



COP 15 - Inuit and Arctic Indigenous People's Day (December 2009)

By Jim Stotts, ICC Chair

Global Climate Change (There's a War Going On)

Good morning Excellencies, honored elders, emerging youth, guests, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Jim Stotts, Chairman of the Inuit Circumpolar Council. Welcome to Inuit and Arctic Indigenous Peoples Day. First, I want to thank everyone that worked hard putting this event together. How about another round of applause for Aavaat Choir?

I think you will enjoy the program we have prepared for you. I know you will appreciate the performances and a taste of traditional Inuit food during the lunch break. I'm sorry if any of you out there are vegetarians. I'm sure you know that Inuit are hunters and we eat meat.

We have an impressive lineup of speakers to inspire and challenge us all to think about how to maneuver forward during this crisis, the crisis of global climate change. We are all here because of COP15 and the world's attempt to solve this crisis. We all know it won't be easy. Global warming is a complicated issue and there are no easy solutions. Inuit are already feeling the negative effects of global warming much more than other corners of the world. We have been discussing global warming amongst ourselves for many years now.

There's a war going on down at the Bella Center. It's a complicated war and it's being fought at many different levels: nation vs nation, poor vs rich, developed vs undeveloped, indigenous vs non-indigenous. It's a war of ideologies. At this late stage it remains to be seen who will win.

I would like to set the record straight on an interview that I gave to the CBC recently where there was a misunderstanding on what I was trying to say. I was quoted as saying that Inuit should be exempt from CO2 emission levels. That's not true. Inuit should make every attempt to be a part of the solution. The ICC position on global warming is well stated and was distributed to the media some time ago. Our position has not changed. I encourage all of you to read the ICC position for yourself. We have copies available here.

What I was trying to say is - it's ironic that Inuit now find themselves in a situation where they will have to scale back on their economic development because of the problem of global warming. This problem was not created by Inuit. Inuit did not cause global warming.

It's no secret that Inuit have been moderately successful developing their own resources and creating their own forms of governance. We should not be ashamed of this. We have always attempted to ensure that our economic development is sustainable and conducted in an environmentally sound manner. We attempt to hold other developers in the Arctic to the same high standards. ICC's body of work at the Arctic Council is a fine example of Inuit commitment to managing development in the right way.

I think there should be some recognition of this fact, and when and if CO2 emission levels are set, I hope Inuit are not harmed economically. I hope Inuit will be treated fairly and some accommodation made on their behalf, especially during internal discussions with our own nation states. That was what I tried to say in the interview. I'm sorry for any confusion I may have caused.

Inuit have been getting some bad press during COP15. It has been said that Inuit are divided, losing their culture and credibility and are in danger of losing the moral high ground. This is not true. In the north, Inuit and the other Arctic Indigenous Peoples occupy the moral high ground. Let's not forget that the Arctic is our home. The Arctic is our corner of the earth. No one has a greater right to determine the Arctic's future than we do.

It's interesting to note that others from outside the Arctic presume they have the right to define who Inuit are and how they should behave. Inuit can define for themselves who they are and what they believe in. Inuit will not change their culture just because the outside world wants them to.

We have other formidable foes in this fight – they are the large, well-funded environmental and animal rights groups. A battle is currently brewing over marine mammals in the Arctic Ocean which have special significance for Inuit. We depend on these animals for much more than simple nutritional need. Our hunting society and food security have become pawns in the debate over climate change and resource development in the Arctic Ocean. Polar bears, walrus and seals have already been targeted. Could the whales be next?

I caution Inuit about getting too close to these environmental groups. These are the same people responsible for the recent European Union ban on importing seal skin products. These same people tried to stop Inuit subsistence whaling and are now pushing an agenda that could result in a complete cessation of our hunting. Inuit will never stop hunting.

I'm curious where is the moral high ground in that? These organizations should be ashamed of themselves. It's shameful that these organizations would even go so far as to destroy indigenous cultures to advance their beliefs. This is a refined form of colonialism. I think we should be careful around these organizations and their spokespersons.

If I was forced to use one word to describe Inuit culture I would use the word 'adaptable'. Inuit legend and history is replete with incredible stories of survival through adaptation to an ever changing hostile environment. Every culture is a product of its environment and Inuit culture is no different from other cultures in this respect. The long, cold, harsh winters molded our culture to be highly adaptable. It was a matter of survival.

Inuit didn't ask for global warming, it came as another gift from the outside world. I want to make it very clear that the word gift does not necessarily mean something good. We have received many of these gifts during the last century and a half, some good and some bad. We kept those gifts that were beneficial and discarded those that were useless, always adapting. This adaptation has not been easy. Inuit have gone from the bone age to the computer age in the space of two generations. Clearly this has been painful and we have lost much during this period.

Despite having its roots in prehistoric times, present day Inuit culture is quite modern. Inuit have no desire to end up as an exhibit in some museum as just another extinct culture. We will leave our children and grandchildren a better life. We intend to be involved in everything that goes on in our homeland. As the first inhabitants and stewards of the Arctic we have the responsibility and right to ensure the protection of our environment and culture. We accept this responsibility for the benefit of all mankind.

The problem with global warming is the fact that it is changing the environment that Inuit have mastered. Our traditional knowledge is not as reliable as it used to be. The long-term potential is there to turn our world upside down. Global warming with a resulting loss of sea ice and milder temperatures has the outside world salivating at the prospect of exploiting previously inaccessible Arctic resources. ICC insists that study and assessment must be undertaken leading to standards for development. Any development in the Arctic must be carried out on a sustainable basis. This includes cultural sustainability.

So, as the battle wages in Copenhagen let's weigh our options and try to be part of the solution. There are some good suggestions out there including the 'ICC Call to Action'. I'm sure we will get more good ideas from our speakers. I want to leave you with two things to think about.

First, Inuit probably should stop waiting for the rest of the world to solve global climate change. We need to start implementing adaption strategies now. Any delay just puts us that much further back. We will have to work together and depend on ourselves.

Second, are Inuit prepared to sacrifice their culture and identity for the sake of solving global climate change? It appears the outside world is asking us to do that, to save them?

Inuit cannot save the planet, but maybe, just maybe, we should start working together to save ourselves.

Thank you.