Internationalism, Indigenous Peoples and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The issue of sustainable development and related cultural, social and polictical aspiration for indigenous people has had a tremendous impact on national governments and international politics in some parts of the world. The indigenous peoples of the north circumpolar world such as Inuit, whose lifestyles, marine orientation and socio-political circumstances are like the peoples of Torres Strait, have been particularly successful in leading a wave of reform. There may be valuable lessons in this experience for Torres Strait Islanders, and it may be desirable to begin active "networking" internationally in order to obtain greater local and regional benefits here at home.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to consider some of the practicalities of politics, especially minority politics, in the new age of global environmental awareness. Although it is evident that the structure of politics has changed in recent decades and now provides new possibilities for groups hitherto powerless, nobody should assume as a corollary that the political power concentrated in the governments of national states is diminishing. Nevertheless, there are substantial opportunities for even small and remote groups like the Torres Strait Islanders.

Soon after this conference ends another begins in Perth, Australia, bringing together the world's governments and major non-government organisations (NGOs) concerned with the environment. This is the IUCN general assembly – the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. Many of their discussions will have particular importance for indigenous peoples like the Torres Strait Islanders. Some of the indigenous representatives from abroad will be particularly eager to talk with Islanders and Aboriginals in Australia about their experience in coping with European settlement and economic development. For instance, Inuit (the Eskimos) will be represented at Perth by their internal organisation, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference. They hope to hear from Islanders about shipping in an important navigation passage and about the struggle to establish greater local control over economic, social and political decisions in their islands. The reason for this interest is the fact that Inuit have problems very much like those of Torres Strait Islanders.

In the Northwest Passage along the coasts of Labrador, Quebec, Greenland, the Northwest Territories and Alaska, Inuit have learned that international cooperation to discuss similar problems and to share the benefits of each other's experience is an essential part of progress with problems at home. International cooperation requires particular initiative because governments and NGOs often forget to include indigenous peoples. For instance, unless there is a last-minute change of plans, Islanders will not be involved in the Perth IUCN conference.

It may not seem obvious that remote communities with many problems and little status in the laws and political frameworks of their home countries should start travelling the world. But the resolution of many problems, especially ones of minority rights and environmental quality, have become essentially international. A reflection of this fact was the recent work of the Constitutional Commission: no issue was more controversial or time-consuming than the resistance by the States to the Federal Government's role in human rights and environment as per the External Affairs Power in the Constitution (Constitution Commission 1988). In earlier times, (eg., when the Constitution was written), it may have been inconceivable that the trees one chopped down locally or the way one's public bodies treated non-European labour and indigenous people would be the business of other countries or association of countries. Yet the campaign against slavery in the 19th Century and the concern by British governments about treatment in Australia of indigenous peoples showed even then that times were changing (Reynolds 1988). Those public figures who play to xenophobic and isolationist sentiment in Australia today and deny the relevance of the world community are out of step and out of date.

International linkages are changing and developing very quickly. The recent collapse of the governments in the eastern half of Europe was caused as much by their human rights records as economic and environmental failures. In the renewed 'Helsinki process' (the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) it is now planned that Europe plus Canada, the USA and USSR establish new standards for human rights, especially minority rights, and new standards for investigation of violations in each other's countries. Another source of new ideas is the publicity surrounding the 500th anniversary of the first voyage of Columbus to the New World in 1492. This is now turning into a world-wide scrutiny of European treatment of non-European peoples. Australia will be as much under scrutiny as the Americas themselves. That

means that both State and Federal Government policies in Australia will be under examination. As an advanced European-peopled country, Australia will be judged by the same standards as any other.

Positive Possibilities: the Northern Hemisphere Case

If negative sanctions await non-performance by Australia in its policies towards Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginals, internationalism is much more than a negative story. Used creatively, it can be helpful for indigenous peoples, governments, researchers and research institutions alike. Inuit regions of North America provide a case study especially useful for comparison with the Torres Strait. (For more detail relevant here on contemporary Inuit and their background see Usher *et al.*1987, Jull 1987, and Damas 1984).

Today's Inuit are descendants of a whale-hunting society which spread across the arctic from the Bering Sea around 800 AD. There were earlier Inuit cultures in the same regions, but they were now superseded by the new migrants. Archeologists suggest that a dramatic change of population took place, while anthropologists suggest continuity and an intermingling of peoples. This new wave of so-called Thule Eskimos moved quickly to occupy the coasts of the Chukotka Peninsula of what is now the USSR, and west and north coasts of Alaska, the coasts and islands of northern and north-eastern Canada, and the vast ice-covered island of Greensland.

In Greenland these Inuit first met Europeans – the famous Vikings, those strong and brave heroes of the White Man's history who continue to fascinate generations of school-children, movie-makers and publishers of coffee-table books. Archeology has shown that when the two peoples met in Greenland, the Inuit picked up all the ideas they could from the Vikings, but the Vikings seem to have learned little or nothing, except perhaps the striking designs seen today on the sweaters of those Viking descendants in Iceland. The Vikings could have learned much, however, because Inuit had many skills and much knowledge for coping with food needs, shelter and warmth, all of these being problems which eventually overwhelmed the Vikings in Greenland. The exact mix of causes for the Viking demise is still a subject of interest in north-western Europe, but it has become clear that the Viking refusal to adapt was a root cause. Inuit, on the other hand, soon had to abandon their whale-hunting life in the face of drastic changes in climate, the so-called Little Ice Age. They had to develop new ways of coping with local circumstances and opportunities, and they produced the various regional variations which modern anthropologists study as if they were separate cultures. They were, however, one widespread culture forced back on local ingenuity to survive.

In the modern age Inuit live, for the most part, in small isolated villages. They have been brought together from their scattered hunting camps by trading posts, schools, medical stations and other facilities – and by enforced government resettlement policies. Until the post-war era they were treated like unfortunate and rather simple people, with white people making decisions for them. In time they revolted. This revolt was not in the form of riot or insurrection, but rather in peaceful demands and protest. The real violence was revealed in the statistics of family and community breakdown. As late as 1970 it was possible say that while Inuit had access to a variety

of unevenly spread conveniences of modern life, the rapid pace of social change, the destruction of traditional society by relocation, and concentration in confusing new villages with other Inuit they did not know, with a new language and way of life imposed by young whites, more than compensated for any benefits of modern technology.

The push by young Inuit in Greenland for more independence from Danish administration and in Alaska for land rights marked a new era from 1970. Canadian Inuit by this time were reacting to the enforced resettlement policies of the government. This was followed by crews looking for minerals, oil and gas, and planning the transportation of these (eg., by drilling and shipping in dangerous ice-filled waters). These activities were damaging to habitat and disruptive of wildlife essential to Inuit diet. Now a better picture of the post-1917 changes in Soviet policy for northern indigenous peoples, including Inuit, is also available. In 1990, these 26 Soviet indigenous peoples formed an association to press for autonomy, urgent environmental protection and rehabilitation, and self-government (Dahl *et al.*, 1990).

In 1973 in Copenhagen's Christiansborg Palace the Greenland Inuit held a meeting with Sami (the Lapps) from Norway, Sweden and Finland, and with Inuit, Indians and Metis (mixed-blood descendants of Indians) from northern Canada. For several days the participants shared the frustrations and comic episodes of their respective struggles for more control of their lives – lives then dominated by Europeans. Until that moment most of these people had felt themselves isolated and overwhelmed by the great power of the southern capital cities which decided their futures. They now discovered that they had counterparts fighting virtually the same battles for the same reasons abroad. The meeting led more or less directly to two more at which important new movements were formed.

In 1975 on a rainy autumn hillside of Vancouver Island off Canada's Pacific coast, a Nootka Indian reserve saw indigenous peoples from many continents, including Australia, meet to form the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP). There were many problems at that meeting. Some Indians from Latin America feared for their lives if their governments at home found out their names. There were translation problems and other misunderstandings. But the week-long meeting was a tremendous success. The theme which emerged quickly was the absolute dependence on traditional lands and waters of these people – on the bounty of wildlife, fish and birds. This close identification with the living environment made them different from the conquering and governing European cultures, and made them all very similar to each other in their needs. Since that time the WCIP has held many meetings around the world and has been effective in working through international political forums like the United Nations to promote indigenous rights to lands and seas, sea creatures and land creatures, and the traditional livelihoods based on these. It is likely that this work will culminate in a major international agreement on indigenous rights; it has already led to the limited but useful new International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention 169 which replaces an earlier convention on indigenous peoples.

In 1977 another idea developed from the Copenhagen meeting was taken up by the Inuit leader of the Alaskan North Slope at Barrow on the shore of the Beaufort Sea. There the world's great oil companies were developing Prudhoe Bay. Eben Hopson, the Inuit leaders in question, had invited the Inuit from Greenland and Canada to

meet to discuss the future. He welcomed them with a few brief words, saying that their two purposes must be to develop strong Inuit-controlled governments in their different regions and to protect an environment essential for Inuit life, especially the marine environment. He was certainly right: it was oil from that Inuit shore which was poured out into the North Pacific in 1989 when an Exxon tanker ran aground, devastating wildlife and habitat on a hitherto unimagined scale.

Eben Hopson had already created the North Slope Borough. This is a government for a huge region of 88,000 square miles. By skilful use of the legal system and sheer determination the Inuit created a strong government which built good houses for all, schools and community centres, and retrained the whole population. The formerly poor and neglected North Slope was brought the best modern facilities of all kinds. The few thousand Inuit living in this region experienced a total change in their lives, as well as creation of many jobs and better kinds of jobs. They had already been faced with a pace of social change which was alarming and they were making the best of it with the revenues they were able to raise from the oil industry. They have also used their growing experience and confidence to impose on State, national and international authorities their own management plan for the coastal zone on-shore and off-shore, their own management schemes for the sea mammals most important to them – whales and walrus – and a variety of other measures supportive of their continuing dependence on the living environment of land and sea.

In 1980, meeting in Nuuk (formerly Godthab), the capital of the new 'home rule' Greenland, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference adopted a charter and established a secretariat. The feeling of pride among the Inuit Greenlanders in their new independence was tremendous, with the cabinet ministers and premier attending most sessions. In 1983 further general assesmblies were held in Canada and Alaska. Returning to Greenland in July 1989 for their assembly in Sisimiut (formerly Holsteinborg), the organisation had come a long way. For one thing, this meeting welcomed the first Soviet participation, a goal which all the member Inuit and the national governments (USA, Canada, Denmark) had worked hard to achieve. But much else was changing.

In the early years the organisation had the enthusiastic support of many individuals and leaders across the Inuit north. But by 1989 they were in positions of power – not only older and wiser, but more likely to draft a tactically subtle resolution than a merely angry or enthusiastic one. No longer merely demanding to have Inuit views heard, they were now directing important offices themselves or were engaged in serious negotiations to achieve major economic and political ends. Perhaps most striking was the fact that senior government representatives from the USSR, USA, Canada and Denmark spoke at Sisimiut in a sort of international 'accountability session', as did the heads of government in the Chukotka Autonomous Region, a representative of the Govenor of Alaska, and the premiers of the Northwest Territories and of Greenland. All these men and women explained how they were implementing the resolutions and policies advocated by the Inuit.

Two of those policy initiatives deserve mention. One was a comprehensive 'arctic policy', nothing less than a 150-page compendium of policy guidelines for development, conservation, social and cultural programs, and political affairs. Inuit, who had

suffered so much from governments which were insensitive or uncomprehending, wanted to sit down with them and explain what their policies should be, with this document as a starting-point. (Canada has already accepted the principle of consultation with Inuit on most policy matters, and in Greenland the Inuit government has replaced the former Danish Ministry for Greenland.)

Of course, the most important aim remained the creation or taking charge of governments in their regions by Inuit themselves. This is being achieved. Any day now the Government of Canada is expected to announce a timetable for creation of Nunavut, a new territorial government covering one-sixth of Canada with most of the powers of an Australian State in an area where about 85% of the population are Inuit. On October 19, 1990, the Northwest Territories 'premier' and head of the Inuit land claims office sent a joint letter to the Prime Minister of Canada laying out their mutually agreed plan for bringing the new Territory into being - that is, carving out the eastern half of the existing NWT and reconstituting it as Nunavut. The Inuit language will be a language of teaching and official use in Nunavut alongside English, while the Nunavut land claims settlement, now agreed in principle, will give Inuit wide new powers and statutory bodies to determine future development and economic planning and environmental management on-shore and off-shore. Issues of sea mammals, protection of the seas from vessel traffic, especially tankers, and the hazards of navigation in ice-strewn waters (like the famous reefs of Torres Strait) have been major elements in all the Inuit land claims and policitical development work (Jull 1987). In October, 1979, for instance, the Canadian Prime Minister responded to Inuit protests about extending the powers of Provinces into arctic seas by promising in a press statement that indigenous peoples interests would not be forgotten (but in the event the provincial role was refused by the next Prime Minister in any case). Torres Strait Islanders preparing proposals for their regional future may well find the Canadian Inuit experience of interest because Canada is so similar in law and politics to Australia, and the Inuit situation and recent political experience is so similar to that of Islanders.

Inuit in the Province of Quebec have also developed proposals for a strong new regional government for their 15 communities totalling about 6000 people scattered along the shores of Ungava Bay, Hudson Strait and Hudson Bay. Their 1975 land claims settlement included a regional government as well as affiliated local governments in each community. Numerous special authorities were also established. But now Inuit have found that too many separate bodies have been set up under the claims settlement, and that this wastes time and spreads the leadership too thinly. Today they are seeking agreement with Quebec on the details of a streamlined and unified politico-administrative system for the region, while preserving local community governments as well. It seems likely that they will achieve this. They have also secured many benefits over and above the 1975 claims settlement from both the Canadian and Quebec governments because although those governments signed the thick agreement, bureaucracies were not adequately adjusted or organised to cope. As a result, Inuit have found themselves spending their claims compensation fund interest on high-powered teams negotiating fulfilment of the matters agreed in 1975 rather than on economic development projects as intended.

The second Inuit Circumpolar Conference initiative of interest is the Inuit Regional Conservation Strategy (IRCS). The 'region' in question is not a small one; it is the

inter-national Inuit Circumpolar Conference, to achieve sound development and protect the environment. But the Inuit have taken their message farther afield. They have appeared before international forums like the United Nations to promote their environmental concerns and also to urge national governments and the world political community to adopt better, safer policies in respect of the arctic. For instance, Inuit have been extremely concerned about the military buildup, especially involving nuclear weapons, in their region. There may be a thaw in Cold War politics, but Cold War military machines are intact and continuing their cat and mouse manoeuvres above and below the ice of the arctic seas (although some very recent easing of tensions is significant (see Cox, 1990)). This month the Soviets tested a nuclear weapon in the arctic. Other issues like arctic haze and the buildup of dangerous elements in the Arctic Ocean from the Soviet rivers and the Gulf Stream which bring the industrial world's pollution right into the heart of the arctic ecosystem are no less important.

In May 1987 the Inuit international president, Mary Simon of Kuujjuaq, Quebec, visited the Polar Inuit in their communities at the north end of Greenland. The local people hunt polar bears for food and for the best warm clothing, and they wished to regain access to their ancient hunting grounds on the Canadian side of the Greenland-Canada border. That border was made without any reference to indigenous peoples' use. Also, the Polar Inuit had been moved from their ancient village site to make way for an American airbase in the 1950s, and have suffered many problems as a result, so they seek compensation. There were other issues, such as the disturbance to humans and wildlife of low-flying American military aircraft and the potential danagers of the airbase becoming a principal target for nuclear attack in war between the Superpowers. These problems well illustrate how even remote and supposedly humble communities may be enmeshed in matters which require resolution at the highest levels of national and international power politics. Canada is very touchy about its arctic sovereignty claims and, thus, accommodating Greensland Inuit hunters could become lost in a war of words among international lawyers. The American military with their highest-tech units engaged in preparing electronic defence or war had no grasp, we learned on that trip, of the views, feeling or needs of the Inuit.

But the Inuit have led an amazing breakthrough in this arctic zone of Cold War fears. Circumpolar cooperation was only a phrase, or a memory for those scientists involved in earlier international projects like the IGY, the International Geophysical Year of 1957-1959. Cooperation had never amounted to very much, although a sort of neutral sense of shared challenge accompanied the various explorations of the north polar region at the turn of the century. For Inuit, however, the term meant much more. Inuit had been arbitrarily divided by lines drawn on the map by white governments. In the Bering Strait the Alaskans had suddenly lost touch with their friends and kin on the Soviet side; the Alaskan Inuit who had moved into the Beaufort Sea coast of Canada after the Mackenzie Inuit had all but died out were cut off from relatives back home; and the Polar Inuit of Greenland were cut off from their traditional hunting areas in uninhabited Ellesmere Island in far northern Canada. For Inuit the emptiness of the White Man's national rhetoric was especially obvious. In recent years their attempts to meet together have often been met with suspicion by white governments. Canadian parliamentary committees inquire pointedly if Inuit internationalism is really an attempt at 'separatism', Canada's favourite fear fed by the French-Canadian nationalist movement in Quebec. Inuit reply that, No, they are

only trying to join Canada as full citizens. (They could also point out that although Canada belongs to the British Commonwealth of Nations and to the Francophonie, the French-language commonwealth, nobody suggests that such historical and cultural ties are subversive).

An example of the achievement of goals is exemplified by the Inuit pressure on Canadian foreign policy. In 1985 a special committee of Parliament was set up to recommend foreign policy directions for Canada. The committee quickly found that the public had much to say and had much idealism about the need for an activist foreign policy rather than the careful cautious approach by the External Affairs department (Simard and Hockin 1986). Inuit and their advisers bombarded the committee with briefs and proposals in support of arctic cooperation, especially a cooperation based on social, economic and environmental realities rather than on speculative fears and fantasies relating to war and transportation technologies, sovereignty theories, macro-economic futures, etc. When the committee finally issued its report, there was a chapter on the north, and while the old hypothetical stuff of 'northern policy' was still there, it was preceded by strong recommendations for a people-centred approach, with many direct quotations from the Inuit briefs. This landmark report set off a chain reaction of conferences, discussions, publications, etc., and finally a report prepared by a special working group of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs responded to the committee's call with a full study of Canada's domestic and foreign northern policies with Inuit at the centre of the recommedations (Robertson 1988). This working group was made up of national authorities on many northern subjects and on constitutional, foreign and defence policy. The several parties in Parliament took the report to heart and the government even recommended it, in speeches by the foreign minister, as the document for the times on northern issues.

The Inuit had no end of trouble with funding their international work. The Greenland government and the Alaska North Slope Borough gave generously year after year, but the Canadians could not find money. The Canadian office and staff lived hand to mouth just to keep the office open, and yet managed a vigorous, high-profile campaign to pursue their main interests – regional Inuit self-government and environmental policy. By ingenuity and sheer doggedness the Canadian office kept things going, and has since become the headquarters with the election in 1986 of Mary Simon as international Inuit president. I have been told in the last few days (November, 1990) that senior United Nations officials have divulged that the Inuit Circumpolar Conference will be recommended for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Of course, influence in political affairs is very much a matter of images. Inuit with few dollars and much ingenuity have been successful both in their Canadian, Alaskan and Greenlandic work and in their international work. They certainly have not solved all their problems. After the world toasted Mary Simon as president at the Sisimiut 1989 assembly, her luggage full of gifts was impounded by the Canadian authorities on the grounds that traditional Inuit resources of walrus ivory and other materials were illegal. Taking traditional foods across international frontiers among arctic regions is a three-yearly headache for the assembly organisers; it seems that no matter how much prior special approval is gained, some dull uniformed agent of the state wrecks it all at the last moment when the planes land with the delegates, cultural performers, gifts and food.