debates over the rate, risks, and rewards of oil and gas development in the Arctic can be expected to overlap heavily with discussions as to how best to cap and reduce carbon emissions that contribute to climate change.

A third theme over the last year has been the continuing central importance of the large social and economic gap between Inuit, and aboriginal peoples generally, and other Canadians.

Evidence of the extent to which Inuit lag behind other Canadians does not become any more palatable just because it continues to pile up.

The research published in this winter's issue of the Canadian Medical Association Journal that more than 70% of Inuit pre-school children in Nunavut experience food insecurity is shocking, even if, sadly, not entirely surprising.

One of my jobs as President of ITK is to speak up for those who cannot easily be heard.

This is particularly true for Inuit children.

... Like children everywhere, they have little say in the decisions made by adult society.

... And, being Inuit, they are often additionally marginalized by the small number of Inuit in Canada as a whole.

Within Inuit society we have to do everything we can to bring attention to the problem of hunger in our communities and families.

The first duty of any society must be to feed its children, and all who are dependent on others for basic nourishment.

Children who are hungry are children who can't concentrate.

They are children who won't learn at school or elsewhere.

They are children who will fall behind and stay behind.

We may welcome the recent, rather modest, re-orientation of the food mail program more towards the supply of nutritious food to those in need.

I would, however, invite you to consider making "Tackling Inuit Hunger" --- whatever it takes in challenging and changing the status quo --- a core priority for the coming year.

Over the past year, I have been pushing to give the closing of the unacceptable gaps between aboriginal and other Canadians a higher profile and priority across Canada.

I have been appealing to both the consciences and self-interests of other Canadians ... both hearts and wallets.

The federal government, with some exceptions in a few policy areas, continues to follow a very low-key aboriginal agenda with a pre-disposition to shifting responsibilities over to provinces and territories.

I have used my direct communications with the federal government, both in face to face meetings and in correspondence, to point out the limitations and inappropriateness of this approach.

I have repeated these messages in public statements and speaking engagements.

And I have been warning provincial and territorial leaders and officials of the risks and downsides involved for them.

Since last summer, ITK has been able to participate in two meetings of national aboriginal leaders with provincial and territorial ministers having aboriginal affairs responsibilities.

I attended the first meeting in October, and Jim Lyall, along with Isabella Payne, kindly agreed to represent ITK at this spring's meeting.

These meetings are preparatory to a meeting of national aboriginal leaders with Premiers this August.

In this exercise --- which involves 18 different parties --- ITK has taken on the role of trying to break through a preoccupation with mere process.

... And to urge focus on some core realities, principles, and choices.

For example, in the work towards a set of common recommendations to be put before Premiers, we recently relayed the following points:

Socio-economic problems in aboriginal communities are of a scale and severity that require urgent and concerted attention; they will not go away through hopes for private sector economic growth or through more of the same in the form of current public sector policies and programs.

The federal government has a responsibility, firmly rooted in the Constitution but also its role in relation to all issues of pressing national importance, to show leadership and invest real resources.

Difficult problems require clear objectives and straightforward language; it would be a disservice to Premiers and Canadians as a whole if clear directions and concrete options were to be lost in a set of heads-down, heavily process-oriented recommendations.”

I have no great expectations that the meeting with Premiers in August will result in the kind of clear call for action at the national level that is sorely needed.

But, regardless of outcomes, we have to speak truth to power.

As candidly and forcefully as we can.

And bring about some ‘constructive damage to the status quo’.

The fourth and final theme I would like to raise with you is education.

Education has been a personal priority of mine since becoming ITK President.

I am very pleased at the progress we have seen this year in the work of the National Inuit Education Committee.

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There have, of course, been many things happening affecting ITK outside the four themes that I have highlighted for you.

Some things have been welcome, some unwelcome, and some a bit of both.

One example is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

While we had to go through a very painful set of negotiations, with no little delay and frustration, I am pleased that we will have an Inuit Sub-Commission and a major event organized around Inuit survivors in Inuvik.

In the Speech from the Throne, we were all pleased to see an announcement that the Government of Canada will reverse its position and endorse the *2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

This change of positions is welcome.

We shall, however, need to be vigilant that the more precise endorsement statement, when it is made, is not heavily diminished by unnecessary and unhelpful qualifications.

I would like to finish with three expressions of thanks.

My first thank you is to you ... all the delegates to this AGM.

You have given your most important asset, your time, to attend and participate in this meeting.

That contribution is very much valued.

My second thank you is to the Board of Directors of ITK.

In theory, the ITK Board meets only on a limited number of pre-set occasions in the course of the year.

In reality, we have many impromptu meetings by way of teleconference to respond to unexpected new challenges and developments.

And Board members are unfailingly generous in making themselves available to give their individual counsel whenever I approach them.

Your hard work and loyalty never go unnoticed, and are always most sincerely appreciated by me, the Board, and all the members of ITK.

... Keep up the good work; we know we can count on you.

And let's all look forward to an important milestone next year when ITK will celebrate its' 40th anniversary in November of 2011.

Taima.

