

Commentary: The North in a Renewed Canada

On 22 January 1992, Cynthia Hill, Chair of the Arctic Institute Board of Directors, Board member Robert Blair and Executive Director Mike Robinson attended the hearings of the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and of the House of Commons on a Renewed Canada in Edmonton, Alberta. This federal committee was formed in September 1991 to review the Government of Canada's constitutional proposals set out in a discussion paper entitled Shaping Canada's Future Together. On behalf of the Arctic Institute of North America, Cynthia Hill presented the following statement to the committee.

The Arctic Institute, founded by an Act of Parliament in 1945, has contributed 47 years of research and publication to the international record of northern science. The Institute continues to develop unique community-based research projects with northerners, focusing on language and culture, traditional justice, land claims issues, land use planning, and science, including climate change, biology, and glaciology. As a result of this experience as Canada's oldest northern research institution, we are here to share with you our thoughts about how much the North has evolved and how important it is to understand the social and political dimensions of this change in terms of a renewed Canada and constitutional evolution.

Our presentation today will make three key points:

- 1) Since Confederation the Arctic has been vitally associated with our Canadian identity, both at home and abroad;
- 2) while the vast northern landscape remains essentially unchanged in geographic terms, its population has made enormous strides as a result of public education, local government development, and the settlement or near settlement of major land claims;
- 3) when constitutional change is considered by the South it must be done with full consideration of the North — and include full participation by northerners in not only the process of change but also with ongoing implementation.

Let me speak to you briefly on the basis of my personal experience as a long-term northern resident, educator, past mayor of Inuvik, mother of two daughters, and wife of a northern businessman. When we first went North in 1963, there were few local grade 12 graduates in the Northwest Territories. The oil and gas boom in the Inuvik region was barely in its infancy, and many Inuvialuit, Gwich'in and other Dene families still lived off the land. There was no Dempster Highway from the South, Tuktoyaktuk was a small, traditional settlement, and TV satellite dishes and VCRs were unknown. Our Member of Parliament was non-Native, our legislative assembly was non-existent, and we were ruled by a committee of appointed commissioners, all men, based in Ottawa. Responsible government was a concept, not a reality.

What a change in a quarter of a century! There are now 500 northern students in Alberta alone taking post-secondary courses at universities, law schools, technical institutes, and junior colleges. There is an aboriginal majority in the NWT Legislative Assembly in Yellowknife, 18 out of 24 MLAs are of aboriginal descent, and the Government Leader, The Honorable Nellie Cournoyea, is from Tuktoyaktuk. The Inuvialuit comprehensive land claim was settled in 1984 and the Gwich'in and Nunavut claims are about to pass into federal legislation. The first-generation oil and gas boom has come and gone, and an oil pipeline is operating from Norman Wells to Alberta. Many aboriginal entrepreneurs learned their craft during these boom years and now supply a wide variety of services to northerners. Every household in Inuvik seems to have a VCR and we have the opportunity to buy fresh fruit and vegetables from a truck that makes regular trips up the Dempster Highway as well as from the Northern Stores. I sometimes wonder how so much change has happened and am impressed at the ability of all northerners to adapt to so many new and different waves of technology, industry, and government.

Let me emphasize that a major legacy of the land claim settlements and the progress of public education has been a transfer of power. Aboriginal control over land, land claims, land title, and shared responsibility in the new co-management regimes for renewable and non-renewable resources are facts.

The North is no longer to be considered just a "bread basket" for the South, and southern Canadians can no longer assume northern compliance with southern desires. Simply put, all northerners want inclusion in all national decisions that affect them.

At the Arctic Institute this new reality has greatly enriched our research projects. We engage in joint ventures, by invitation, with northern communities. We work with northerners to study northern issues and concerns. Our researchers routinely train themselves out of their jobs by training northern residents to conduct their own archival, social science, and curriculum research. We welcome the emergence of this new community-based research relationship and are proud of our contributions to these positive developments.

I want to speak briefly about the international view of Canada and the importance of the North in shaping our total Canadian identity. Many Arctic Institute board members travel widely to conduct their business and government affairs. When they speak of their voluntary role with the Institute they evoke strong

emotions in their listeners. The rest of the world has a great deal of admiration for Canada as a tolerant, humane middle power. Our struggles as a nation to accord aboriginal people with constitutional protection of their rights, to settle land claims, and to preserve traditional language and knowledge are carefully watched by parliamentarians, academics, civil rights groups, business leaders, and members of the general public throughout the world. Many people in the industrialized first world marvel at the existence of a Group of Seven nation where a significant amount of the land mass is beneficially occupied by aboriginal people. So as we rethink and debate the merits of our Constitution, and consider a renewed Canada, we must not lose sight of the present reality and our northern ancestry as a nation.

I would like to conclude by urging the Committee on a Renewed Canada to maintain a broad vision of our national identity. We are a northern country, not just an urban strip of population ranging from Victoria to St. John's within 200 miles of the American border. We have a strong northern heritage. We must not succumb to a process of constitutional change that does not take into account our northern history, northern aspirations, and the need for northern involvement.

Cynthia C. Hill
Chair, Board of Directors
The Arctic Institute of North America

This column, formerly called Guest Editorial, will now be called Commentary to more accurately reflect its nature as a vehicle for *Arctic* readers to express an opinion on contemporary issues of northern interest. Readers are encouraged to submit potential commentaries to the Editor for consideration.