

HANDOUT 2.4: Nunavut Government Overview

The High Arctic was first explored and settled approximately 12,000 years ago, first in the Bering Strait region, and thousands of years later, further east in what is now known as Nunavut. Inuit in Nunavut already had a vibrant culture and social norms by the time the **Qallunaat** (non-Inuit, often Europeans) arrived. Before European colonization, Inuit lived and shared responsibilities with other families in temporary camps, and moved around the territory based on the season. Decision-making was informal and consensual: men and women discussed critical issues and came to decisions together. Elders were trusted advisors and consulted on important decisions. These Inuit traditions, known as **Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit** (IQ), are still used in Nunavut as the foundation of today's societal values and cultural principles.

In 1576, the British explorer Martin Frobisher established the first recorded contact with the local Inuit population while searching for the Northwest Passage, but it was not until two hundred years later that the territory was permanently colonized. While English whalers entered Nunavut's bays to hunt and trade European goods with Inuit, diseases were also spread throughout the territory, resulting in the significant decline of Inuit population. The growing presence of European trade changed Inuit traditional lifestyle drastically. Many Inuit settled more permanently near trade stations, and modified their migration patterns, relying less and less on hunting and fishing to live.

The *Indian Act* of 1876 clearly established First Nations as the responsibility of the federal government. However, Inuit were never formally included in this legislation despite being impacted by its policies. Protestant and Catholic churches also received federal government support to 'integrate' Inuit into Canadian culture and to spread their Christian values. Residential schools appeared in the territories during the beginning of the twentieth century. The Ministry of Northern Affairs, and later territorial governments, managed the residential schools that housed First Nations, Métis and Inuit children. Some communities had day schools instead of boarding schools, where children could go home at the end of each day. This system still affected families negatively as they were forced to settle permanently in communities and prevented them from maintaining semi-nomadic lifestyles. Children were often subjected to mental and physical abuse, and the trauma from those experiences still affects victims and their descendants to this day.

Foreign powers explored the High Arctic more frequently during and after the Second World War, prompting the Canadian federal government to develop strategic interest in the northern territories. To protect Canada's sovereignty, the Canadian government increased its military presence and relocated nearly 90 Inuit from Inukjuak, Nunavik (in northern Québec) to northern Nunavut. These displaced Inuit received few supplies and possessed limited knowledge of their new

land and its ecosystem. One of the main goals of this relocation was to establish a permanent human presence in the High Arctic with people used to create a border as 'human flag poles.' This relocation led to the creation of the communities of Grise Fiord and Resolute Bay.

In the early 1950s, the slaughter of hundreds of **qimmiit** (sled dogs) profoundly affected Inuit lifestyle and their capacity to be self-reliant on their territory. Qimmiit served many purposes over the centuries, including travelling short and long distances, protecting hunters from predators, and assisting with trapping and hunting. In the 20th century, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) established laws and policies to control and manage qimmiit. Dogs who did not obey these rules were unnecessarily killed. As a result, many Inuit were left without their main mode of transportation and primary tool for hunting and trapping. This increased dependency on store-bought food and further isolated Inuit from one another. Inuit had access to services such as social welfare and government-funded housing, but with the prolonged presence of settlers on the territory, the disturbance of Inuit traditional lifestyle, and residential school abuse, profound and prolonged trauma has left its mark.

Nunavut Land Claim Agreement and the *Nunavut Act*

In the 1970s, Inuit across the Canadian Arctic started to organize themselves to claim more autonomy and independence. The Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, an organization representing Inuit in Canada, proposed the creation of a separate territory in the eastern Arctic that would be controlled by Inuit. The proposal was negotiated between several groups, and following a plebiscite in 1982, an agreement-in-principle was signed in 1990 and ratified in 1993.

The *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement* (NCLA) granted Inuit rights to hunt, fish and trap throughout their ancestral territory, as well as financial compensation and control over a portion of the land. The NCLA also provided greater autonomy in education, governance and community management, allowing Inuit to govern themselves as freely as possible under the Canadian government's supervision. Alongside the NCLA, the Nunavut Act officially divided the Northwest Territories in two, with the eastern portion to become Nunavut. Nunavut held its first territorial election on February 15, 1999, established its legislative assembly, and separated from the Northwest Territories two months later. Inuit now have guaranteed participation in the decision-making process about policies affecting the territory and its communities. Since the creation of the territory, the government of Nunavut is guided by Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ) principles. The Legislative Assembly, as well as every territorial department, must respect the IQ principles and integrate them into day-to-day operations.