

A Dream Called Nunavut

Felipe Soto Anaya*

The list of this century's most important political events—the majority regional and international wars—is still incomplete. The year 1999 will have its milestone: the world map will change once again, but this time not because of the break-up of a nation caused by the distension that emerged from the end of the Cold War, or because of the many inter-ethnic civil wars that have made us witness to the birth of new countries, particularly in the last decade. A very special national event which undoubtedly will have worldwide repercussions is approaching, the result of the process of maturation of political relations between Canada's government and one of its indigenous peoples.

The birth of a third official territory will forever change the map of Canada. It will conclude a long but successful, peaceful negotiation process between the Canadian federal government and the Inuit people (wrongly called "Eskimos"), almost forgotten by the rest of the country, perhaps because of their distance or the great differences between their way of life and that of the majority of the Canadian population.

As of April 1, 1999, Nunavut is the new home of the Inuit who live today in the eastern part of the Northwest Territories. It will contrast in important ways with the other provinces and terri-



Nunavut, a hope for new Inuit generations.

tries of the country. Nunavut—which in Inuktit, the Inuit language, means "Our Land"—is not only the largest sub-national entity in Canada, but in the entire hemisphere, and is the first Canadian autonomous territory with an indigenous self-government.

Nunavut comes out not only of the urgent need to restructure relations between the federal government and the indigenous groups who live in the country's Arctic northeast, but also of the national clamor for breaking with the federal government's anachronistic, paternalistic model of social policy. For decades, this model has been a heavy fiscal burden for society at large in the southern part of the country and has created a harmful dependence of the indigenous

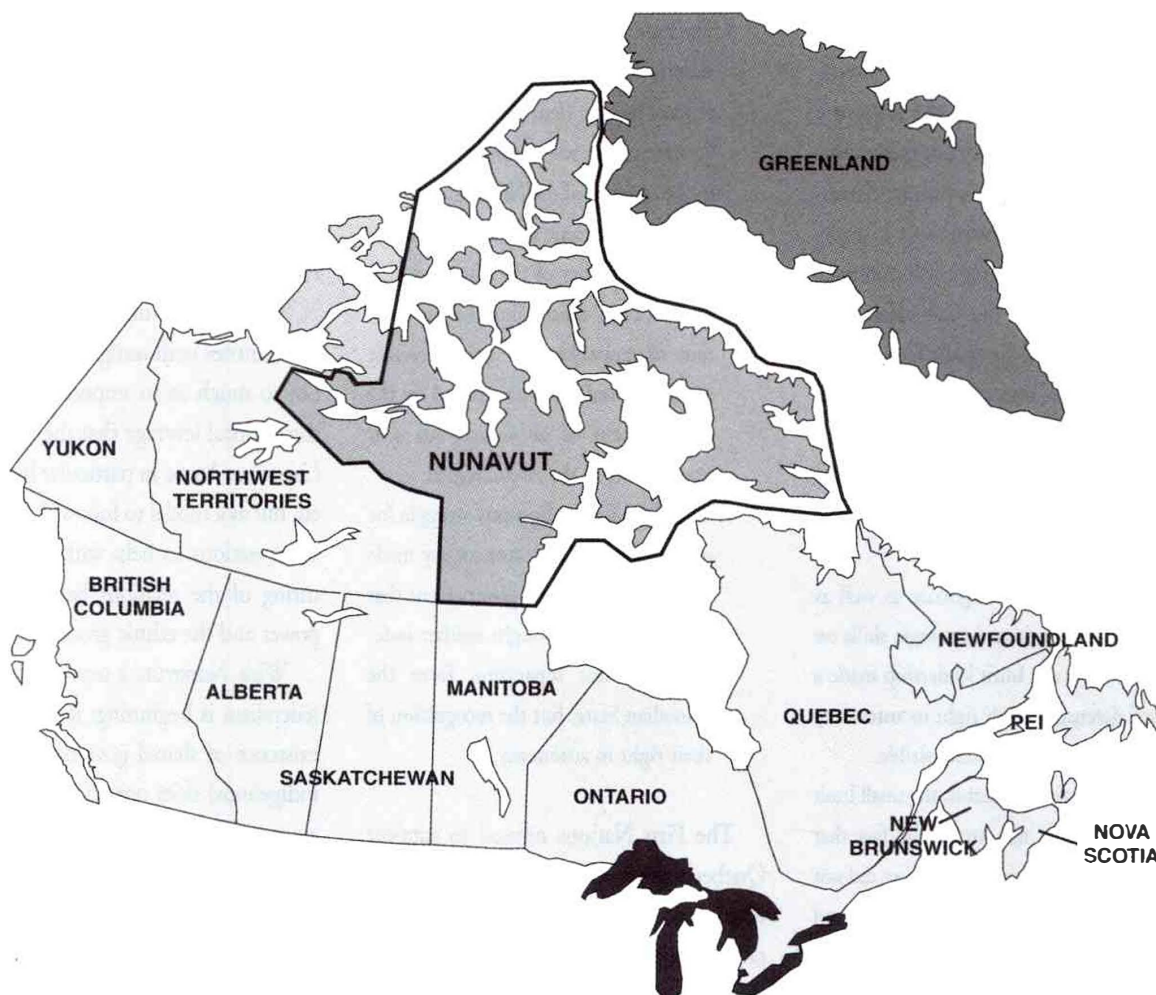
peoples on public funds, which has mutilated the aspirations and will of the inhabitants of the Canadian Arctic.

For the last 50 years, the Inuit Arctic community suffered under an immense wave of colonialism with military, commercial and religious aims that broke the equilibrium and stability in which these peoples had lived for more than 4,000 years. This, together with high tech capitalism, industrialization, etc., led the government to decide unilaterally that the "savage" inhabitants of the polar region were very ignorant and therefore did not deserve to possess and live in a territory so rich in natural resources, much less to allow them to control and benefit from those resources. For that reason, official policy proclaimed that they should be assimilated into the Western way of life, economic model and "morals." In 1953, many Inuit communities were relocated (a euphemism for deportation) in order to populate certain areas of the Arctic that the government considered a priority.¹

Despite the rigors of the climate, before the arrival of the Euro-Canadian colonizers, the Inuit had never known hunger, poverty (in cultural terms), social imbalances, chronic diseases, family violence or the loss of their language, their values or their traditions.² The social costs the Inuit have had to pay as a consequence of the cultural offensive have been very high. Prolonged government policy with an eye to Inuit assimilation and the extinc-

* Mexican political scientist, specialist in international relations.

Nunavut Territory in Canada



Source: *Nunavut. Our Land, Our People* (Nunavut, Canada: Nortext Multimedia Inc., 1993), p. 4.

tion of their own spirituality, as well as the progressive substitution of values has damaged the indigenous Arctic community.

The creation of Nunavut is not the magic solution to the Arctic's socioeconomic situation, but it is the opportunity—through the first self-government of an indigenous majority in the country's history—to recover experiences, traditions and values that guaranteed the stability and harmony of the inhabitants of that part of our planet for thousands of years.

Advances in societies' health and well being are achieved and consolidated when all their structures—social, economic and cultural—are perfected. The majority indigenous government will write a new Nunavut Constitution and legislation in accordance with traditional indigenous parameters in matters of politics, the economy, health, education, justice, etc.

Generally speaking, Nunavut is the product of a political and territorial agreement between the Canadian government and the indigenous groups who live in the Canadian Arctic. That agreement gives

the Inuit the right to political autonomy within a predetermined geographic space. It is the conclusion of all the territorial claims and it gives the right to possess that space as well as the renewable and non-renewable natural resources to be found in the soil and the subsoil of certain pre-established areas.³

The final Nunavut accord was not the result of the mere bureaucratic procedure or a quest for power by a specific political group. It was, rather, the fruit of 25 years of negotiations between the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, their representative

body, and the federal government. The accord stipulates the awarding of a sum of Can\$1.12 billion⁴ so that the Inuit population in the new territory has the financial resources to create the structure necessary to efficiently carry out the administrative functions under a public, democratic, decentralized government in a territory of 2.2 million square kilometers.

During the talks, the Canadian government recognized six main factors that made it possible to come to political agreements with the Inuit Arctic groups and negotiate a just territorial and political reintegration:

1. A marked will to negotiate as well as solid diplomatic and strategic skills on the part of the Inuit leadership made a real defense of their right to autonomy and self-determination possible.
2. Distance, climatic factors, the small Inuit population in the Arctic, the fact that the indigenous Nunavut project did not seek independence from Canada, and the government's need to show, exercise and maintain its presence in the region were all determining factors in making the Inuits' political-territorial negotiations move forward in different ways and at a different pace from those of the rest of the First Nations in Canada.
3. The degree of consensus and unity among the Inuit leadership guaranteed not only continuity of the process, but also made it very clear to the federal government that under absolutely no circumstances nor given any other offer would the Arctic First Nations renounce their political-territorial claims.
4. The signing of important national and international accords on indigenous autonomy and rights were important fac-

tors in favorably advancing and concluding the Nunavut project.

5. The Inuit autonomy movement acquired validity and legitimacy given two important factors: first, the vote in a public referendum was absolutely favorable to the creation of the Nunavut territory and self-government; secondly, the seriousness and viability of the Nunavut project proposals, which stated that exploitation of renewable and non-renewable resources would not be affected by the establishment of an indigenous self-government in the Arctic region.
6. The Canadian indigenous struggle for recognition as a different society made it clear to the federal government that the First Nations sought neither independence nor separation from the Canadian State, but the recognition of their right to autonomy.⁵

The First Nations refused to support Quebec independence at the Charlottetown and Meech Lake constitutional talks, and the Inuit made statements to the effect that those of them who live in northern Quebec, in the Nunavik region, would unify with Nunavut if Quebec separated from the Canadian State. Both these positions reduced the political turbulence that could have led to the total rejection of the Nunavut project to a simple debate about self-determination of the Arctic indigenous groups.

Nunavut is much more than a simple indigenous territory with an autonomous government. It is a prototype of political progress and the result of the merger of ancient and modern forms of doing politics. Inuit society must find the ways forward to achieve the equilibrium of this amalgam.

Undeniably, the international indigenous community always shares the same fate and the same objectives: political autonomy and self-government to recover traditions and values⁶ regardless of the enormous cultural differences that may exist among the First Nations who inhabit Canada, Mexico, Brazil, the Philippines, Finland, etc.

The case of Nunavut can be taken up by countries with indigenous populations, not so much as an important example of the political leverage that the Inuits of the Canadian Arctic in particular have achieved, but as a model to follow that may serve other nations to help with a real restructuring of the relations between those in power and the ethnic groups there.

With Nunavut, a new phase of world federalism is beginning; it shows that the existence of shared governments (federal-indigenous) does not endanger the sovereignty of a nation-state like Canada. At the same time, it is no longer possible, particularly in countries like Mexico, to put off opening up new avenues for democracy that truly recognize the right of indigenous peoples to practice their traditional forms of government within the territorial base that has always belonged to them. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *The High Arctic Relocation* (Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1994), p. 7.

² Diane Engelstad and John Bird, *Nation to Nation, Aboriginal Sovereignty and the Future of Canada* (Concord: House of Anans Press Ltd., 1992), p. 14.

³ Nunavut Implementation Commission, *Footprints in New Snow* (Ottawa: Bradda Printing Services Inc., 1995), p. A-22.

⁴ Tungavik Federation of Nunavut, *Our Land, Our Future* (Ottawa: TFN, 1990).

⁵ Ovide Mercredi and Ellen Trupell, *In the Rapids* (Toronto: Penguin Books, Canada Ltd., 1993), p. 189.

⁶ Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *People to People, Nation to Nation: Highlights from the Report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa: RCAP, 1977).