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To melt, thaw, and resolve ourselves

by PETER JULL

Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies,
School of Political Science & International Studies
University of Queensland, Brisbane

The American election delayed release of the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment report, but its principal authors have spoken to the US Congress and its contents have been discussed in North American and world media. As the *Washington Post* reports (31-10-04), 'The most comprehensive international assessment of Arctic climate change has concluded that Earth's upper latitudes are experiencing unprecedented increases in temperature, glacial melting and weather pattern changes, with most of those changes attributable to the human generation of greenhouse gases from automobiles, power plants and other sources.) Temperatures in the Arctic have been rising much faster than in low or mid latitudes.

Canada's national *Globe & Mail* says 'The 1,400-page report, dubbed "the brick" by the more than 250 scientists working on the project, is to be released Nov. 9 in Reykjavik at a ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council. The council countries are Canada, Iceland, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Russia and the United States.' The report can be found at <http://amap.no/acia/>

Unlike the Antarctic, of course, the Arctic has permanent indigenous residents with rich stores of accumulated knowledge and observation of place and season, and languages expressing many nuances unknown among the European peoples who govern the nation-states which annexed their lands and seas. These peoples fear that it will not only be reindeer/caribou, polar bears, and walrus who become extinct.

This northern tier of peoples began to cooperate and meet as early as 1973, but the end of the Cold War eased and accelerated contact. They worked hard to interest national governments in the qualities of the Arctic as a coherent environment and region linked by ocean and prehistorical cultural currents. Eventually governments caught onto the idea. America's Arctic was primarily military-centred and even today Native Alaskans have to work hard at keeping governments mindful of their needs. On the other hand, Canada and the Nordic countries were accused of flippancy by some shrill American 'friends' when they opted to cooperate together rather than wait for America to become interested. If we had been 'realistic' and waited, of course, nothing would have happened.

Instead, over time the initiative of northern peoples, notably Inuit Alaskans, other Inuit, and Sami in Scandinavia, lured governments into the business of non-military active Arctic cooperation. The Arctic Council secretariat and chair rotates among member states, but indigenous peoples are a second tier, Permanent

But now, as *The Washington Post* (4-11-04) reports again,

The Bush administration has been working for months to keep an upcoming eight-nation report from endorsing broad policies aimed at curbing global warming, according to domestic and foreign participants, despite the group's conclusion that Arctic latitudes are facing historic increases in temperature, glacial melting and abrupt weather changes.

State Department representatives have argued that the group, which has spent four years examining Arctic climate fluctuations, lacks the evidence to prepare detailed policy proposals. But several participants in the negotiations, all of whom requested anonymity for fear of derailing the Nov. 24 report, said officials from the eight nations and six indigenous tribes [i.e., peoples] involved in the effort had ample science on which to draft policy.

The Canadian branch of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC), the international Inuit organisation, published the report's 10 key findings in its newsletter, *Silarjualiriniq*, available online. The ten points without most of their sub-points read:

- 1 Arctic climate is now warming rapidly and much larger changes are projected**
- 2 Arctic warming and its consequences have worldwide implications**
- 3 Arctic vegetation zones are projected to shift, bringing wide-ranging impacts**
- 4. Animal species' diversity, ranges, and distribution will change**
- 5 Many coastal communities and facilities face increasing exposure to storms**
- 6. Reduced sea ice is very likely to increase marine transport and access to resources**

(e.g., Sovereignty, security, and safety issues, as well as social, cultural, and environmental concerns are likely to arise as marine access increases.)
- 7. Thawing ground will disrupt transportation, buildings, and other infrastructure**
- 8. Indigenous communities are facing major economic and cultural impacts**
 - Many Indigenous Peoples depend on hunting polar bear, walrus, seals, and caribou, herding reindeer, fishing, and gathering, not only for food and to support the local economy, but also as the basis for cultural and social identity.
 - Changes in species' ranges and availability, access to these species, a perceived reduction in weather predictability, and travel safety in changing ice and weather conditions present serious challenges to human health and food security, and possibly even the survival of many cultures.
 - Indigenous knowledge and observations provide an important source of information about climate change. This knowledge, consistent with complementary information from scientific research, indicates that substantial changes have already occurred.
- 9. Elevated ultraviolet radiation levels will affect people, plants, and animals**
- 10. Multiple influences interact to cause impacts to people and ecosystems**

Or, as ICC head Sheila Watt-Cloutier has said, “We find ourselves at the very cusp of a defining event in the history of this planet... The Earth is literally melting.’ Yes, the permanently frozen Arctic tundra, and sea ice, are melting.

Despite the concern of scientists and officials around the world, the Bush Administration does not want to acknowledge the problems, despite their cumulative and dire global nature.

One may hope that Torres Strait Islanders and coastal Aboriginal peoples in Australia will be able to lend support to the Arctic peoples’ cause, as well as convincing governments at home that the Australian coasts also face problems. While national and state environmental officials and other researchers do good work, stressing bottom-up issues and imperatives, Canberra and state capitals usually end up chatting among themselves. They behave just like one would expect an industrial society to behave, with little or no commitment to coastal peoples apart from occasional unhelpful and hypocritical demands that they be more ‘self-reliant.’
