

# LETTER TO THE EDITOR

## Decolonization of Language Policy in Arctic Canada

Dear Editor:

Colonialism in northern Canada is not a historical artefact because the bureaucratic structure of colonial government persists. If parts of southern Canada are discussing post-colonial frameworks,<sup>1</sup> then we must consider that the northernmost Territory of Nunavut (“our land”) is in a syn-colonial condition and the present trend is for it to continue. Canada endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2016 and enacted it in 2021. If Canada is truly committed to a philosophy of reconciliation and decolonization, then it will make policy changes in the north that follow a guiding principle of self-determination for indigenous people. The simplest changes would be 1) to deliver more Inuktitut<sup>2</sup> instruction in schools and 2) to add knowledge of Inuktitut to the essential hiring criteria for the entire Government of Nunavut (GN).

### **Colonialism in the Territory of Nunavut, Canada**

The relationship between Canadian governments and Indigenous peoples is centered on land and natural resources.<sup>3</sup> Colonial control of land through local government is established when settler society dominates the administration of government, making it a settler government.<sup>4</sup>

Inuit organizations sought to increase Inuit employment in government within Nunavut by negotiating Article 23 of the 1993 Nunavut Land

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<sup>1</sup> Discussions questioning the post-colonial nature of Canada. See Kiera L. Ladner, *Visions of neo-colonialism? Renewing the relationship with Aboriginal peoples*, 21 CAN. J. OF NATIVE STUD. 105 (2001); see also IS CANADA POSTCOLONIAL? UNSETTLING CANADIAN LITERATURE 7–8 (Laura Moss, ed., 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Inuktitut is the language of Inuit, the Indigenous people of Nunavut.

<sup>3</sup> The primary goal of settlers in Canada was to gain possession of land, unlike colonizers of other countries who also sought labour capital. See Andrew Crosby and Jeffrey Monaghan, *Settler colonialism and the policing of Idle No More*, 43 SOC. JUST. 37, 40 (2016).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Grafton (2017) distinguishes between imperial and settler colonialism, and specifically, the role of subnational jurisdictions (such as the Nunavut Territory) as neocolonial governments. Emily Katherine Grafton, *Reserved responsibilities: A comparative analysis of settler colonial narratives of Canadian federalism and sub-national jurisdictional responsibility for Status First Nations peoples living on-reserve in Manitoba, British Columbia, and the Northwest Territories* 222–228 (Sept. 22, 2017) (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Manitoba) (Settler Colonial Studies Blog).

Claims Agreement (NLCA).<sup>5</sup> Article 23 stipulates that Inuit participation in government employment should match the 85 percent proportion of Inuit in the overall population of Nunavut.<sup>6</sup> It has been over 20 years since the inception of Nunavut and at 50 percent the government workforce is not representative, and there are well established statistics that the management and senior administration of the GN has especially low Inuit representation.<sup>7</sup> Government employment in Nunavut has, therefore, a colonial character.

Including Inuktitut in government hiring criteria was specifically mentioned in the 1993 NLCA as a means of attaining a representative workforce in Nunavut.<sup>8</sup> Inuktitut is not yet included as an essential merit criteria for all positions and so language policy as it pertains to hiring criteria within the GN still does not reflect the Inuit society of Nunavut. As the GN transforms into more of a settler government, the difference between the GN and Inuit organizations will increase. Their interests will diverge because the GN will increasingly represent settler ideals whereas Inuit organizations represent Inuit society.<sup>9</sup> Initial steps towards decolonization in northern Canada would disavow colonial policies, reconcile the structure of the GN with Inuit society, and match economic growth with indigenous growth.

### **Toward decolonization in Nunavut**

Policy changes are needed to establish a system that encourages inclusive and healthy Indigenous community instead of a separate and administratively dominant settler government:

- Under the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement,<sup>10</sup> Inuit accepted becoming a part of Canada. Inuit in northern Canadian communities should have access to the same community infrastructure as any other Canadian citizen.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Agreement Between the Inuit of the Nunavut Settlement Area and Her Majesty in Right of Canada, Tungavik-Can., June 10, 1993, (S.C. 1993, c. 29).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at art. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Alastair Campbell, Terry Fenge, & Udloriak Hanson, *Implementing the 1993 Nunavut Land Claims Agreement*, 2 *ARCTIC REV.* 25 (2011), at 38; *see also* Government of Nunavut, 2019. *2019 September Inuit Employment Statistics*. [https://gov.nu.ca/sites/default/files/trps\\_2019-2020\\_q2\\_english.pdf](https://gov.nu.ca/sites/default/files/trps_2019-2020_q2_english.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, *supra* note 5, at art. 23.

<sup>9</sup> An example of divergent priorities is that the organization representing Inuit in Nunavut, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI), has taken the Government of Nunavut to court over the lack of Inuktitut in the education system. “The Government of Nunavut passed legislation in 2008 to require Inuktitut education for all grades by 2019–2020, but never achieved its legally-binding commitment.” Liny Lamberink, *Nunavut Inuit sue territorial government over right to education in Inuktitut*, CBC (Oct 13, 2021, 3:00 AM), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/nti-suing-government-of-nunavut-inuktitut-education-1.6209460#:~:text=The%20Government%20of%20Nunavut%20passed,achieved%20its%20legally%2Dbinding%20commitment.>

<sup>10</sup> Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, *supra* note 5.

<sup>11</sup> *See* Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework: Inuit Nunangat*

- The Nunavut education budget should prioritize Inuktitut programming. The system needs a significant increase in the number of Inuktitut-speaking teachers in order to deliver Inuktitut instruction.<sup>12</sup>
- The GN must make Inuktitut language an essential part of merit criteria for GN hiring. For equity purposes this change should be accompanied by a commitment to continue and expand Inuktitut language training throughout the GN.
- Federal institutes based within Nunavut should have a workforce that is representative of Nunavut.<sup>13</sup> Counter-intuitively this means keeping some specialized and non-Inuit bureaucracy in the national capital, Ottawa.
- Federal offices should recognize that they operate within the unique Indigenous society of Nunavut and rank Inuktitut language higher than other languages when hiring for positions in Nunavut. The present practice of considering Inuktitut last is overtly colonial and should not be acceptable.

Sincerely,  
Dr. Thomas Hadlari<sup>14</sup>

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(2019), <https://www.itk.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/20190925-arctic-and-northern-policy-framework-inuit-nunangat-final-en.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Seventy percent of teachers in Nunavut are non-Inuit. GOV'T OF NUNAVUT DEP'T OF EDUC., *Department of Education Annual Report 2019–2020*, [https://gov.nu.ca/sites/default/files/gn\\_dept\\_of\\_ed\\_2019–20\\_annual\\_report\\_english.pdf](https://gov.nu.ca/sites/default/files/gn_dept_of_ed_2019–20_annual_report_english.pdf). See also Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Robert Phillipson & Robert Dunbar, *Is Nunavut education criminally inadequate? An analysis of current policies for Inuktitut and English in education, international and national law, linguistic and cultural genocide and crimes against humanity*, NUNAVUT TUNNGAVIK INC. 83 (Apr. 2019), <https://www.tunngavik.com/files/2019/04/NuLinguicideReportFINAL.pdf> (a discussion of GN educational policies that marginalize Inuit culture).

<sup>13</sup> Article 23 applies to “positions in the federal Public Service”; Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, *supra* note 5; see also Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, *National Inuit positions on federal legislation in relation to the Inuktitut language* (Nov. 2017), <https://www.itk.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Inuktitut-position-paper.pdf>. And, Section 23 of the NLCA applies to “positions in the federal Public Service”.

<sup>14</sup> The author has mixed Indigenous and settler heritage from the Canadian Arctic. He was raised in Yellowknife, NWT and Cambridge Bay, Nunavut. He participated in the ratification vote for the creation of the Nunavut Territory in Arctic Canada (est. 1999) and is a beneficiary of the Nunavut Comprehensive Land Claim agreement. In the 1990s he attended one of the last residential high schools in northern Canada (Akaitcho Hall), earned a PhD in Earth Science in 2005, and he presently works as a research scientist residing in southern Canada.

