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Comments on the Polar Imperatives - Politics and Environment Panel

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Northern Nationalisms, Arctic Mythologies, and the Weight of History: A Conference in Memory of Shelagh Grant

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I am honoured to share some thoughts from my experience with you today. My views are my own. I ask you not to infer from my remarks that I am speaking for Inuit at any level.

I will begin by noting that progress to better respect Indigenous peoples' rights can get blocked by the unhelpful dichotomies of thought that tend to plague the politics of western democracies — in debates about where the collective good lies.

Instead of seeing the relationship between peoples and the natural world, European knowledge traditions tend to gravitate to “either-or” thinking. For example, depending on your political affiliation, oil and gas development may be seen as either all good or all bad, all the time. European sourced knowledge traditions classify any given people as either constituting a “State” or as a people not considered to constitute a “State”. (This played out in the unvarnished power dynamics that shaped the structure and voting rights of the Arctic Council to the disadvantage of Arctic Indigenous peoples.)

Concepts like sustainable development and human rights principles are supposed to help us all mitigate this type of dichotomous thinking. But world politics and Canadian politics still struggle with how to talk to each other about what sustainable development means and what climate action to take — without tearing each other apart — figuratively or literally. The attachment to adversarial political debate was evident for example in Jason Kenny's 2019 “war room” to fight “environmentalists”. There are many other examples across the political spectrum. And whipping up populist fears of “globalists” doesn't help when we have a problem as global and massive as the climate crisis. As the UN Secretary General and many others have pointed out, humankind is facing an existential threat of our own making that grows by the day. And too many of us also apparently don't care too much about what other species we take out with us.

Dichotomous thinking is also evident in western legal systems for example, in the urge to define Indigenous peoples from the outside -- or the impulse to draw boundaries to express hard line power positions over people and place. Dichotomous legal thinking tends to replace the problems it aims to solve with new problems. This is important because legal traditions provide a frame and reference point about what the law is and should be. If you want to understand more about what I am talking about, I recommend you read Kenneth Nunn's "Law as Eurocentric Enterprise"¹ in which he sets out some interesting examples of Eurocentric legal traditions.

Another example is a Western (non-Indigenous) tendency to compartmentalize when problem solving. For example, if we are talking about military security, some want to hive off from that, a discussion of human security and environmental security—despite the obvious connections. And the reverse is also evident, the Arctic Council permits discussion of environmental and human security but not security involving militarization. It is evident that the old way of thinking about both sovereignty and security has made the Arctic, and the world, less safe for everyone on the planet.

Another dynamic negatively affecting the taking of rational climate action – action that we all urgently need – is the adversarial and competitive nature of European-sourced political systems. While Inuit have our own politics and disagreements, our culture highly values rational discussion, devoid of expressions of anger. Displaying anger publicly is not considered adult behaviour in Inuit culture. I am not saying Inuit never display anger. I am saying that it is a cultural value to not do that. "White people" (I did not invent the term "white people" by the way, self-identifying white people created it and define its boundaries) -- sometimes mistake the very measured, non-angry communication style of Inuit as a sign of weakness or vulnerability — when, actually, Inuit are demonstrating our values on how political and policy debate and decision-making should take place among adults.

Unfortunately, the adversarial nature of "western" political systems has been further aggravated, and ratcheted up, today by this age of disinformation wars fuelled very much by social media manipulation. So we all need to ask ourselves - are those who are whipping up populist anger and misinformation fearful of losing policy debates on merit? What we need today in Canada's national politics, is more diplomacy, more respect for expertise (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous expertise) and less self-serving name calling. While our leaders are shouting at each other, and their political advisors are focused on political games of "gotcha," the world is literally burning and melting.

Indigenous peoples often face double standards when we are effectively implementing our right to self-determination (meaning our collective right to exist and thrive). For example, it is okay for industry to use the power of its money and influence to elect officials and carry out expensive lobby efforts to shape government decision making. But when Indigenous peoples do our homework, employ sound evidence-based policy arguments, and execute effective political advocacy to influence leaders in parliament, we sometimes are

¹ K.B. Nunn, "Law as a Eurocentric Enterprise." *Law & Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice* 15, no. 2 (1988): 2.

characterized as being manipulated by others. The unsaid implication is that we are not capable of independent thought or of making our own political and economic strategies. Since the Trump-era, right-wing political extremism that has infected Europe, Canada and other parts of the world has become a problem layered on top of other political problems. That reality — populist misinformation combined with xenophobia to manipulate emotions — further makes meeting the challenge of rational problem solving for something as complex as the climate crisis even harder. As young people today would say, today's political class needs to learn how "to adult".

So while all of this may seem disheartening, let me share what does give me hope:

- The ever growing global respect of Inuit leadership, past and present, on environmental matters as well as global security and human rights issues.
- The commitment of those willing to work through multi-lateral bodies at the regional and the global level. I give my wholehearted support to you all.
- The fact that the UN General Assembly (UNGA) passed a resolution recognizing the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a human right; and called upon States, international organizations, businesses, and other stakeholders to "scale up efforts" to ensure a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment for all.
- The stance taken by Canada, the U.S. and all the Scandinavian states to oppose the Russian invasion of Ukraine and call it out as a threat to global security, and to cooperation in the Arctic.

Let me also say that I don't want to see militarization of the Arctic, but I do understand the need to take action to sanction rogue leadership threatening human rights and human security -- whether that occurs in Russia, in the United States or elsewhere.

I will close by suggesting that perhaps we need an expanded and new concept of territorial integrity — one that articulates our collective obligation as humans to protect the integrity of the earth, the sea and air — if only to protect ourselves from self-destruction.