

Nunavut

On April first, Nunavut became a reality—the first change in Canada’s geopolitical boundaries since the 1949 addition of Newfoundland and Labrador. My wife Helen and I had the good fortune and honour to be present in Iqaluit for the celebrations, joining people from all over the North and other parts of Canada in recognition of this significant event. The excitement was palpable and infectious—the realization by the Inuit people of a dream long cherished but seemingly elusive. There was obvious pride of accomplishment among the leaders and perhaps some sense of surprise that all of the planning, negotiating and endless meetings had produced the desired result: Nunavut!

It was a moving experience to take part in the interdenominational church service the night before “Nunavut Day.” Inuktitut was the first language, but English and French were also fully used. The military’s Forward Operating Location hangers served as a wonderful resource for ceremonies attended by the Prime Minister, Governor General, Commissioner Helen Maksagak, Premier Paul Okalik, and many others. Music, drumming, and dancing added to the joy of the events and illustrated the superb talents of the Inuit artists. The newly elected members of the legislature appeared at once modest and a bit self-conscious as they took their places and commenced their first session. Everywhere people greeted each other with “Happy Nunavut Day.”

Interestingly, the first step toward Nunavut was taken in the west, not the east. Knute Lang, Territorial Council member from Aklavik, proposed division of the Northwest Territories in 1961 because he saw the then active west being held back by the east. In 1966, after visits and consultations in almost every community throughout the Territories, the Carrothers Commission recommended against division. Their premise was that in the east, there was little understanding of the role of elected government, so the people would not be full participants in the decision-making process. From 1969 onward, the territorial government concentrated on nurturing local government. The eastern residents responded with enthusiasm: they soon gained experience and expertise in running their own communities and fully participated in territorial elected office.

The territorial legislature’s Unity Commission, established in 1980, found that in fact there was no feeling for unity, and the move towards division recommenced, this time led by the eastern people. The Inuit leadership concentrated on reaching a settlement with the federal government on land and aboriginal rights, a vital precursor to the establishment of a separate territory. When this agreement was reached in 1993, the creation of a new political entity, Nunavut, was inevitable.

While a unified Northwest Territories had political strength because of its sheer size and strong aboriginal majority, it did not satisfy the desires of the Inuit for a jurisdiction that would be more manageable and could embody their own cultural values. Nor were they persuaded that modern communications and transportation facilities, coupled with regionalization of government services, could fully meet their needs and aspirations.

There is recognition in Nunavut that the road ahead will be difficult. But there is an enthusiasm for the task, rather like the enthusiasm that prevailed in 1967 when the Territorial administration moved north out of Ottawa and the Territorial Council began its rapid growth to fully elected status. In the ensuing years, the Inuit embraced elected government and, through education and experience, readied themselves for Nunavut. They are fortunate indeed in having a core of long-time public servants, dedicated to the east, to work with them in the months to come. The challenges faced by the people of Nunavut are considerable. The solutions they seek will be of their own making, and therein lies their strength. I wish them well.

*John H. Parker, O.C.
771 Towner Park Road,
Sydney, British Columbia V8L 5L8*