

Remapping the Canadian North: Nunavut, Communications and Inuit Participatory Development

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An Israeli academic once said to me, “Here in Israel, we have too much history and too little geography. In Canada, you have too much geography and too little history.” With our struggles over Aboriginal rights – currently emerging around fishing rights on both coasts – our continuing constitutional debates, and our anxiety over the possible separation of Quebec, we may have too little shared history. Indeed, geography is a critical factor in our historical and political formation, and given our geography, Canada’s heritage owes a great deal to the technologies that have linked us together as a nation. With the division of the Soviet Union, Canada is the largest country in the world, and our population of 30 million people is smaller than the state of California. Living along a long border in the shadow of the United States, what Maurice Charland (1986) calls “technological nationalism” recognizes that technologies – railroads, airplanes, satellite communications – have been an important means of constructing Canadian identity, unity and national formation, including the political positioning of Inuit in the Far North. Using technology to conquer distance – first economic and later cultural and ideological – Canada has worked to unify the citizenry of the country and fortify the nation-state, including the Far North, where, in 1999, the new Territory of Nunavut became the first addition to the political landscape of Canada since Newfoundland joined Confederation in 1949.

Nunavut – which means “Our Land” in Inuktitut – is the result of a land claims settlement that recognizes the Aboriginal rights and self-determination of Aboriginal nations whose land was never treated or surrendered. Signed in 1993, this agreement treaties more than two million square kilometres in the Eastern Arctic, and allocates \$1.14 billion dollars over 14 years to Inuit in the Baffin, Keewatin and Central Arctic regions of the Far North. An extension of this settlement carved Nunavut out of the Northwest Territories, creating a new Territory which represents one-fifth of the land mass of Canada, with a population of about 22,000 of whom 17,500 are Inuit (56 per cent under the age of 25) living in 28 communities. Inuit have title to 355,842 square kilometres of land – an area almost the size of California – which constitutes them the largest private landholders in North America. They also share royalties and responsibilities for renewable resources throughout Nunavut, where they will govern with administrative autonomy.

Like the creation of Nunavut, the elections for the new government that took place on February 15, 1999 were ground-breaking events for the North – and unusual by Canadian political standards. The election process was more communal than adversarial. There were no political parties and competing candidates – Inuit and non-Inuit – flew together, sharing costs and hustings to reach the smaller communities in Keewatin, Baffin and the Central Arctic. Competitors assured that all