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THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

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Make indigenous people stewards of the North

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Climate change, pollution, sovereignty in the Northwest Passage – in her 2009 LaFontaine-Baldwin lecture presented in Iqaluit, Inuit activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier says her region has many problems and only one solution. Let the people whose past is there decide the Arctic's future

I believe that Canada's responses to the many pressing concerns now facing the Arctic will be telling of the sort of democracy we will become in this still-new millennium. Canada is an Arctic nation, and the region serves as nexus to the rest of the world.

As the residents of this special place, Inuit occupy a unique position in Canadian and world affairs, and we have come to a turning point in our own development as a people. Today, I hope to walk you through our Arctic story, describing the challenges we have faced and continued to confront, along with the remarkable successes we have achieved. Lastly, I will speak on where I hope we as people and Canada as a democracy will go from here.

I will begin with the Inuit story. We are a uniquely adaptable people. We have weathered the storm of modernization here in the North remarkably well, going from dog teams and igloos to snowmobiles, jumbo jets, permanent homes and even supermarket-like stores, all within the past 50 years. These enormous changes to our communities were often accompanied by a great imbalance, a loss of control over our lives from multiple historical traumas.

Many families were forcibly relocated to new communities in the name of sovereignty. Our children were uprooted from their families and culture to be reprogrammed. Children and family members were sent away for medical reasons never to be seen again. Our dogs, deeply central to our free

movement and hunting, were slaughtered by southerners who did not understand this relationship and who hoped to keep us in place. Sexual abuse occurred from those in authority positions. Regulations and activism from actors who had never even visited our communities caused a collapse in our sealskin market.

All of these made up a serious failure of our democracy to advance the public good. Together, these traumatic events have deeply wounded and dispirited many, translating into a “collective pain” of families, communities and nations. Substance abuse, health problems and, most distressing, the loss of so many of our people to suicide have been among the saddest results.

But through all of this, we have had our land, our predictable environment and climate and the wisdom our hunters and elders have gained from it over millennia to help us adapt. However, things are not so predictable as they used to be, as climate change challenges even the most experienced hunters in our society.

‘LAND IS A POWERFUL PLACE’

We remain a hunting people of the land, ice and snow. The process of the hunt teaches our young people to be patient, courageous, bold under pressure and reflective. The nature of the land is a powerful place that one learns to control one's impulses, to be reflective, to withstand stress, to have sound judgment and ultimately wisdom. In a world that has all too often become filled with noise and business, it gives you a sense of peace and well-being, connecting powerfully to one's identity and essence.

This culture, however, is not only used for survival on the land – these crucial life skills and wisdom are very transferable in the modern world. Many who have acquired these traditional skills and continue to practise them are the members of our community who in large part are also “making it” in the modern world. One way of life is not at a cost to the other. In fact, one who has and carries the values, principles, traditions and the wisdom of our culture are more able to balance more effectively the two worlds.

Our need to learn and live these skills and this culture is why, for us, environmental changes caused by faraway sources pose such a challenge to our success as an indigenous people.

Transboundary contaminants, the persistent organic pollutants and other compounds that are carried north on the winds and ocean currents from their sources of production in our globalizing economy far to the south came to accumulate here in the bodies of our animals and country food. Taken up through our traditional subsistence diet, the chemicals are found in the nursing milk of our mothers, and impact us far more than any other people in the world. For us Inuit, it is foremost a health issue, not just an environmental concern.

Climate change has also added a new layer of stress and uncertainty to our lives here as the nations of the world have turned their eyes north to the newly open shipping routes and vast resources appearing from beneath our melting lands and ice. Routine shipping through the Northwest Passage would be an environmental tragedy, both as clear evidence that climate change was allowed to go too far, and because of the constant possibility of oil spills and further contamination of our delicate ecosystems.

As nations speak of developing the North, many, including our own, have begun to posture and threaten, asserting their claims to Arctic sovereignty. Too often, these claims lose sight of the fact that the Arctic is not some frozen barren wasteland but a rich, warm world full of life, people and culture.

Perhaps more than any of these other problems for our people, climate change and its many effects threatens the memory of where we were, who we are, and all that we wish to become. If we protect the environment and climate of the Arctic, keep our Inuit hunting culture alive and stay connected to the rhythms and cycles of nature, we will as a people, and as Canadians, prevail and thrive.

When I speak of these many traumas and challenges, I do so not to say that we as a people have a right to continue to struggle to fulfill our great potential, or that we need government to support us as a wounded or dependent people. I say these things merely to help you to understand our situation and to appreciate all the more the remarkable successes we have enjoyed despite these challenges as a proud and resilient people. We do not need our government to support us as dependents, but Canada must work with us to develop our potential for the good of our communities, our region and our world.

'REACHED OUT TO WARN THE WORLD'

Our successes have not only been among developing our own young people, but also in reaching out to the rest of the world. Our organizations, particularly the Inuit Council, have had remarkable successes in sharing our institutional knowledge with other indigenous peoples around the world. Just as our Inuit culture is based on sharing, we shared our experience from our land-claims negotiating days, developing and running our own businesses, working with government of co-management regimes, administrative skills, fundraising etc., and we share all this with indigenous peoples from Russia to Belize with remarkable results.

As well, as responsible sentinels of rapid environmental change that we so often observe in the Arctic, we have reached out to warn the world and spur peoples and nations to action.

When the problem of contaminants became apparent, our organizations took strong, co-ordinated action. I was honoured to serve as the spokesperson for a coalition of Northern indigenous peoples at the forefront of advocacy for the Stockholm Convention that addressed these transboundary contaminants. In that process, we shared our knowledge, combined with the best science, and together we showed the world the human face of a devastating problem. Our coalition built partnerships with environmental and conservation groups as well as less likely allies like government agencies and industry; met with leaders of foreign governments; and lobbied our own governments at all levels. We actively engaged in the international negotiations as well, putting the human face of the issue front and centre and using our deep familiarity with the problem and unique voice from a unique vantage point to help lead the negotiations toward a successful resolution.

As well, we have taken strong action on climate change, working to shift the paradigm of the world's thinking on these issues from one of economics and technical science to human impacts, human rights and human development.

As many of you remember, in December, 2005, we submitted a climate-change-related petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. To prepare the petition, we engaged a team that spanned North America, with our own counsel and advisers in the North and legal scholars from the U.S. We sought a declaration that the destruction of the Arctic environment and the culture and economy of Inuit as a result of virtually unrestricted emissions of greenhouse gases by the United States was violating our human rights as guaranteed by the 1948 American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man, including the rights to subsistence, to use our traditional lands, to our culture and environment.

The purpose of the petition was to educate and encourage the government of the United States to join the community of nations in a global campaign to combat climate change. It was not aggressive or

confrontational. We were reaching out, not striking out. In a very real sense our petition was a “gift” from Inuit hunters and elders to the world. It was an act of generosity from an ancient culture deeply tied to the natural environment and still in tune with its wisdom, to an urban, industrial, and “modern” culture that has largely lost its sense of place and position in the natural world.

‘RETAKING A PRINCIPLED PATH’

I believe we helped to influence what was already starting in the U.S. – a real shift in the public debate on climate change. Our message has resonated with the rest of the world as well; the United Nations Human Rights Council has recognized climate change as a human-rights issue for all indigenous peoples. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has taken up our call and now argues that, as we address climate change over the coming decades, we must use a human-rights approach to empower individuals and communities, and give all those affected active participation in the decision-making that affects their lives. It appears that the wisdom of the land, once heard, strikes a universal chord on a planet where many are searching for a balance in sustainability.

All of these successes remind us just how far Inuit have come as a people in this new world, and of the vast potential that remains among us as Northerners, as Inuit, as Canadians and as global citizens.

I see several important roles for Northerners, and for all of our Canadian democracy, in securing the future of our Arctic and for retaking a principled path. First, we must now demand that our government take bold, courageous, principled action both on the international stage, and on balanced, sustainable development at home in the Arctic. Our politicians, both in their domestic decisions and their role in global negotiations, are who we need to count on to represent us in the most focused and ethical way.

As a wealthy nation with a privileged history, we have an obligation to lead on the global stage. Our government must return to the international negotiating table that it left years ago when we turned our back on the Kyoto Protocol. We must retake the moral high ground if we have any hope of convincing other nations to reduce their own emissions.

As part of this process, we must encourage our government to make use of the voices of indigenous and vulnerable communities the world around, the human faces of climate change, in the negotiations for a successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol that will hopefully conclude this December in Copenhagen. This treaty may well offer the last best hope for us to come together to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions before the changes spiral beyond our control.

MORE THAN WINDOW DRESSING

In this effort, Northern cultures must be more than simply window dressing for the interests that too often control our development decisions and international negotiating positions. Rather, informing these decisions and positions with the wisdom of Northern cultures must be part of a broad-based, principled rethinking on our national approach.

Within Canada, our government must follow a different path in responding to climate change in the Arctic. As the world is once again attracted to the Arctic's resources, again our government's decisions are affecting Inuit. As the Northwest Passage sea-ice coverage is lost, Canada is pressed to defend its sovereignty over the fabled passage. As Inuit know, the sea ice, including the land-fast ice that covers much of the passage, has offered our hunting culture a stable platform for untold generations. That ice also offers the best defence against ships attempting the faster route.

Slowing down climate change would be the best long-term solution to enforcing Canada's Arctic sovereignty. Instead of aggressively facing climate change and becoming an international leader, however, Canada has decided that the best way to defend its sovereignty from foreign ships running the passage is with our military and a new fleet of armed icebreakers. Canada, a peaceful nation, will now "defend" the Arctic. We will posture and even threaten those who attempt a free passage through our islands.

Canada should take another approach – a more principled and human-centred approach. As my good friend and a great Canadian Lloyd Axworthy has advocated, and as I have suggested before, Canada should take the lead in the peaceful, co-operative management of the Arctic, perhaps by means of new multilateral institutions, or a greatly expanded rôle for the Arctic Council.

I believe we must work hard to avoid creating yet another region where relationships between nations are tense with strife and fear. The Arctic is one of the last peaceful and pristine places in the world. We all must realize that thriving, human communities will speak more strongly to our Arctic sovereignty than any fleet of icebreakers or barracks full of soldiers.

While I acknowledge our government's new campaign abroad to show that we Inuit have an ancient and established culture already in place here in the Arctic, this campaign abroad must be matched by real action here at home to empower us as the best possible stewards of this land. How can Canada ensure the peaceful use of the Arctic and respect of human rights in the circumpolar North?

I propose revitalizing an old idea with a "made-in-Canada" notion that was born in our Northern land claims. Recognizing the importance of the Arctic for the planet, and the historical stewardship of indigenous peoples over the Arctic ecosystem, consider an Arctic treaty that charges circumpolar indigenous people with the stewardship of the Arctic for the continued benefit of humankind. International co-management boards would integrate traditional and scientific knowledge to ensure sound and peaceful management of the Arctic's natural resources.

This model would represent a significant change from our nation's current "use it or lose it" philosophy to Arctic development, and instead embrace the vision of a sustainable Arctic economy in partnership with a carefully managed Arctic ecosystem. This vision has been embraced at a UN gathering of nations in Iceland, which found that the Arctic nations either need to begin fulfilling their stewardship obligations, or that a whole new treaty system may be necessary for Arctic preservation. Inuit have much to offer our fellow Canadians, and are ideally positioned to show the world a model of sustainable development and environmental management in the region that connects all nations around the globe.

'REFUSE DANGEROUS COMPROMISES'

As wise stewards of our land, my own people must refuse the dangerous compromises between our principles and our development that may diminish our own moral high ground. As we call on the world to change its ecologically degrading practices, we must not accept those practices at home no matter how desperate our need for short-term jobs or economic development. Economic gain must not override the existence and well-being of a whole people whose way of life is already monumentally taxed. We must not let the prospect of development in the Arctic diminish our ability and our region's ability to teach the "life-centred sustainability" that Arctic people have practised for millennia. The people whose lives depend upon the ice and snow for cultural survival must be factored into all our plans, and this must not become a discussion only in terms of sovereignty, resources, and economics.

I want to stress here that I am not saying we ought to halt economic development. Rather, we must retake real control over that development by insisting that every opportunity and program be analyzed

against its impact on our world; meaning the greenhouse gases it will emit, the unsustainable cycles it will feed and the lasting impact it will make on our delicate landscape and the health of our people.

This mature innovation, which recognizes the full costs and benefits behind our actions, can still produce healthy profits for our companies, industries and economies, but will do so in a manner far more sustainable than the thoughtless development of our past. Whenever we make development decisions, we should consider the implications of what we are doing, not only for ourselves and our future generations, but for all of those to whom we are connected by the world's common air and sea.

As we do so, we will ask those around the world, making similar decisions, to do the same for us. The balance, then, is really in understanding our interconnection with all of humanity, and working to ensure all of humanity understands that connection with us.

We cannot separate political and economic development in our communities from individual education and development. Every level of the systems here in the North must be directed to ensuring that indigenous wisdom along with global access and knowledge are the foundations of any sustainable endeavour. Inuit were once highly independent people with our own education, justice, health and social systems based upon indigenous knowledge and wisdom. Historically, our sustainable way of life was based upon developing the wisdom to see what needs to be done and then doing it. I believe we can return to this sustainable system, but we must do so by stepping away from dependency on our government; I hope that the rest of Canada will aid us in this effort.

This is Canada's moment to lead by example in all of these weighty efforts – to take a principled stance on the global stage. All Canadians must realize that it's only by thinking and acting globally that we'll be able to address these changes here at home. By setting an example at home, adhering to our principles and becoming wise stewards of our vast natural resources, we can motivate others.

I hope that our story from the North, and an awareness of the challenges ahead, give you some insights into how you might contribute to the public good through our democracy in your own way. I urge you each to take courageous, principled leadership to move our nation, and our world, forward as a shared humanity.

About the lecturer

Sheila (or Siila) Watt-Cloutier is an Officer of the Order of Canada and the first recipient of Canada's Northern Medal and was nominated for the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. From 1995 to 1998, she served as president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council. From 2002 to 2006, she was the international chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council. Most recently, she has focused on the impact of persistent organic pollutants and global climate change in the North.



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