



Arctic Council Deputy Ministers Meeting (May 2010)
By Jim Stotts, ICC Chair

Responding to Emerging Challenges in the Arctic
(Show Some Leadership Please)

Where to begin? Which challenge to highlight? There's no shortage of challenges facing the Arctic. Hardly a day goes by without another news story pointing out the many problems facing the Arctic. Everyone has a solution, depending on their point of view. That's part of the problem, too much talk, not enough action. The running dialogue in the media is often emotionally charged and distorted. Emotionalism is not productive, we need to look at the challenges we face together with a clear head. The Arctic is in dire need of a healthy dose of leadership. Where will this leadership come from? Who will save us?

Surprise, many of the solutions lie with the people sitting around this table. What's been missing so far is the collective political will of the eight Arctic nations to step up and make the right decisions. This means decisions that are balanced, sustainable, fair and equitable. This means decisions that are right for the countries and right for the region. This means adopting real Arctic policies at the national and, in some instances, regional level.

While we're at it, let's not forget about the people that actually live in the Arctic. Arctic peoples have the most to offer, and the most to lose, from any future scenario in the Arctic. The Council's permanent participants must, I say must, be consulted more than ever. ICC feels its place at the table is not as secure as it was in the beginning. Sometimes we feel like we're on the verge of being squeezed out by non-Arctic countries and organizations.

We don't have to remind everyone that there is a sense of urgency. This might sound callus and insensitive, but the environmental catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico was a blessing in disguise for the Arctic. The inability of industry and government to handle the Gulf oil spill has captured the attention of the world. Arctic states and Arctic peoples are rethinking their positions regarding development in the Arctic Ocean. British Petroleum's blowout in the Gulf provides a harsh lesson that the Arctic must learn from. Clearly, there is a better way to do things.

Inuit know that oil spills in ice infested waters are much harder to handle than oil spills in open water, and no amount of technical double-speak will convince us otherwise. We need to slow down and make sure any development is carried out the right way. There's no need to rush. The Arctic Ocean might never recover from an environmental catastrophe like the one in the Gulf of Mexico. Sacrificing the pristine Arctic environment for the sake of resource development is unacceptable to Inuit, and should be unacceptable to everyone.

Lately the Arctic Council has been characterized and criticized in the media as being ineffectual and too slow to act. There is talk about the need to reform the Council. ICC's not sure what that means exactly, but we don't think the word reform is the right term for what's needed. The word reform suggests that there is something unsatisfactory or wrong with the Council and ICC disagrees with that.

We think the Council needs to regroup and refocus. It needs to get back to its original intent, which was to provide a forum for the Arctic states and permanent participants, working together, to provide good sound advice to our countries on Arctic policy in the areas of environmental stewardship and sustainable development. We think the Arctic Council, including its working groups, needs to reset how it goes about fulfilling its mandate. The Council needs to get back to its original intent.

We fear the Council has become a forum for different groups to advance their own vision of the Arctic. This does not mean that Arctic states and Arctic peoples should not talk to others interested in the region. There's a world of good ideas outside the Arctic that we can use. However, from ICC's point of view any decisions concerning the future of the Arctic must be made by the Arctic nations and the Arctic peoples. We have the responsibility and obligation on behalf of our people to do no less.

There is a difference between participants and observers and ICC believes this difference must be maintained within the Arctic Council. ICC does not support recent proposals calling for new forms of governance which would dilute the influence of the permanent participants at Council meetings while advancing their own influence. Some of these proposals are coming from current observers. This is counter-productive to the Council's efforts.

So, ICC respectfully urge the Deputy Ministers and Senior Arctic Officials to go back to your capitols and advocate strongly for increased political and financial support for the Arctic Council and its work. See what you can do within your countries to start the process of implementing the recommendations of the Arctic Council into national Arctic policy. If this effort is successful most of the recent criticism of the Council should evaporate. ICC believes this is a key element of an Arctic Council response to emerging challenges in the Arctic. Show some leadership, please.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our viewpoint.