
John Amagoalik

Reconciliation or Conciliation? An Inuit Perspective

The *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law* defines *reconcile* as:

1. to restore to harmony
2. to bring to resolution
3. ... reestablishing a harmonious relationship¹

According to Dictionary.com, conciliate is defined as:

1. to overcome the distrust or hostility of; placate; win over...
2. to win or gain (goodwill, regard, or favor).
3. to make compatible ...
4. to become agreeable.²

Since Europeans arrived on our shores more than five hundred years ago, there has never really been a harmonious relationship between the new arrivals and the original inhabitants of North America. The history of this relationship is marked by crushing colonialism, attempted genocide, wars, massacres, theft of land and resources, broken treaties, broken promises, abuse of human rights, relocations, residential schools, and so on.

Because there has been no harmonious relationship, we have to start with *conciliation*. We have to overcome distrust and hostility, make things compatible, and become agreeable. For this to happen, from the Inuit perspective, many things need to be considered.

Canada must acknowledge its past history of shameful treatment of Aboriginal peoples. It must acknowledge its racist legacy. It should not only acknowledge these facts, but also take steps to make sure that the country's history books reflect these realities.

Non-Aboriginal Canadians cannot fully understand the crushing effect of colonialism on a people. They do not appreciate the negative self-image that people can have about themselves when another culture projects itself as being “superior” and acts to impose its laws, language, values, and culture upon the other.

Canadians must understand that their leaders had assimilation policies designed to kill Aboriginal cultures and traditions. In reference to Inuit, the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* quoted an unnamed federal administrator as writing in a 1952 report, “Their civilization, because it is without hope of advancement, should be ruthlessly discouraged.”³ Because of this mindset, assimilation policies were implemented. Children were taken from their families and homes, placed in faraway residential schools, and forbidden to practice their languages and cultures. Aboriginal children, as young as five years, were taken from their parents and placed

in schools where many were psychologically, physically, and sexually abused by church and government officials.

Some Aboriginal groups, such as the Beothuk in Newfoundland, were hunted for “sport” by white settlers until they became extinct.⁴

There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of broken promises, broken treaties, unfulfilled obligations, and commitments. Many Canadians think these broken promises only happened in the distant past. They are still happening today. At the time of this writing (2007), the Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, the body that negotiated and signed the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, is taking the Government of Canada to court because the government has not lived up to dozens of its obligations in this modern treaty, signed in 1993. It broke its past promises and is still breaking them today. The Government of Canada reneged on its commitments in the Kelowna Accord. First Nations still have to resort to highway and railway blockades, occupations, and civil disobedience to remind Canadians of broken treaties, theft, and murder.

When Inuit from Nunavik (northern Quebec) were relocated to the High Arctic⁵ in the 1950s under false promises of eventual return, their human rights were violated and the Government of Canada abandoned them under harsh conditions.⁶ It was decades later when the government finally admitted that they were relocated to bolster Canada’s claim to sovereignty over the High Arctic Islands.⁷ The Government of Canada refuses to apologize.

When thousands of Eskimo huskies were slaughtered by the RCMP, the government again pleaded innocence. They denied it happened when there is overwhelming evidence that it occurred.⁸

When Canadian sovereignty over the Arctic is mentioned today, the discussion revolves around purchasing icebreakers and offshore patrol ships without any mention of Inuit. The government seems to have forgotten that Inuit have been occupying and using the lands and resources for thousands of years. It is as if Inuit are a non-entity and not a factor in the sovereignty debate. Our use and occupancy, our land claims treaty with Canada over these lands and waters, and our commitment to Canada are lynchpins of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic.

Martin Frobisher was recently honoured by the Canadian Mint with a commemorative coin and presented as a hero. To the Inuit of southern Baffin Island, he was a pirate,⁹ a kidnapper, and a murderer.¹⁰ He deserves no honour.¹¹

Toward Conciliation

Canada needs to apologize. In order for there to be forgiveness, there has to be a genuine and sincere apology. Canada has already apologized to the Japanese and the Chinese. Why does it not do the same to the Aboriginal peoples who have been its most obvious victims over the centuries?

Canada must abandon its culture of denial when it comes to crimes against Aboriginal nations.

Canada must stop honouring historical figures who committed crimes against our people.

Canada must put in place a long-term program to improve the socio-economic status of our people, to improve health and education, and to effectively deal with the housing crisis that faces our Aboriginal communities. Canada must honour its obligations under historical and modern treaties. The legacy of broken promises must stop.

Canada must recognize and acknowledge the Inuit use and occupancy of our homeland and our commitment to Canada as the cornerstones of Canada's claim to the Arctic and its internal waters.

Zebedee Nungak, one of the foremost Inuit thinkers in Canada, has some recommendations. He writes,

The power relationship between Canada's governmental jurisdictions and its Aboriginal Peoples has to be fundamentally corrected. That is, from a lopsided Benefactor/Beneficiary set-up, to more of a Nation-to-Nation, equal-to-equal level jurisdictional field.

The country's legislatures have to deliberately make room for Aboriginal representation in mainstream political life. This includes Parliament, which, being supreme, should tackle this innovatively. Government policies towards Aboriginal Peoples have to be totally renovated. Aboriginals should not be required to go through the indignities of "surrender and extinguishment" for their lands and resources.¹²

Is There a True Commitment?

So, in order to facilitate conciliation, Canada, as a maturing nation, must take significant and sincere steps to that end. It is high time for Canada to act honourably. Looking at history, this may be asking too much.

Notes

- 1 *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law* (1996). Retrieved 18 December 2007 from <http://dictionary.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/results.pl?co=dictionary.lp.findlaw.com&topic=50/5049720b943657385f6a60f9f7123e74>
- 2 Dictionary.com Unabridged (v1.1). Retrieved 15 November 2007 from: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/conciliate>
- 3 Cited in Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP] (1996:458). *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 1: Looking Forward, Looking Back*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Supply and Services Canada. The quotation is from a document entitled "The Future of the Canadian Eskimo," dated 15 May 1952 (NAC RG22, volume 254, file 40-8-1, volume 2 (1949-1952)). The RCAP report continues, "The anonymous official goes on to ask what can be done about the problem of finding meaningful work for Inuit when few technicians or artisans are needed in the North. The solution, for the author, was to move the people south."
- 4 Budgel, Richard (1992). The Beothuks and the Newfoundland Mind. *Newfoundland Studies* 8(1):15-33.
- 5 In 1953 and 1955, a total of ninety-two people from sixteen families were relocated by the federal government from Inukjuaq, Quebec, and Pond Inlet on Baffin Island to the High Arctic. The author's family was among those relocated from Inukjuaq to Resolute Bay; he was five years old at the time. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People's convened hearings on the relocation and, in 1994, it published a special report on the issue: *The High Arctic Relocation: A Report on the 1953-55 Relocation*. Ottawa, ON:

- Minister of Supply and Services Canada.
- 6 The relocation was an ill-conceived solution that was inhumane in its design and its effects. The conception, planning, execution and continuing supervision of the relocation did not accord with Canada's then prevailing international human rights commitments. The government, in the final analysis, failed in its fiduciary responsibilities to the relocatees. An acknowledgement of the wrongs suffered by the relocatees and their families, as well as their communities, coupled with an apology is warranted.
 - 7 The Preamble to the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (1993) states: "AND IN RECOGNITION of the contributions of Inuit to Canada's history, identity and sovereignty in the Arctic." Retrieved 2 November 2007 from: http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/agr/nunavut/pre_e.html
 - 8 Inuit Elders have testified that during the 1950s and 1960s their dogs were shot by RCMP and other non-Inuit officials. This took away their ability to live independently and provide for their families through hunting, and Inuit were not consulted or offered alternatives. The killing of sled dogs was one of many acts at the time that disempowered Inuit and reinforced government control over their day-to-day lives (see "Echo of the Last Howl," a documentary video produced by Makivik Corporation in 2004). In response, the RCMP conducted an internal review and concluded that there was no organized slaughter (Royal Canadian Mounted Police (2006). *Final Report: RCMP Review of Allegations Concerning Inuit Sled Dogs*. Ottawa, ON: RCMP. Retrieved 18 September 2007 from: http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/ccaps/reports/sled_dogs_final_e.pdf). Inuit organizations responded in a press release that disputed these findings and questioned the legitimacy of the RCMP investigating itself (Makivik Corporation and Qikiqtani Inuit Association, Joint Press Release, 5 December 2006, *RCMP self-investigation does not reveal the truth about the slaughter of Inuit sled dogs in the 1950s and 1960s*).
 - 9 "By the year 1560, it is almost certain that Frobisher was an active privateer, and possibly also a pirate. Thereafter, all doubt vanishes." McDermott, James (2001:49). *Martin Frobisher: Elizabethan Privateer*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
 - 10 During the summer of 1577, Martin Frobisher and his crew captured an Inuk man with the intent of bringing him back to England. Shortly afterwards, some of the crew came across an Inuit encampment, and after a skirmish

in which five or six Inuit men were killed, they captured “an old woman and a younger female with a baby.” The “elder woman was stripped ‘to see if she were clouen footed’, but was then released ...

The younger woman and child were secured and taken back to the pinnaces, to become the second and third of Frobisher’s captives.”

McDermott (2001: 180–81).

- 11 George Best, one of Martin Frobisher’s men, reported in his diary, “Having now got a woman captive for the comfort of our man,

we brought them together, and every man with silence desired to behold the manner of their meeting and entertainment...”

In a book published in 1928, the author praised Best’s dairy for its “remarkable account of the meeting of the two adult savages, the Englishmen looking on with interest...” McFee, William (1928:72). *Sir Martin Frobisher*. London, UK: John Lane the Bodley Head Ltd.

- 12 Personal correspondence with Zebedee Nungak.

Biography

John Amagoalik was born in a hunting camp near Inukjuaq, Nunavik (northern Quebec) and grew up in Resolute Bay in the High Arctic. After attending high school in Churchill, Manitoba, and Iqaluit, Nunavut, he worked as regional information officer for the Government of the Northwest Territories and then as executive director of the Inuit Claims Commission. In 1979 he was elected vice-president of Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (now Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami), and he served two terms as president during the 1980s. Throughout the 1990s, as chief commissioner of the Nunavut Implementation Commission, he worked passionately on the detailed planning required to prepare for the new Nunavut Territory. He lobbied actively for the creation of an electoral process that would guarantee gender parity in the new legislature; however, the proposal did not gain enough support to be implemented when the Nunavut Territory was created in 1999.

John has been recognized with a National Aboriginal Achievement Award, an Award of Excellence from the Canadian Public Service Agency, an honorary Ph.D. from St. Mary's University, and a Special Recognition Award from the Qikiqtani Inuit Association (QIA). In 1999, John was named a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honour. He currently works as QIA's director of Lands and Resources.

John's contribution to this collection is a clear and strong indictment of Canada's treatment of Aboriginal people in general and Inuit in particular. In *Reconciliation or Conciliation? An Inuit Perspective*, John questions whether there has ever been a truly harmonious relationship between the new arrivals and the original inhabitants of North America. He describes some of the steps Canada should take to facilitate conciliation: Canada must apologize, abandon its culture of denial, stop honouring historical figures who committed crimes against Aboriginal people, address systemic socio-economic disparities, honour its treaty obligations, and acknowledge Inuit contributions to Canadian sovereignty over the Arctic.

Inuit children who lived too far away and had to stay at school during the summer. Anglican Mission School

Aklavik, NWT, 1941

Photographer: M. Meikle

Library and Archives Canada, PA-101771

(This photo can also be found, along with many other resources, at www.wherearethekids.ca)

