

Q&A

Arctic sovereignty is built on strong northern communities, says National Inuit Leader Simon

'Ownership and sovereignty claims are best asserted with presence, and not just military presence,' says Mary Simon.

By HARRIS MACLEOD

National Inuit Leader Mary Simon, president of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, said people living in Canada's Northern communities aren't thinking about sovereignty disputes with other Arctic nations, they're too busy dealing with the challenges of day-to-day life. If Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) wants to assert

Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic then putting more time and money into building strong communities would go further than shows of military might, she said.

Last week Ms. Simon met with the Prime Minister, along with Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq (Nunavut), and Indian and Northern Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl (Chilliwack-Fraser Canyon, B.C.), who visited Iqaluit, and Pangnirtung, Nunavut to open an Economic Development Agency for the North. Ms. Simon's message was that the Inuit are in dire need of improved health and social services from the federal government, including help preparing for the looming threat of the H1N1 virus.

She spoke to *The Hill Times* about the problems facing Canada's Inuit, who live in the Arctic, as well as northern Quebec, and Labrador, and her hopes for the future.

Recently a picture of two 10-year-old boys sleeping outside a grocery store in Iqaluit sparked a debate about the issues facing Canada's Northern peoples, but some argue the picture was blown out of proportion. Does it reflect something that's happening in Northern communities?

"Those particular pictures bring out the story and it relates not so much to the fact there's kids sleeping outside in every community, but it's the invisible homelessness that we have, the overcrowding in homes and poor housing, I really think it speaks to that. There are not a lot of people that sleep out on the streets up in the Arctic, it's pretty cold in the winter time. ...

"I know kids are often not in their homes but I've never really seen anyone sleeping out at night like that. What it brought home to me was the fact that

we need to do better in terms of housing for our people up North. This invisible homelessness is pretty acute. When you think of three families living in a three-bedroom home, some families living in tents. ... Some people still live in sort of homemade shacks."

Does that picture say something about the social fabric of Northern communities?

"The traditional culture is still there but because there are a lot more social problems than there were in the past, not everybody is in this boat, but there are a lot of people that have addiction problems and we don't have proper treatment centres. When you're drinking and on something else it's not as important to be looking out for somebody else, and I think that shows a lot in some of our communities where families and individuals are having problems. They're not looking out for themselves or their families, so their kids aren't being looked after."

The Prime Minister is in Nunavut, and he's visited and spoken about the North more than any prime minister in recent memory. Does this show he has a real commitment to the North, or is he trading action for photo-ops?

"I wouldn't want to second guess his motives but the fact that he is paying attention is important and we applaud the Prime Minister for focusing on the North. What we'd like to see more of though is the Prime Minister and the government paying more attention to the communities. Sovereignty is about not just building hardware, but it's also about building healthy sustainable communities where people are getting rid of their addiction problems, they are able to go to better health care services, they have better housing, and that the education system is actually producing and educating and graduating kids that will become the doctors, and the nurses, and the healthcare workers, and the businessmen that we need up North right now.

"I've been talking a lot about the H1N1 virus lately, and it's not so much that the people who work up there are not working on planning if there's an outbreak, but the problem is that they are faced with so many immediate issues and lack of resources that it's very hard to plan something that isn't actually there when you have so many urgent issues facing you. We need to invest more into the North so that we have better more viable communities and that's what I keep telling the Prime Minister, is that if we can do that it's not just an investment for Inuit and the North but it's an investment for Canada. Because ownership and sovereignty claims are best asserted with presence, and not just military presence. Inuit have used and occupied the Arctic region for thousands of years and because of colonization and all the changes that we've been confronted with over a short period of time the social fabric of our communities is quite fragile and we need to put some effort and investment into it."

Is the possibility of Arctic sovereignty disputes with a country like say Russia a real fear in Inuit communities?

"Not to my knowledge. People are more concerned about their daily lives and the conditions that they face and the lack of employment in the communities."

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Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq was the first Inuk woman appointed to Cabinet and she's also in charge of dealing with the H1N1 virus. Is she doing a good job of managing the H1N1 pandemic issue, and is she an effective representative for Inuit peoples around the Cabinet table?

"I would say yes on both counts. I think she's trying very hard to manage the H1N1 issue and she has been on the radio up North talking about having vaccinations for Nunavut in late fall. But we have four regions so I want to make sure she's also dealing with the other [Inuit] regions as well because we are more susceptible to the disease, or aboriginal people are, because of the conditions we live in. There are a lot of high-risk people as well, but it's really the living conditions that we face.

"She represents Inuit in a positive way in Cabinet and she's a strong, outspoken individual and I think she's doing fine. This is a situation where there was a pandemic plan that was a couple of years old and they are revising it as we speak and it's not just minister Aglukkaq, I think all the healthcare professionals are playing catch up to make sure that the plans are up to date and relevant. And the second thing is that people need to be told what the plans are, especially if you're living in remote regions where there are no roads. Whenever I've asked for a meeting with Minister Aglukkaq I've been able to get it. For me that's been a plus, and we also spoke Inuktitut when we had our meetings. ... I certainly know she knows the health issues for the North because she's been a health minister for Nunavut so she doesn't lack the knowledge or the experience."

The North is going through a time of unprecedented change because of climate change, how is that affecting the Inuit?

"There's a lot of concern because the elders and the older folks still go out on the land and hunt for our communities because we still don't have the kind of grocery stores that we depend on down South for our food, except for the large centres like Iqaluit or Kangiqsualujuaq, where I come from, then you have daily flights and you get your food in the store, although it's three times more expensive.



Photograph by Jake Wright, The Hill Times

Due north: Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami leader Mary Simon said the federal government needs to pay more attention to Northern communities, not just military Arctic sovereignty.

You can buy it if you have the money. But in the smaller communities you don't have that. We have our co-op stores, our northern stores, but we don't have fresh produce a lot of the time, fresh meat a lot of the time, so people still have to go out on the land to hunt for their food source. So this is a big concern because climate change is changing really the way people have hunted for centuries."

Suicide deaths among boys aged 15 to 19 is 40 times higher in Nunavut than in the rest of Canada, what type of living conditions account for that?

"That question is very complex because you have to look at the source of it where men were the hunters and the providers of their families years ago and now I think all that has changed. The young guys are not going to school, they're not educating themselves in general—I'm not saying everybody is like that—and there's a lot of alcohol and drugs that go on up in the North

and we don't have proper treatment centres. That's one thing I've been advocating a lot is that we need better mental health services and better treatment centres because when you commit suicide it's the last act that you play out in a crisis, so it has a lot to do with your mental health. Unless we can get help for our young people and better mental health services and treatment centres for our youth, suicide isn't going to go down"

How would you like to see life for the Inuit change over the next 10 years?

"I would like to see a revamped education system for all across the North that involves the educators, and the governments, and other people that are involved in education to make sure that we have an education system that people are proud of and that embraces our culture and our language. Look at the New Zealand situation and the way they turned their system around; the New Zealand M ori lost their language virtually, and

their kids weren't going to school, and they took control of their education system and they revamped it and now people who are not M ori are proud to speak the M ori language, that's how healthy it is now. The education system embraces their culture and they teach in their mother tongue, so if it can be done in other countries there's no reason why we can't do it.

"The healthcare system, even though there's been a lot done, we're not there yet. We need a better healthcare system that will put more investment into mental health services. We need mental health workers that are trained. A lot of the social workers end up being mental health workers which puts a big strain on them and we need to have treatment centres both for adults and also for the youth. I can envisage a treatment centre that has aftercare that helps people after they go through their treatment, and also a centre where young people have a segment of the centre where just the youth

are and they're being treated for the difficulties that they're experiencing. And maybe a family centre where families can stay while a loved one is being treated or helped. I think our mental health issue is one of the top health priorities. It's hard to say that because there are so many other health issues. ...

"When I was at the Council of the Federation meeting in Regina I asked for a first ministers meeting for next year, for June of 2010, because I think after the [residential schools] apology was all done and now the government is saying we need to have this reconciliation with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as leaders we have to look at how we're going to address aboriginal issues and how it's all going to come together over the next 25 years. We need to have a long-term strategy and a plan, but deal with immediate issues at the same time. It's not one or the other, it can be both."

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