

**CREATING PUBLIC GOVERNMENT**  
**IN NUNAVUT**  
**THE LIFE-PLACE MODEL**  
**AN ESSAY**

**By**

**Mike Bell**

**Inukshuk Management Consultants**  
**1377 Ridgemount Dr.**  
**Comox, British Columbia V9M 1A5**  
**Tel: (250) 890-3671**

**Email: [mikebell@shaw.ca](mailto:mikebell@shaw.ca)**  
**Web: [www.inukshukmanagement.ca](http://www.inukshukmanagement.ca)**

**© Mike Bell, 1999**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
<i>Prologue</i>	1.
<b>PART ONE: THE CHALLENGE OF NUNAVUT</b>	6.
▪ Background	
▪ Understanding the Challenge	
▪ The Pressure to Produce services	
▪ The Problem of "Imprinting"	
<b>PART TWO: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND MODEL</b>	10
▪ Conceptual Frameworks: The Old and the New	
▪ An Ecology of Spirit	
▪ Interiority, Diversity and Communion	
▪ The Life-place Model	
<b>PART THREE: RE-INTERPRETING ABORIGINAL SELF-GOVERNMENT</b>	15
▪ Some Conclusions	
<b>PART FOUR: THE LIFE-PLACE MODEL AND ABORIGINAL SELF-GOVERNMENT</b>	19
▪ The Criteria	
▪ Self-propagating, Self-Nourishing, Self-Educating, Self-Healing, Self-fulfilling, Self-Governing	
<b>PART FIVE: "FROM THE GROUND UP "</b>	23
▪ The Problem with Northern Consultations	
▪ Some Guiding Principles for Consultation On the Nunavut Public Government	
▪ The Consultation Process	
▪ Time Requirements	
<b>PART SIX: MAKING THE TRANSITION</b>	29
About The Author	32

## **PROLOGUE**

*In February 1999, six weeks before the formal creation of Nunavut, a group of Nunavut senior civil servants invited me to go to Iqaluit on Baffin Island for some discussions. These were people deeply involved in the creation of the new Nunavut public government. They wanted to talk about an essay I had written some months before.<sup>1</sup>*

*The essay suggests that the old approach to community development in the North based upon what I called the Power Paradigm isn't working. It operates on the wrong set of assumptions. It assumes that CD is all about acquiring power, particularly financial power; that the way to develop communities is to develop their service systems; and that the ultimate purpose of CD is to create economically viable communities. These assumptions have guided most of the major CD initiatives in the North for the past 30 years. But they are not valid. They fly in the face of our day to day experience.*

*What we are seeing in the communities is people who have already acquired a great deal of power. Their problem is knowing how to use it. We've seen governments spend decades building service delivery systems that don't address most of the underlying social problems, don't build the capacity within residents to recognize their strengths and mobilize their personal resources, and, instead, create dependency relationships. And as for trying to create viable local economies in small remote communities with very small populations, though jobs are important, most communities will never be economically viable.*

*What's needed is a new approach to CD based upon a new set of assumptions. This new approach I call the Spirit Paradigm. It argues that the real purpose of CD in the North is to create healthy communities. The way to create healthy communities is to help residents maintain or re-establish their relationship with the land and with their own cultures, with their own inner Spirit, with their families and extended families and with their organizations. The way to develop these relationships is through healing and learning—a type of learning that is based upon a combination of traditional knowledge and formal education.*

*The essay was well received. Their community experience was similar to my community experience. They had been seeing and sensing the same things I had been seeing and sensing. But the discussions raised a fundamental question. "How do we make the transition from the Power Paradigm to the Spirit Paradigm?"*

*Making the transition is not simply a matter of adopting a new set of CD tactics. A paradigm shift requires a new conceptual framework and a new model for development—one that is more akin to the earth-based world-view of the Inuit and other aboriginal peoples. That is the focus of this essay.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Mike Bell, *The Changing Face of Community Development in the North: From the Power Paradigm to the Spirit Paradigm*, Inukshuk Management Consultants, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, 1999.

*Finding such a framework and model—one that will enable the Inuit to develop their communities and public government in a way that truly responds to their culture and traditions is of interest to other aboriginal peoples across this continent and to indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. All of them find themselves in the same situation.*

*They are surrounded and controlled by alien cultures. In most cases, these controlling cultures have oppressed them over extended periods of time. They, the controlling cultures, have either tried to ignore them, subjugate them, or tried to acculturate them—often all the above. And yet, precisely because aboriginal peoples are surrounded by controlling cultures, their survival depends upon their ability to relate to these cultures—without selling their souls. Thus the struggle to create healthy communities and new forms of public government becomes a day to day struggle to find the elbowroom they need to translate their traditions and values into a modern context and achieve true self-determination. That is why aboriginal peoples around the world are looking with such great interest to the development of Nunavut. There is a sense that, if the struggle is ever to be won, it has the best chance of succeeding in Nunavut.*

*Though there are only about 25,000 residents of Nunavut, the Inuit make up 85% of the total population. The region is relatively remote from the rest of Canada and, because of its isolation, the Inuit have been less dominated than most other indigenous groups. Further, the Inuit have managed to retain many aspects of their culture and traditional lifestyle. Sixty years ago most of them still lived a nomadic life on the land. Today, most Inuit families are still highly dependent upon the food they can acquire from hunting as an essential part of their diet. Their culture is strong if somewhat battered, most Inuit have retained their language, Inuktitut, and their relationship with the land is still the defining element in their identity as a distinct people—especially as it is articulated by their elders.*

*The Inuit struggle is also of great interest to non-aboriginal people. Many of us have a growing awareness that something is going terribly wrong with our own societies and the way we are trying to live our lives. Each day we become concerned about the deterioration of this beautiful planet on which we live. We witness the ongoing destruction of the earth's life systems—the pollution of our air, the destruction of our forests, the loss of our topsoil, the drying up of our aquifers, the poisoning of our seas, the loss of animals and plant species. We are also populating our earth far beyond its capacity to absorb all of us. Though we recognize these realities, we grow increasingly disillusioned with our ability to do anything about them. As we think about the future of our children, we have this terrible feeling that we are headed down the path of destruction. We are playing a fool's game with the planet and, to quote a favourite expression borrowed from the sandlot baseball of our youth, we are aware that "Nature bats last."*

*We want to turn things around, to stop the destruction, to restore the sanity. And our desires are realistic. We have no wish to return to some former idyllic way of life where*

*we all live a hunter-gatherer existence and depended completely on the earth that surrounds us—any more than the Inuit want to give up their televisions, telephones and modern houses and return to snow houses, dog teams and hand-held harpoons. But we want things to change. And we are growing increasingly frustrated at our ability to create that change. Just as aboriginal peoples feel themselves overwhelmed by dominating cultures, so we feel ourselves oppressed by a corporate-technological culture that promises solutions. But we don't trust the culture's technologies. Nor do we trust our governments. They continue to assure us of their commitments to the environment but they continue to reduce budgets in the interest of jobs and "development". And so, many of us are at our wits ends. Our tiny effort to recycle and reuse, or to challenge industrial giants or to pressure our governments seem so puny. We feel like we are simply dusting the furniture at Pompeii.*

*In the midst of our frustrations, it is natural to look for enemies—someone to blame for our present predicament. We blame government, corporations, educational institutions, or the churches. We cast the struggle to improve our environment into an ethical framework—and there is no doubt that the dominant institutions in our society have acted unethically in the past and some continue to do so today. But as we look at the people involved—educators, civil servants, business executives, church leaders—we recognize that many of these people are our neighbours. They love their families, do good works, are involved in their communities, work conscientiously for their employers and try to love their neighbour. After a while we come to the conclusion that, if we were in their situation, and accepted their assumptions and belief systems, we would act precisely in the same way.*

*The real issue in most cases is not a problem of ethics. It is a problem of perception. To use the current jargon, what we have here is a failure to communicate that is based upon a clash of paradigms. What we desperately need is a new conceptual framework, or paradigm or worldview. We are seeking is a new way of understanding what is happening to us and to our planet, a new common ground for discussion. And, as a friend of mine likes to say, the key to discovering this new common ground is to realize that we are standing on it.*

*And so, like the Inuit and other indigenous people, we are looking for something—a new way of understanding what is happening to us so we can deal with the problems confronting us and create a better future for our children. Because we know that our success ultimately depends upon our ability to re-establish our relationship with the planet, we find ourselves looking towards aboriginal peoples. We can see the struggles they are going through, the terrible ravages of addictions, the poverty, the day to day struggle for survival. Most of "us" don't want to trade places with "them. But as we observe aboriginal people more closely, we discover something that they have mysteriously managed to retain in spite of everything else—a profound sense of their relationship to the land. We sense that this relationship is still alive, and it is a relationship that we share with them. It reaches deep down beneath the cultural differences between us and aboriginal peoples and is grounded in our own genetic coding.*

*Once, a long time ago, way back in our own histories, all of us were very much aware of this relationship. We have an intuitive sense that this relationship was, and still is a fundamental part of our own human experience. Our own modern science has thrown the door of our understanding wide open to a redefinition of our relationship to the universe. We are beginning to understand that we are not lords of the universe but part of the universe. Our planet, which is a tiny speck in the billions of galaxies that make up this universe, is not simply a place we inhabit. It is an evolving relationship we share. The 70% of our bodies that consist of salt water, the same salt water in our seas and oceans, is part of the earth's life-support system. The other parts of our bodies, the 30% that consists of minerals, are part of the earth's crust.*

*Our human consciousness, this unique awareness that is the crowning achievement of our species, is part of the consciousness of a living universe. To quote Thomas Berry, our human consciousness is "the universe reflecting upon itself." As the Dene of the Western Arctic have said so simply yet so eloquently "The earth is our Mother and we have come from the earth."<sup>2</sup>*

*And so the Inuit experience of trying to create institutions and forms of government that truly reflect a human-earth community is of profound significance for us. We know that our efforts to save the planet aren't working. Many of us fear what we see as an impending crisis--the breakdown of our life support systems. We know there is a serious, deeply rooted perceptual problem--and if we are to turn things around we need a new understanding of our relationship with the universe. We hope that what the Inuit are trying to do will work for them—and will provide us with a new conceptual framework and a model for development of our society.*

*This essay develops in six parts.*

**Part One** discusses the challenge facing the Inuit. They want to develop a public government that truly reflects their culture and traditions. But, for a variety of reasons, they are locked into structures and systems they have inherited from the controlling culture.

**Part Two** discusses a new conceptual framework and model for the development of public government in Nunavut. The Framework is called an "Ecology of Spirit." The Model is the Life-place Model—known in most of the rest of the world as "bio-regionalism." Both the framework and the interpretation of the model rely heavily upon the thinking of Thomas Berry.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> "Statement of Traditional Dene Values and Principles," *From Dene Government Past, Present and Future*, The Dene Nation, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Berry is a cultural historian, cosmologist, and "geologist". Though he has written extensively in many areas of philosophy and science, he is best known for two works: *The Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1988; and, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era; A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*, Harper, San Francisco, 1992. I am deeply indebted to Thomas Berry and draw heavily on his thinking throughout the course of this essay.

***Part Three** indicates that Aboriginal Self-government is the vehicle for implementing the new Life-Place Model. But first it must be re-interpreted beyond the narrow confines of the Canadian legal system to reflect the traditional earth-human relationship out of which it has emerged.*

***Part Four** links aboriginal self-government to the Life-place Model. It suggests that an understanding of how the land governs itself might prove instructive for determining how the people of Nunavut might govern themselves.*

***Part Five** discusses a process for the development of the Nunavut public government. It recommends a series of community consultations and events to tap into the Inuit consciousness of their relationship to their land. Out of this process would emerge a vision, set of values and criteria that might be used as a framework for designing the public government itself.*

***Part Six** is a summary and conclusion. It also discusses the challenge of making the transition to a form of public government based upon the special relationship the Inuit have always enjoyed with their land.*

## **Part One**

# **THE CHALLENGE OF NUNAVUT**

### **Background**

On April 1, 1999 the 25,000 Inuit of the High Arctic established Nunavut, a new territory in Canada's north. The result of a long hard struggle, the creation of Nunavut emerged out of the negotiation of their land claim with the federal government and the settlement of that claim in 1993. It gave the Inuit ownership of about 350,000 square kilometres, the right to establish their own territory, Nunavut, with a land area of almost 2 million square kilometres, (a fifth of the land mass of Canada and about seven times the size of Texas), and a cash settlement of \$1.148 billion to be paid out over 14 years.

One of the characteristics of the Nunavut claim that distinguishes it from other aboriginal claims settlements, apart from the sheer size of the geographic area involved, is the right of the Inuit to create their own political territory and establish their own form of public government. All other claims settlements exist within the political boundaries of an existing Canadian province or territory.

At the time of negotiations, the Inuit argued quite convincingly that unless they were able to develop their own form of public government, they would continue to be dominated by Ottawa, several thousands kilometres to the south, as they had been dominated for thirty years by the Government of the Northwest Territories, several thousand kilometres to the west. This would continue to frustrate their primary aspiration: to create their own form of public government, one that would express and represent their culture, language and traditions.

As significant an achievement as Nunavut is, it is only the most recent in a number of significant achievements for the Inuit in the course of their history.

According to western science, the Inuit first appeared in the Arctic region they now call Nunavut about 4000 years ago. Living in small family groups, they travelled continually, pausing from time to time where there were caribou, fish, muskox or whale, and where the snow was good for houses. Through their ingenuity and creativity, they were able to exist and thrive in what most people consider the harshest environment on earth.

They were independent as a people, with their own social customs, practices, culture, traditions and spirituality. Their ability to survive depended upon their relationship with the land. For them the land was a living reality. Their cosmology—their origin stories—all reflect a close kinship with the animals of the land and sea. They came from the land: it was their provider and their survival as a people depended upon their ability to understand the land. They didn't manage the land; the land managed them. And down through the centuries they learned that their survival depended upon their ability to adapt to the changing seasons and migration patterns.

The Inuit lived pretty much this way until the 1950s when they experienced starvation and were persuaded by the federal government to move into settlements. While they still maintained their close ties to the land, they were no longer a nomadic people. Their sense of community also began to change—from a *relationship* to the land and to one another, to a *place* with municipal boundaries.

Because their governance methods were based upon family structures, they were not adaptable to life in settlements where numbers of families had to live together. So the government introduced new forms of governance—in particular municipal councils—imported from the south. They were also introduced to schools, welfare, modern health care, modern housing, and a job-based economy, telecommunications and so forth. In a word, their lives were significantly changed. While the settlement life bought them many benefits, it also brought them many problems. Most Inuit blame the settlement era for an increase in social problems, family breakdown, addictions, and the abuse and the culture loss of residential schools.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the lives of the Inuit began to change once again. They entered into serious negotiations on their land claim; in a series of cost-cutting measures government began to downsize and transfer more services to communities; and there was more and more interest in aboriginal self-government. With the settlement of the land claim in 1993, the Inuit had entered a new era—an era I have called the Era of Community. The new challenge is to “create community” through the restoration of primary relationships. The *primordial* relationship, the relationship out of which all else flows, is their relationship to the land. As I have noted elsewhere, the traditional aboriginal definition of community is “*an intimate relationship with all living things, both animate and inanimate.*”<sup>4</sup>

How does the creation of Nunavut relate to the history of the Inuit? To gain perspective I would like to place the three eras of Inuit history on a 24 hour clock. If we imagine for a moment that the whole history of the Inuit—with its three distinct eras—can be collapsed into a 24 hour clock, we would discover that: the Era on the Land would take up 23 hours and 59 minutes; the Settlement Era would take the next 59 seconds; and the Era of Community that is just beginning to emerge would take up the last second. The significance of this image will soon become apparent.

## **Understanding the Challenge**

If the challenge of creating Nunavut were simply a matter of forming another public government, the task would be rather straightforward. One would use as a model the public government structures of the Northwest Territories, or Yukon, or the government of one of the smaller provinces and simply create a carbon copy. That would be the

---

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Di Ann Sue Blesse for this definition. See, *Northern Canadian Aboriginal Teachers' Perception of Classroom Learning Environments*, Department of Education, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Fall, 1997. Unpublished Masters Thesis.

simplest and most efficient way of creating Nunavut—if the task were simply one of forming another public government. But that’s not the task.

The task is to create a unique form of government—one that truly reflects and incorporates the culture, values, language and traditions of the Inuit. And this is what makes the task so difficult.

In the following sections of this essay I will suggest how the Nunavut leaders might go about doing this. But first, there are three obstacles that are part of the environment in which surrounds those directly involved in creating Nunavut. These are:

1. The pressure to produce services.
2. The problem of imprinting
3. The lack of a conceptual framework and model

### ***The pressure to produce services***

I began the presentation to the deputy ministers in Nunavut (referred to in the first paragraph of this essay) with an expression that one often saw displayed in workplaces a number of years ago. “*When you are up to your ass in alligators, it’s hard to remember that your first priority was to drain the swamp.*” I then indicated that my presentation would be very much about draining the swamp. But I recognized that their priority, six weeks away from the official creation of Nunavut, would probably be to ward off the alligators.

The builders of Nunavut—the politicians, civil servants and community leaders—really are up to their asses in alligators. Compared with the rest of Canada, the residents of Nunavut have, on a per capita basis: the highest birth-rate, the highest infant mortality rate, the highest suicide rate, the highest rate of incarceration, the highest rate of sexually transmitted diseases, the highest rate of unemployment. They also have the lowest per capita income, the lowest literacy rate, significant addictions problems in most communities, as well as serious housing shortages.

There is constant pressure to improve services, and it is coming from all sides: from the residents, from the politicians, and from the civil servants themselves. The demand for services continues to grow, revenues are not able to meet needs, and most departments are experiencing serious staff shortages—especially in some critical areas like nursing and education. Staff turnover is a constant problem. In a situation like this, it is difficult to pause, stand back, and ask the important strategic questions about what kind of public government we are trying to create. There is a difference between urgency and importance; but the tendency is to always deal with the alligators first—and worry about the swamp later.

### *The problem of Imprinting*

A few years ago a movie came out entitled, “*Fly Away Home*”. It told the story of a father and daughter who became concerned about a group of Canada geese that were losing their ability to migrate. So they became a constant presence to the chicks from the moment of their birth and got them to “imprint” onto an ultra-light aircraft which the chicks accepted as their “mother”. Then, using the aircraft, they led the birds down to their traditional winter feeding grounds in the southern United States and, in doing so, were able to teach the birds to migrate once again.

Now I want to make this very clear to avoid any misunderstandings. People are not birds. But the example can help illustrate the problem now facing the leaders of Nunavut. They want to develop a government that is unique and reflects their own evolving culture and traditions. But most, of the people involved in the development of the Nunavut public government have either been hired from the outside--or have grown up in Inuit settlements where they have “imprinted” on models of service delivery systems that have been imported into the culture. And as I have noted elsewhere, organizational structures are like Trojan Horses. They bring with them policies, decision-making mechanisms and systems that often clash with aboriginal cultures.<sup>5</sup>

All of the non-aboriginal civil servants and many of the aboriginal civil servants have been trained or gained their experience either with the Government of the Northwest Territories, a provincial government or with the federal government in the South. They only know what they have experienced and, indeed, it is precisely because of this experience that they have been hired to work in Nunavut.

Almost all of the politicians are either totally new to political office or have served previously with the Government of the Northwest Territories. The Nunavut Legislature has been modelled on the GNWT Legislature. The legislation for Nunavut has been adopted—almost intact—from the GNWT. The structure of government departments has been designed by former GNWT civil servants. Almost all of the financial and information systems have been transferred over from the GNWT. Many services have been contracted back to the GNWT—until the Nunavut government has the time to develop its own service systems. Because of their dependence on the federal government for funding, "the feds" have a strong influence on the shape and form of the Nunavut government. Even the residents of Nunavut seem to have imprinted on what previously existed. Whether they are aware of it or not, what many residents seem to want is the same as the people in the West have—only better.

To return for a moment to the 24 hour time clock analogy we used above... in designing the Nunavut Government, the Inuit leaders seem to be returning not to their 4000 year old experience of life on the land--the 23 hours and 59 minutes on the time clock--but to their experience of settlement life—only the last 59 seconds. Why is this?

---

<sup>5</sup> Mike Bell, p 47.

One reason is undoubtedly a strategic decision to help cope with constant demand for services. “Lets get the services ‘out the door’ and worry about cultural adaptation later.”

A second reason has to do with “propinquity”—a word from a Latin root meaning, “nearness in time and place” or “something that is close.” On one occasion, some reporters asked George Ball, an advisor to several U.S. presidents, why there was always a squabble among White House staff to see who would get the office closest to the President’s Oval Office. He responded, Nothing 'propinks' like propinquity.” In other words, the closer you are to the Oval Office, the more power you can exert on the president, and the more power the president is likely to exert on you. Thus, if your total experience of public government comes out of the Settlement Era—the era that is part of your own upbringing and closest to you—it is highly likely that imprinting will occur and you will be influenced to design the form of public government that you are familiar with, whether it reflects Inuit culture and values or not. It would be extremely difficult for you to reach back further, to a time in history before people moved into settlements. Unfortunately, unlike the restoration of migration patterns in the movie, this imprinting on artificial structures will not help create a form of government that reflects Inuit culture and traditions.

A third reason is the lack of an alternative conceptual framework and model. It is hard to shift paradigms unless we have an alternative paradigm to shift to. It is this issue that I will now address.

## **Part Two**

### **THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND MODEL**

#### **Conceptual Frameworks: The Old and the New**

For the last four centuries western industrial society has been shaped and formed by the physics of Isaac Newton, the dualistic philosophy of Rene Decartes and the scientific methodology of Francis Bacon. This legacy has shaped all aspects of our life--our philosophy and value systems, our science, our laws, our economy and our technologies. In particular it has shaped our view of the universe in which we exist.

We have inherited a mechanistic concept of the universe that has dominated most of our thinking up to the present. It divides the human community from "the envelope"--the planet on which it exists. Man is the dominant species which stands over and against the planet and all other species. Our Judaeo-Christian cosmology and its creation stories have reinforced this concept of man as the dominant species. To quote the words of the Creator in Genesis, " Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and *subdue it; and rule*

over the fish and the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." <sup>6</sup> (Italics mine)

The result of this legacy has been to disassociate the human community from the earth community, and to develop within us humans an arrogance of ownership. We continually take from the earth without giving back. As a result, we are now experiencing the dire consequences of our actions-- the breakdown of our planetary life-systems. We are in quite a fix.

Some place great confidence in technology to get us out of this fix. But there are others-- and I count myself among them--who are not so optimistic. Though I have confidence in the potential ability of technology, I know that technology alone will not save us. What we need is a *metanoia*<sup>7</sup>--a conversion: a complete change of mind and heart that will provide us with a new way of thinking and feeling about the earth and our relationship to it.

Fortunately, modern science has given us some help. In the early part of this century the work of Einstein and his colleagues, working in the area of particle physics, made us aware that that the sub-atomic world is a world of wonder, mystery, interiority, and relationships. In more recent times the Hubble telescope has brought us pictures of an amazingly expanding universe. For the first time we have been able to stand outside our planet to reach back into our history and help us understand our origins as a human species. Most important of all, we have come to realize that our tiny planet, far from being a dead, inanimate object upon which we exist, is, rather, a living organism--Gaia. Our lands, our oceans and our atmosphere are living systems upon which we, and all other species, are completely dependent for our existence. Thanks to the New Science,<sup>8</sup> we are now able to begin shaping a new cosmology—the New Story about where we have come from and where we might be going.

Though this new understanding of the universe and of our planet may be new to many of us, it is not new to aboriginal peoples. From time immemorial, through their myths, their stories, their traditional practices and their traditional knowledge they have noted and honoured their relationship to a living universe. But when they have tried to share their world-view with us, we have not known how to listen.

When aboriginal people have talked to us about "Mother Earth", we have interpreted this term as a quaint analogy. When they have spoken about the animals and birds as their brothers and sisters, we have categorized them as primitive animists. And when they

---

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 1:28

<sup>7</sup> from the Greek "meta" meaning "above or beyond" and "noia" from the root "nous" which means "mind." In the Bible the term is usually translated as a complete "change of mind" or "conversion".

<sup>8</sup> The "New Science" is a term that comes from the earth sciences--the disciplines of physics, biology, chemistry, geology and from theories of evolution, cosmology and chaos that span several disciplines. Unlike the Newtonian model of the world that is characterized by materialism and reductionism, the New Science focuses on *relationships* rather than *things*. It abandons the concept that there are "basic building blocks of nature." It emphasizes holism, processes and systems--and relies heavily upon insights from the world of sub-atomic physics.

have talked to us about "the land" we have heard them talking about real estate. Our 400 year old science and technology has helped us create our own, small autistic world. We move around inside it, confident that we are seeing the world as it really is--the only way it can be. And when things don't fit into our perception of the world we either make them fit, or we cast them out as being irrelevant.

Despite the relevance of the aboriginal worldview, which now seems very much in keeping with the insights of the New Science, the leaders of Nunavut, like almost all of us, have great difficulty breaking out of the industrial-technological framework. We have become accustomed to this framework and, in many respects, it has served us well. But with our planetary systems beginning to crash down all around us, we now need a different conceptual framework--one that will help us understand the aboriginal worldview.

My work in northern communities over the past two decades has provided me with some insights--if that is not too strong a word--into how we might begin to go about the process. The foundation for this framework is what I have called an Ecology of Spirit. To explain this concept I am highly dependent upon the work of others, in particular on the work of Thomas Berry.

### ***An Ecology of Spirit***

The word "ecology" comes from the Greek, "*oikos*" which means "household" and "*logos*" which means "word" or "meaning." Thus, ecology is the study of the earth household. More specifically, it is the study of the relationships that inter-link all members and species of the earth household.

The word "spirit" comes from the Latin word "*spiritus*" which means "breath." It refers to an energy or dynamic life force that expresses the inner soul or essence of a being.

The Term "Ecology of Spirit" then, is *the study of that complex set of relationships and systems, infused with an inner life-force (or Spirit), that links the land and its creatures, to individuals, people, communities, organizations, and to the entire universe.* The concept of an Ecology of Spirit is expressed most simply in the traditional aboriginal concept of community: "*An intimate relationship with all living things, both animate and inanimate.*"

Though Thomas Berry does not use the term "Ecology of Spirit," it is based upon his three fundamental principles of the universe: *interiority*, *diversity*<sup>9</sup> and *communion*.

**Interiority** is the psychic dimension that exists within the universe and all its species. It is a consciousness, a life-energy, a force that manifests itself in many forms, but

---

<sup>9</sup> Berry prefers the term "differentiation" but the meaning is quite similar to "diversity." The discussion of the three principles is found in *Dream of the Earth*, p. 45-46 and in Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story*, p 70-79.

particularly in the ability of the universe and its species to self-organize (Scientists call this self-organizing characteristic "autopoiesis"). When we refer to the universe as a living organism, we are acknowledging its interiority, its consciousness, its ability to self-organize.

This interiority manifests itself in many forms. It is evident in the creation of the universe through the gathering of clusters into supernovas and their consequent explosions and creation of planets. It manifests itself at the sub-atomic level in the ability of electrons and neutrons to join together. It manifests itself in photosynthesis in the plant world, in what we call "instinct" in the animal world, and in human consciousness which Berry describes as "the universe reflecting upon itself". Though there are various manifestations of interiority, all of these forms of psychic energy are intimately linked with one another. They have all emerged out of the explosion of the supernova which created our sun and spun off our planet. Because we are part of this living universe, we humans, like all species, carry this consciousness in our genetic coding--our DNA.

**Diversity** is the inherent tendency of the universe to continually express itself in different forms and species. This characteristic is what allows one thing to be distinguished from another--to "differentiate" itself, to use Berry's term. It is a characteristic shared by stars and galaxies, atoms and molecules, as well as by species of animals and races of people. The more complex that organisms or systems become, the greater their tendency to diversify and, at the same time, distinguish themselves from one another in order to preserve their unique identity. In the animal world it is what differentiates whales from dolphins, and trout from salmon. At the human level, it is what makes one individual different from another individual, races of people and cultures different from other races of people and cultures.

**Communion** is the inherent tendency of each reality within the universe to join with every other reality in the universe. All species form a single community of being. What we do to one species will have an impact on every other species. Thus the air pollution from our factories affects the water systems and air, which affects the caribou, which affects the pregnant mothers who eat the caribou, which affects their unborn children and infants, which affects their children, and so forth. Thus there is an intimate relationship between the human community and the earth community. The earth is not an object that stands over and against us. To use Berry's expression, "we are all one community--a community of subjects".

As we view the creation of Nunavut through the lens of an Ecology of Spirit, we begin to get a different perspective on its significance. Though the creation of Nunavut has been a magnificent political achievement, the nature of Nunavut is not, in its essence, a political/legal reality. This is only the very recent, external manifestation of a relationship of a people with their land that extends back for centuries. All political systems are artificial structures and boundaries that we impose upon the human-earth experience.

In its essence, Nunavut is the consciousness in a people of their relationship to their land. It is a sense of place that is expressed in the name they have chosen to give to this place—"Nunavut", which means in Inuktitut, "Our Land."

In selecting a development model it would be a mistake, I think, to try and adapt a governance model from a controlling culture which does not reflect this relationship. The challenge for the Inuit is to return to their traditional awareness of who they are as a people, to seek within their collective consciousness a model that will give full expression to their relationship with their land—a relationship that identifies them as a distinct people.

### **The Life-Place Model**

There is no single model that can perfectly reflect the interiority, diversity and communion that characterises the special relationship the Inuit have always had with their land. But the model that seems to come closest is what I have called "The Life-place Model". The term is cumbersome but it is better than the technical term for the model which is "bioregionalism"—a term that sounds to me like a disease. I can't imagine how it might be translated into Inuktitut. But if I were asked by an Inuktitut interpreter to explain the underlying concepts, I would say that it refers to a place which is a life-place—a place that "gives life". So, though I will use the term "bioregion," I will refer to the model as the "Life-place Model."<sup>10</sup>

A bioregion is a distinct geographical area—like the Arctic—with distinct natural features. The region shares the same or similar soil, flora, fauna, climate, geology, animal population and drainage areas. Unlike other ecological entities which traditionally treat humans and their culture as interlopers, the concept of a bioregion sees humans as an integral part of the region. Together, the people and the land form a distinct community, each one requiring the other, each one respecting the right of the other to exist, each one recognizing its inter-dependency.

The concept of a Life-place Model has emerged out of certain depressed areas in the United States and various poorer regions of the world where people—usually indigenous people—have seen their land and their environment exploited and severely damaged by industrial development or urbanization that is out of control.

Efforts to restore their land are based upon a consciousness that the land is not simply a location or a place that people happen to inhabit. It is a "place that gives life" by restoring the relationship between humans and the other species that inhabit the location. The ability for a place to "give life" is rooted in a consciousness that land is the source of

---

<sup>10</sup> The best and most comprehensive explanation of bioregionalism that I have found is contained within the various articles in *Home: A Bioregional Reader*, Edited by Van Andruss, Christopher Plant, Judith Plant and Eleanor Wright, New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, British Columbia, 1990.

life and it can only “give life’ if the species who inhabit the land—humans and all other species—establish a mutually supporting relationship with one another.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of a "life-place" also carries with it a consciousness that this life-place is “*our life-place*.” It is the place that we identify as our own--our "homeland"-- and have identified as our own for a long time, perhaps from time immemorial. It is this "sense of place", based upon an awareness of our relationship with this land, that is the foundation of aboriginal cultures and spirituality. It is this sense of place that identifies inhabitants as “who we are”. As the advocates of bioregionalism like to say, “We cannot really understand who we are until we understand where we have come from.”

I have never heard Inuit use the term “bioregionalism.” But in many meetings and discussions over the years with Inuit I have heard them continually refer to their land, in one way or another, as both a “life-place” and as their “homeland”. My experience leads me to believe that the term “bioregionalism” is simply a modern term that describes traditional consciousness of Inuit about their relationship with their land. It is not, in my opinion, a new model superimposed from the outside. It seems to be an appropriate model to help shape the new public government of Nunavut.

In what follows I will discuss how the Life-place Model can serve as a model for the development of public government—through the vehicle of aboriginal self-government. But I would first like to pause for a bit to discuss the concept of aboriginal self-government because there is a great deal of confusion about its meaning.

### **Part Three**

#### **RE-INTERPRETING ABORIGINAL SELF-GOVERNMENT**

In my work I am often involved in helping aboriginal communities define their vision for the future. Typically I will ask community members, working in small groups, what they would like their community to look like, say, in ten years. To help them with the task, and help consolidate the various visions coming out of the groups, I suggest that they describe their future in terms of various categories: youth, elders, family life, economy, organizational structures, services, self-government. Inevitably, when the groups report back and discuss their visions with one another, they have a great deal to say about all the categories—except self-government. When I question them about why they had so little to say about self-government, they will either have no response or they will equate self-government with their ability to “take over and run our own services.”

---

<sup>11</sup> "Aboriginal people from almost every culture believe that health is a matter of balance and harmony within the self and with others, sustained and ordered by spiritual law and the bounty of mother Earth. They have long understood that the well-being of people depends upon the well-being of the air, water, land and other life forms. This belief has been confirmed by the findings of countless scientific studies of poor health in a compromised environments. Although the details of cause and effect have not been fully established, the general scientific conclusion is clear: human health depends largely on the condition of the natural environment and of the built environment." *Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples: Volume 3, Gathering Strength*, Canada communications Group--Publishing, Ottawa 1996 p. 184-185.

Wondering about their lack of knowledge about a principle so vital to their future, I decided to investigate the concept of aboriginal self-government. I turned to *The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* and its companion research document.<sup>12</sup>

As I wandered through these ponderous tomes I began to understand why aboriginal peoples have so much difficulty understanding and explaining self-government.

What I came away with is this. Aboriginal self-government flows from the principle of self-determination, it is somehow linked to the concept of “*prior occupancy*”, it emerges out of the oral traditions and historical practices, and it has been recognized as an “inherent right” in section 35 of the Canadian Constitution, proclaimed in 1982. That’s it. The rest was page after page of court cases and intricate legal explanations. You had to be a lawyer to understand it.

As I was wandering through the pages of legal distinctions, I was reminded of an old Latin principle: “*Quidquid recipitur, recipitur per modum recipientis*” which roughly translates as “Whatever is received, is received according to the viewpoint or mindset of the one doing the receiving.” In other words, if we view the principle of self-government through the lens of the modern Canadian legal system, we will only see that part of self-government that has meaning within that legal system. Here we run right up against the old “world-view conceptual framework problem” again.

We tend to analyze aboriginal self-government through a two-step process. First, we examine aboriginal traditions to detect elements that suggest rights—as we understand the concept of rights. Second, we translate those rights into terms we can understand and test them against the concept of rights *as we understand them within our legal framework*. And, “something gets lost in the translation.”

What gets lost is the whole understanding that aboriginal people have of their relationship to the land. What gets lost is the whole psychic dimension of the earth as living organism that is the basis of their culture and the foundation of their concept of rights. What gets lost is their whole concept of a human-earth relationship as expressed in the concept of community as an intimate relationship of all living beings both animate and inanimate. What gets lost is the idea that primordial rights belong to the land and all its species, not just the human species.

In our efforts to define aboriginal rights in terms we can understand, we chop up the relationship into little pieces and come away with the parts which we then believe are the whole. It is very much like dividing the pieces of a system up into distinct autonomous components and still believing that we have a system in place. After we have finished with the exercise, what comes out the other side are three things. Some kind of access to what are now called “natural resources” (or to use the land claims terminology—both

---

<sup>12</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 2: Restructuring the Relationship--Part One*, Canada Communications Group--Publishing, Ottawa 1996; and *Aboriginal Self-Government: Legal and Constitutional Issues* (Papers Prepared as Part of the Research Program of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples), Canada Communications Group--Publishing, Ottawa, 1995.

surface and sub-surface rights). The right to provide services, which usually looks like a combination of municipal services, land management, and various kinds of health and social services. And the right to provide governance structures which have to look like “our governance structures” or they won’t be recognized legally.

This problem of organizational acculturation is played out time and time again across the North in many different venues and situations. As an example...when impact review panels are forced to consider traditional knowledge in their review of resource development projects, aboriginal groups find themselves playing against a stacked deck. Their understanding of the land, which is based upon a *relationship* with the land often crashes in flames when pitted against the scientific knowledge of technical specialists. Unfortunately, review panels, steeped in the tenets of western science, are not able to deal with “relationships”. They can only deal with what they consider to be “hard facts.” “*Quidquid recipitur...etc.*”

What are the implications of this problem for the creation of a new public government in Nunavut? How do the Inuit develop a form of government that truly reflects their culture and traditions, yet at the same time meets the requirements of a dominant culture?

My sense is that the answer does not lie in trying to integrate two diverse cultures and worldviews into a single form of government. I don’t think this can happen. What’s needed, is a shift to some common ground.

For the Inuit this will mean a re-affirmation of the traditional consciousness of their relationship to the land and a translation of that consciousness into terms that other people can understand. For the non-aboriginal community, especially for the institutions and governments of the dominant culture, it means seeking a new understanding of the aboriginal reality in light of the New Science. It also requires a different understanding of their own relationship to the universe in which they exist. It’s a tall order.

## **Some Conclusions**

I would now like to turn our attention to how the Life-place Model might be used as a vehicle for the creation of a public government in Nunavut. But first some conclusions that flow out of the previous discussion about an Ecology of Spirit and aboriginal self-government.

*First*, when thinking about the Nunavut public government, our perspective must be broader than we are used to when thinking about other public governments. I propose that we step out of our usual conceptual framework and look at public government in the context of an Ecology of Spirit. The challenge here is to think about public government not only in the context of the human community, *but in the context of the human-earth community.*

*Second*, the traditional role of any government is the public good and the business of any government is to provide services. I would propose that our thinking has to go well

beyond our narrow definition of “public good” and government as the provider of services—which are, in effect, only a means to an end. In terms of Nunavut, the end is the maintenance or restoration of primary relationships. Specifically I am referring to

- The primordial relationship<sup>13</sup> of the Inuit with the land
- Their relationship with their own inner Spirit
- Their relationship with the members of their human community—their families, extended families and the people they live with “in community.”
- Their relationship with their organizations and institutions.

Thus, the proper role of the Nunavut government—its purpose—is to foster the development of the human-earth community. This is the “public good”.

*Third*, the driving force behind the development of public government must be aboriginal self-government. But aboriginal self-government must be interpreted in the broader sense that stresses the relationship between the people and their land.

*Fourth*, the rights of the land must be given precedence over the rights of the people. Though we may quibble in individual situations, the following axiom seems to be valid “What is good for the land is good for the people.” Based upon our experience as a human species in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the reverse does not seem to be the case.

I would like to conclude this section with a quote from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. In its discussion of aboriginal self-government, the Commission draws the link between aboriginal self-government and the governance of the land. It quotes the following words of Rene Lamothe, a Dene living in the Treaty 11 area of the Northwest Territories. They seem to summarize much of our previous discussion.

*"According to our beliefs, the spirit and the land are the boss of Dene life...The Land is the boss. She provides all the necessities of life. The Dene are given the responsibility to continue to live with her in that part of her being which has generated the Dene way of life, to govern themselves at personal, family, regional and national levels. This is fundamental to survival. To disrespect the spirit of the land is to disrespect life. In the teachings of the Dene elders, because The Land is the boss and will teach whoever She wants, they will accept as Dene anyone who comes to know and live as they know and live. At that time they will only be too eager to share their responsibility for jurisdiction and governance. This is not a note on racial relationships, it is a statement to the belief of the Dene that The Land is the boss of culture, that culture is inextricably tied to The Land, and that people are required to adapt their way of life to the teachings of the Land."<sup>14</sup>*

---

<sup>13</sup> The word "primordial " comes from the latin words "primus" meaning "first" and "ordiri" meaning "to begin". Thus the *primordial relationship* is the very first, the fundamental relationship that precedes all other relationships and from which all other relationships come.

<sup>14</sup> Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, p 118.

**Part Four**  
**THE LIFE-PLACE MODEL**  
**&**  
**ABORIGINAL SELF-GOVERNMENT**

**The Criteria**

Any model that will serve as the foundation for the development of a public government in Nunavut must meet certain criteria. It must:

- Be based upon the foundation of the primacy of the land and be directed to the development of the primordial relationship of the human community with the earth community.
- Be consistent with and flow from the community's culture, heritage and traditions. In particular it must receive the approval and acceptance of the community's respected elders.
- Be based upon the aboriginal concept of community: "the intimate relationship with all living things, both animate and inanimate."
- Be self-sufficient and sustainable, to the fullest extent possible. While no community or region in the modern world is fully self-sufficient and sustainable, every effort must be made to ensure that the community is as self-sufficient as possible and has the on-going human and financial resources needed to sustain it.
- Be able to meet the needs of all residents of the community, both human and other than human residents and species.
- Be able to establish and maintain linkages and positive working relationships with outside communities.
- Be internally consistent. It must have a conceptual framework and be explainable within the context of that framework.

In his discussion of bioregions, Thomas Berry describes a bioregion as...

*An identifiable geographical area of interacting life systems in the ever renewing process of nature. The full diversity of life functions is carried out, not as individuals or species, or even as organic beings, but as a community that includes physical as well as the organic components of the region.*<sup>15</sup>

Berry then goes on to note the manner in which a bioregion continually develops and renews itself. The earth is self-propagating, self-nourishing, self-educating, self-governing, self-healing and self-fulfilling. Referring back to our earlier discussion of aboriginal self-government, these functions might be seen as the fundamental characteristics of aboriginal self-government.

### **Self-Propagating**

The first characteristic, self-propagating, requires that we recognize the rights of each species to its habitat, its migratory routes, its place in the community. Just as the home is the domestic setting for the human family, so the bioregion is the domestic setting for the earth community and for all the species that exist within it.

Our human-centred perspective teaches us that we must “manage” wild life and its resources. But our biocentric perspective tell us that what we are actually doing is helping the land and its non-human inhabitants manage themselves. (We don’t manage the migrations by telling animals when to migrate, or what route to take, etc.) Nature has its own system of checks and balances which limits the ability of one species to dominate other species.

As we turn our attention to the human population, the function of self-propagation focuses our attention on the propagation of the human species—especially the procreation and development of children. Aboriginal self-government would seem to have a mandate to address issues and needs related to the size of families, the health of the physical community where families exist, the need for appropriate housing, the provision of clean air and water, the availability of required health services, etc. It would also have a mandate to help ensure that each child and young person grows up in a healthy supportive home environment where they have the opportunity to thrive and flourish.

Finally, as we look at the relationship between the human settlement and the earth community that surrounds it, we recognize that both the human population and the non-human population require their own unique space. Fish have a right to their spawning beds, humans have a right to safety from predators within municipal boundaries. These unique spaces must be respected and not infringed upon. Self-government must create a suitable framework for these common spaces for such things as tourism activities,

---

<sup>15</sup> All of the quotations from Berry in this section come from Thomas Berry, "Bioregions: The context for Reinhabiting The Earth," *Breakthrough*, Spring/Summer, 1985 P 6-9.

resource development projects (mines, pipelines, dams), the disposal and treatment of waste products, and so forth.

### **Self-Nourishing**

The survival of species depends upon their ability to nourish themselves. This is true for single-cell organisms as it is for the whales in the ocean. The securing of food is based upon a system of checks and balances, and the ability of each species to acknowledge its dependency on every other species.

In the human situation the principle of self-nourishment embraces agriculture, hunting and gathering and what we refer to as our economies—our work and commerce—those things that we need to “put food on the table”. As Berry notes, “the various bioregional communities of the national world can be considered as commercial ventures as well as biological processes. There is a constant interchange of values, the laying up of capital, the quest for more economical ways of doing things.” He goes on to note, however, that human economies are dependent on the earth economy. To the extent that we wipe out species and destroy the land, to that same extent so we jeopardize our own economies.

### **Self-Educating**

One of the essential functions of all species within a bioregion is their ability to learn and educate themselves. This is as true of the region as a whole as it is true of the species within a region. The ability of species to learn seems to be partially a matter of instinct or conditioning, partially a matter of experimentation and interaction with other species. The aboriginal elders have always emphasized the importance of learning from nature, a point that Berry makes. “The educational processes observed in the natural world form a model for the human. There is presently no way for humans to educate themselves for either survival or fulfillment than through the instruction available to them through the natural world.” This is the whole foundation of our human science and knowledge.

As a human species, we have inherited from the earth a capacity to learn and educate ourselves. Our consciousness as a species is our greatest achievement. The ability to learn is facilitated by the wisdom and experience of elders, the teachings of our parents and the community, the provision of schooling. All of these sources of learning must be seen as essential to human learning.

### **Self-Healing**

As we are all aware, the earth and each bioregion have amazing regenerative powers. As Berry Notes, “The community carries within itself not only the nourishing energies that are needed by each member of the community; it also contains within itself the special

powers of regeneration. (When damaged by natural disasters) the life community adjusts itself, reaches deeper into its recuperative powers and brings about a healing.”

In many aboriginal communities today, the need for healing is of primary concern. Wrestling with the turmoil of the Settlement Era and facing the problems of addictions, family breakdown, suicide and the loss of their culture and language, many aboriginal people are instinctively returning to the land and to cultural healing methodologies based upon the land as their primary source of healing. In this context, the primary source of healing becomes the re-establishment of traditional relationships with the land—for individuals, families and communities.

### **Self-Fulfilling**

Within a bioregion, the land and all species that form a community within it have an inherent tendency to self-fulfillment. Each species seeks its own survival and the realization of its full potential. The continually changing seasons, the migration of caribou and birds, the attainment of the full hunting powers of the polar bear, the speed and the prowess of the eagle and the falcon—these are manifestations of the function of self-fulfillment.

Within the human species the function of self-fulfillment manifests itself in culture, spirituality and a sense of aesthetics. Our poetry, literature and stories, our song and dance and theatre, our architecture and our artwork, our clothing and our tools—all of these can be expressions of self-fulfillment. It also manifests itself in our social and personal relationships the glory of our elders, the love and strength within the family, the growth and development of our children. The function of self-fulfillment is the realization of our full potential and Spirit as individuals and members of the human-earth community.

### **Self-Governing**

The bioregions share with the universe as a whole the capacity for self-governance. This is one of its crowning achievements. Its ability to establish and maintain its life systems; its self-organizing capabilities which give rise to the changing seasons; its ability to provide habitats for species; its inherent consciousness that guides its own survival; its ability to differentiate and create species; its inherent ability to create and sustain earth-human communities—these self-governing capabilities provide an elegant model for human governance.

Within the human community, our ability to self-govern manifests itself in our political systems, in our institutions and in our organized social groupings. Each group, each organization must recognize and acknowledge the rights, responsibilities and contributions of each individual—women as well as men, children and youth as well as their parents and elders.

Self-government within the human community places a very high priority on the development of leaders, for it is the leaders who must guide and help the community facilitate its vision, provide guidance, ensure learning and facilitate healing. To a very large degree, it is the role of the leaders to help create and maintain their land as a life-place.

As I have suggested in this paper, the principle of aboriginal self-government can become the vehicle for a form of government that is modelled on the Life-Place Model. But this can never be achieved within the narrow understanding of aboriginal self-government as it is presently interpreted by the Canadian legal system. The true concept of aboriginal self-government must emerge out of the 4000-year-old history of the Inuit themselves and their deep-rooted consciousness of their relationship with the land. I respectfully suggest that the essence of this concept today is linked to the ability of their land to self-propagate, self-nourish, self-educate, self-heal, self-fulfill, and self-govern.

The development of a Nunavut public government cannot be achieved exclusively through the development and implementation of the Life-pace Model. No bioregion is completely self-sustaining, no system of government can exist without establishing relationships with other governments, no system of learning, or health care, or justice, no regional economy can exist without linkages to a larger and broader world. But as important as linkages are, of primary importance is the Inuit consciousness of their experiences with the controlling culture that surrounds it.

Throughout their history the Inuit have always borrowed knowledge, technologies and tools from neighbouring cultures. They have been able to do this—and still retain their culture—because they had a very clear understanding of who they are as a people. In a changing world, their success in developing their own form of public government will depend upon their ability to retain their vision, by doing what they have always done—turn to their land for instruction and understanding.

## **PART FIVE "FROM THE GROUND UP"**

*"Question: How should the people of Nunavut go about creating their unique form of public government?"*

*Answer: From the ground up."*

### **The Problem with Northern Consultations.**

In this section I will recommend that the people of Nunavut undertake a major consultation process--at all levels of Nunavut society--to shape their new public

government. But before getting into the details, I'd like to make some observations about northern consultation processes in general.

In almost two decades of work in the North, I've been involved in, or witnessed, various efforts to create governments--territorial governments, municipal governments, and aboriginal self-governments. Most of these efforts are seriously flawed. Either they fail to adequately consult people about the kind of government they want, and/or when they do consult, they consult about the wrong things.

When Ottawa set up the Government of the Northwest Territories in the late 60s and early 70s, it did not carry out adequate consultations with aboriginal groups. It more or less imposed a government upon them. For years, many aboriginal groups have seen the Government of the Northwest Territories as an imposition--a barrier between themselves and the federal government with whom they have signed treaties. This failure to consult is still a very thorny issue for many aboriginal people in the NWT who still do not see the GNWT as "our government". It is a fundamental reason for the creation of Nunavut.

More recently, the division of the Northwest Territories created the need for a new constitution for the much smaller NWT. In 1998 the GNWT with the initial cooperation of the western aboriginal leaders, launched a consultation process to develop a new constitution for the Northwest Territories. Typically they held a series of community meetings during which they asked participants to view and comment on several possible organizational models--models that had been developed ahead of time. The process went belly-up after a few months when aboriginal groups became concerned that the development of a new constitution before the settlement of land claims might jeopardize their self-government interests. One wonders why the consultation process did not begin with a discussion of self-government and move from there to a discussion of a territorial public government.

There are many such examples. Though it might seem to people in the North that there is continual consultation, in almost all situations the consultations do not get down to the basics. They are too narrowly defined and they inevitably accept the currently existing systems and structures as "givens".

- Consultations take place to ask people what kinds of schools they want in their communities. Inevitably, aboriginal residents will stress the need for "learning on the land." The schools then try their best, with limited funds, to respond. The Department of Education develops a culture-based curriculum that is often delivered by non-aboriginal teachers; the individual schools, with limited funds, may take the children out on the land for a "land experience program" once a year. These are sincere efforts that take up a great deal of time, energy and money. But creating curricula and programs are not what is meant by "learning on the land". What people want is an ethic or an approach to learning, based upon their traditional relationship with the land, that will pervade all of the child's learning

experiences--including schooling. Unfortunately, starting the consultation process by asking about schools will never lead to the much more needed discussion about learning.

- Consultations on the criminal justice system start with the existing CJS and its various laws, regulations, punishments and programs. It does not start with the traditional aboriginal concepts of restorative justice--finding ways and means of re-establishing the relationship between the offender and the community. Though there are some attempts to adapt the existing criminal justice system to aboriginal culture through such things as sentencing circles, there is no question but that people will end up with a European-Western type justice system rather than an aboriginal-type justice system.
- Consultations on "the environment" inevitably start with existing regulatory regimes and ask people how they can be improved. When the discussion manages to go further--for example, to a discussion of wildlife species themselves, it rarely gets down to the level of recognizing that the land and its species have rights in themselves (a concept well entrenched in all aboriginal traditions). Though many species are important as a food source--they are not *only* a source of food. They are part of the foundation of a whole culture.
- Consultations on health care always begin with a discussion of "care" rather than "health." In a word, they accept as a given the existing system. They never start with a discussion of health itself, nor with a consideration of the relationships between health and the land. Even though health care professionals continually bemoan the emphasis on critical care rather than prevention, the creation of dependency relationships rather than the fostering of personal accountability, the hospital as a place of healing rather than the land as a place of healing--the consultations that would lead to these changes almost never take place.
- Consultations on the economy almost always begin with discussions of the human economy--jobs, businesses and the development of natural resources. There seems to be no real recognition that all economies are based upon the earth economy, or that the economic carrying capacity of a region is the determining factor for economic development--especially when it comes to the extraction of minerals and fossil fuels. Though we tinker around with regulatory requirements that we believe are protecting the environment, our priority always seems to be based upon two principles: 1) the resources of the earth are at the disposal of the human community and, 2) the rights of the human proponents must be protected. We must ensure that all resource development companies go through the same processes--and the benchmark is set by what is perceived to be the most efficient and most expedient process--otherwise we are not being fair. And "not being fair" has significant political and legal implications.

I could go on and on--but I think the point is clear. Almost all consultation processes begin in the wrong place. They do not begin with recognition of a centuries old *special relationship* between people and their land. Instead, they start by accepting as "givens" the existing programs, service systems, regulatory regimes and political processes that have been put in place since aboriginal people moved into settlements. The advice that comes out of these consultations is filtered through the existing systems--in much the same way that concepts of self-government are filtered through our western legal system and traditions. As a result, the advice is either rejected--because it is simply unworkable within the existing systems-- or a series of attempts are made, many of them very sincere, to make changes in systems and structures that will make them more "culturally relevant". The consequence of consultations that start from the wrong place is often a great deal of frustration on the part of participants. Many people--especially elders--fail to see how the advice they have given gets translated into changes in the existing systems and structures. At times they undoubtedly feel marginalized.

In his book, *Dancing With A Ghost, Exploring Indian Reality*, Rupert Ross quotes a sentence he found on a blackboard in the band hall on the Weagamow Lake Reserve in Northern Ontario. It seems to summarize much of the preceding discussion.

*"I believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."*<sup>16</sup>

So what would an appropriate consultation process for the development of a Nunavut government look like? What principles should guide it? What should be its purpose? What kind of consultation process should be put in place?

### **Some Guiding Principles for Consultation on the Nunavut Public Government**

In the introduction to this section I asked the question, "How should the people of Nunavut go about creating their unique form of public government?" I answered the question, "From the ground up."

The expression, "from the ground up" has two meanings..

First, it means starting the consultation process from the community level and working up to a territorial level, rather than working the other way around--"from the top down." The task at hand--creating a new form of public government that will reflect the culture, traditions and spirituality of the Inuit for many generations to come--this task is simply too important to be left to a handful of elected leaders. The consultation process must involve every one--people from all levels of Inuit society. It must begin at the community level and involve young children, teenagers, parents, elders; local, regional and territorial leaders; stakeholder groups representing civil servants, the various

---

<sup>16</sup> Rupert Ross, *Dancing With A Ghost: Exploring Indian Reality*, Reed BooksCanada, Markham, Ontario, 1992. P 5.

professions and institutions and the new breed of young Inuit intellectuals. It must involve both Inuit residents and allow for the participation of non-Inuit residents. It is the role of the leaders to establish the process, listen, document the suggestions and help shape them into a vision, guiding principles and criteria for the development of a public government.

Second, there is a more literal interpretation where "the ground" refers specifically to "the land". If the special relationship between the people and their land is the foundation of their culture, heritage, spirituality and traditions, then that special relationship must be the foundation for their new form of public government. There really can't be any other foundation for the creation of public government or for the consultation process.

The principles that should guide the consultation process, then, are:

- It must start from the ground up and involve all segments of Inuit society, and,
- It must focus on an exploration of the relationship between the people and their land.

### **The Consultation Process:**

**Purpose:** The purpose of the consultation process is to flesh out the special relationship of the to their land in terms of:

- a vision
- principles and values, and
- a set of criteria

These can then be used as the foundation for the development of a public government.

The key question to be addressed in these discussions might be the following: *What has the land taught us about the way we should govern ourselves as a people?*

**Process:** The Inuit leaders would structure and facilitate the process. I would recommend that the process begin with a consideration of the Life-place Model. As noted above, the Arctic is a distinct bioregion that has given life to the Inuit for centuries. In exploring the relationship of the people to their land, the process might explore the way in which the land...

- self-propagates,
- self-nourishes
- self-educates
- self-heals
- self-fulfills
- and self-governs

As the participants in the process become more aware of these capacities within the land itself, applications and linkages would be made to the human community.

**Scope:** Though it might seem difficult to involve all levels of Inuit society in a consultation process, as we've noted already, there are only about 25,000 residents in the Nunavut Territory--the equivalent population of a small city in Southern Canada. Though the consultation process will require significant resources, it is a manageable task. The major challenges will be logistical (because of the distance between communities).

There would be two types of consultations. Community Consultations and Special Events.

**Community Consultations** would take place in every community and involve all members and stakeholders within the community. In addition to large, facilitated community meetings, there would be special consultation within the schools and young people, with caregivers and service providers, with hunters and trappers groups, with community leaders, and especially with elders. In addition to consultations, there might also be various kinds of cultural celebrations, workshops in land skills, community art and photographic exhibits, story-telling sessions--all designed to explore the *special relationship*.

As I have noted above, the elders, because of their knowledge of the special relationship of the people with the land, would have a significant role in this consultation process. More than any other group, they carry within themselves a consciousness of the importance of the land in Inuit society. Because it is sometimes difficult for people--especially young people--to really understand what the elders are telling them, some special training might be needed to help people listen to and comprehend what the elders are saying. In a similar manner, after elders are consulted about how they may wish to participate in the consultations, orientation sessions might be provided to help them better understand the linkages between their experiences and the development of a public government.

**Special Events.** In addition to community consultations there would be a series of special events. These would take place on a regional or territorial level, and would be more technical in nature. For example, Inuit leaders might sponsor a series of conferences on subjects like self-government, bioregionalism, language, youth, the role of elders in the new government-- or on issue-related subjects such as healing, learning and the economy. The leadership might invite other indigenous peoples or resource people with special expertise to participate in these events and share their experiences and wisdom. Special research projects might be undertaken. And, as information begins to emerge out of the process, there will undoubtedly be a need for Inuit leaders and policy makers to come together to explore new ways of creating policy, developing or modifying systems, and re-structuring departments of government.

It would be essential, throughout the course of the consultation process, to document findings as they emerge and share them throughout Nunavut. Fortunately, the increasing use of electronic technology throughout Nunavut will greatly facilitate this process.

### **Time Requirements: Two Years**

I would anticipate that the process described above would likely take most of two years.

- 4 months for the initial planning and consultation to set up the process
- 12 months for the community consultations and special events
- 6 months to consolidate and synthesize the vision, values, principles and criteria and develop a transitional plan.

Making the transition--creating new form of public government-- will take continual work over a number of years. Though this might seem like a long period of time, it is a very short period of time when compared to the history of the Inuit and their future. And the stakes are very high.

In the final section of this essay, I will make a few concluding comments words about making the transition.

## **PART SIX MAKING THE TRANSITION**

*"On the way to the moon the Apollo astronauts made tiny 'mid-course corrections' that enabled them to land at an exact predetermined spot. The corrections were small but because the moon was far away they made a big difference. It is like that with us. Some of the changes we make in society, in our lives, in our organizations seem insignificant, but over the years they can have major impact."*

Edward B. Lindaman and Ronald Lippitt<sup>17</sup>

Given the need for the significant change of direction I have outlined in the preceding pages, it might seem strange to start the final section of this paper talking about "tiny mid course corrections." But it's not, really.

Once the proper program was fed into the NASA computers and the computer in the space capsule, the overall direction was set. From there it was a series of minor changes to keep the capsule on track.

---

<sup>17</sup> Edward B. Lindaman and Ronald Lippitt, *Choosing the Future You Prefer*, Development Publications, Washington, 1979 p. 4--as quoted by Marvin Weisbord, in *Productive Workplaces: Organizing and Managing for Dignity, Meaning and Community*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco 1987 p. 281

In like manner: once the leaders of Nunavut make the major decision to found their government on the traditional relationship of the people with their land (instead of on southern-based models of public government); and once they hold a series of consultations at all levels of Nunavut society to develop a vision, values and criteria; and once they formally decide to adopt the resulting vision, values and criteria as the framework for their new government and their direction for the future--well, this is like typing the right program into the computer. The direction is set. From there on it's a large number of smaller changes--adapting, transforming or recreating the forms, systems, structures and policies and programs of public government.

To those directly involved in creating the new form of public government, the ideas and suggestions in this paper might seem hopelessly unrealistic. As I noted earlier in this paper, they are "up to their asses in alligators, " with demands coming at them from every direction, and not nearly enough money to do what has to be done. The task might seem impossible. But if one pauses for a moment to put the task in the context of the Inuit culture and traditions, a different perspective begins to emerge.

The creation of public government is a critical development in the history of the Inuit. But if one looks backwards, one sees many critical developments in the four thousand-year-old history of the Inuit and their relationship to this land. This is only the latest "critical development." If one looks forward into the future--who knows how many years the public government the Inuit are now creating will have to serve their needs. Will it be for the next hundred years, five hundred years, a thousand years?

We don't know. But when we look upon the present task of creating a form of public government in terms of both the past and the future, we realize how important that task is.

We realize that decisions made within the next few years will have implications for many generations to come. It will be possible to make modifications along the way--but this is the time when the vision gets fed into the computer and the direction is set for the trip into the future. The decisions made now will affect generations--perhaps many generations--to come. This is the time when people must ask the critical questions.

***Will we model our government on other governments that surround us? Or will we create our own unique form of government--one that is modelled on the life-place relationship that we have always had with this land?***

There is an old Chinese proverb: "If we don't change directions, we are going to end up where we are headed." This essay has put forward the position that leaders and people of Nunavut need to chart a new course--that the present course is a necessary "holding action" but, if it is pursued over an extended period of time, it will inevitably lead to a form of public government that is very much like every other form of public government. It will not produce a form of government that truly reflects the Inuit

culture and traditions because it will not be founded on the unique relationship that the Inuit have with their land.

This essay also argues that there is still time to change direction. It recommends a Nunavut wide consultation based upon a new model--the Life-place Model-- facilitated through a new understanding of Inuit self-government.

Finally, this essay argues that such a change of direction is "do-able". Though Nunavut represents a huge geographical region, it is a tiny government in terms of the number of its residents, and the size of its structures, systems, staff, and budget.

The real challenge is the willingness of the people and leaders of Nunavut to chart a new direction. It is a great challenge. And the only map into the future is the one that exists within them--within their consciousness of a special relationship with the land they have called "Nunavut" for 4,000 years.

## About The Author

**Mike Bell** is a management consultant working out of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. His interest in community and organizational development in cross-cultural contexts extends over four decades.

Mike began his career as a Roman Catholic priest. During his years of training he worked as a volunteer in poverty programs in the inner cities of New York and other American cities in the Eastern United States. From 1967-69 he served as a student chaplain at the International Cite de Paris, a large international student campus with students from forty different nations. During the student riots that broke out in May of 1968, he helped students develop emergency programs to respond to the upheavals in French society.

In the early 70s, after leaving the priesthood, he worked for a number of years as a street-worker and community organizer in Milwaukee's East Side counter culture community. Most of his work was directed toward helping community groups establish street-level programs related to the drug culture. In 1975 Mike and his family moved to Northern British Columbia where he assisted residents in the resource communities of Houston and Granisle develop and run community health centres.

From 1980-1983, Mike served as the Superintendent of Social Services on Baffin Island in the Northwest Territories. Much of his work involved the training of Inuit social workers and assisting community residents to develop service committees. In the mid-1980s he moved to Yellowknife and held several senior management positions with The Department of Social Services and with the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation.

In 1986, Mike established his consulting firm, **Inukshuk Management Consultants**. Over the past thirteen years he has been involved in a wide variety of community development projects both in Nunavut and in the Western Arctic. Most of his work is with aboriginal organizations, community groups and government departments.

Mike has a Masters Degree in Theology from St. Paul's University in Ottawa and Masters Degree in Communications from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He is presently writing a book of essays and stories entitled, *The Inukshuk Chronicles: Perspectives on Communities and Organizations as Part of a Living Universe*.

Mike welcomes any comments readers might have on this essay.