
A Parliamentary Perspective on the Arctic Council

by Charles Caccia, MP

In September 1996 a new international organization, the Arctic Council, was established. Earlier this year the Second Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region took place in Yellowknife. This article looks at the background of the parliamentarians and their attempts to form a working relationship with the Arctic Council.

The Second conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region was attended by members from seven of the eight circumpolar nations, including Canada, Denmark, Greenland, Iceland, Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. Unfortunately the Congress of the United States was absent. Also in attendance were representatives of the Sami Parliaments, the Nordic Council, the West Nordic Parliamentary Council and the International Arctic Indigenous People's Organizations.

The Canadian delegation was headed by Clifford Lincoln and included MPs Karen Kraft-Sloan, John Finlay, Monique Guay, Keith Martin, and Senator Raynell Andreychuk. The Canadian delegation also included David Schindler, Professor of Ecology from the University of Alberta and Cindy Gilday.

The Canadian delegation articulated a definition of sustainable development that included elements around the environmental, social, economic, spiritual, cultural, historical and political.

The presentations on each theme emphasized the unique characteristics of the Arctic region and the need for broader co-operation among the eight Arctic countries. The Arctic is an important region globally and presents parliamentarians, governments and northern residents with profound cultural, socio-economic,

political and environmental challenges and opportunities.

The Arctic region and its peoples are extremely sensitive to activities both within the region, and far from the Arctic. The parliamentarians were particularly struck by the number of speakers who raised the immediate and critical issue of toxic contaminants and their effect on the Arctic environment and its peoples.

The conference focused on four themes of importance to the Arctic: first, achieving sustainable development in the Arctic Region and use of renewable and non-renewable resources; second, environmental contaminants in the Arctic; third, challenges for Arctic governments; and finally, security issues.

The immediate and urgent threat to the Arctic environment of radionuclide contamination from various sources, including nuclear tests, scuttled nuclear submarines, and ice-breakers, and radioactive waste material, also was stressed. All governments were urged to co-operate and address this issue with haste.

Unanimous support from all delegations, in the form of a Recommendation, called for the immediate and expeditious establishment of the Arctic Council. An Arctic Council is considered to be the most effective way to harmonize the many diverse bilateral and multi-lateral

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activities and initiatives currently being undertaken on Arctic issues.

Other key Recommendations formulated by the parliamentarians in the Consensus Statement from the Conference included the following:

- The recognition of a broader definition of security in national policies and international arrangements that shift the predominantly military focus of security to one encompassing values, lifestyles, and the cultural identity of indigenous northern societies.
- The meaningful inclusion of indigenous peoples in the decision-making process at all levels.
- The sustainable and rational utilization of the living marine resources in the Arctic region, including marine mammals.
- Continued co-operation in the development of regional infrastructure, including communications, transportation systems, and commercial activities throughout the Arctic, consistent with environmental protection and cultural values and identities.

The Conference articulated and strengthened these specific recommendations through requests to the national government of each circumpolar nation. Among other things, the parliamentarians requested each representative national government to:

- encourage and foster co-operation among Arctic states;
- address the value of traditional ecological knowledge;
- support the need for improved scientific knowledge through the continuation, under the aegis of the proposed Arctic Council, of existing programs such as the AEPS and other national and scientific research initiatives;
- ensure appropriate and inclusive environmental assessments for all activities that may impact Arctic landscapes and waters;
- ensure the development of co-ordinated programs and activities to give expression to the cultures and histories of indigenous peoples, recognizing the particular role and contribution of Arctic women; and
- support the efforts for a ban on nuclear-weapons tests and encourage and support appropriate decommissioning and disposal of nuclear reactors and wastes.

The Third Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region is to be held in Salekhard, Russian no later than 1998.

A Link with the Arctic Council

Perhaps the most important recommendation of Yellowknife was the strong and unanimous support for the immediate establishment of an Arctic Council. This recommendation was put forward at the Third Ministerial Meeting on the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy held in Inuvik March 19-21, 1996.

The initiative to create an Arctic Council was led by Mary Simon, Canada's Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs. John Finlay, MP attended the Inuvik Conference on behalf of the parliamentarians and reported on the recommendations of the conference. The ministerial meeting recommended an Arctic Council "that will enhance international co-ordination and co-operation on issues of Arctic policy, environmental protection, sustainable economic development and cultural diversity.

In May 1996 the House of Commons Standing Committee on Environment discussed hearings on the possibilities of circumpolar co-operation. Several members spoke in favour of the creation of an Arctic Council with parliamentary involvement. However, I added a word of caution at that time.

If you compare the text of the parliamentary declaration in Yellowknife, with the ministerial declaration in Inuvik, you will notice the Yellowknife declaration is strong, very action-oriented and very little process-oriented. It has a very precise sense of mandate. The ministerial declaration is very much process-oriented. Also it speaks about environmental protection of the Arctic and that is all it says, nothing more.

In the creation of the Arctic two things could happen. Either the thing goes more and more into process under the auspices of a council that will be larger and perhaps heavier. Or, if the parliamentarians are present and effective and influential, it becomes more action-oriented, with specific initiatives. This is why this period leading to the formation of the Arctic Council has a certain significance. The intervention and participation of parliamentarians therefore becomes important, because it could go either way. It is there in this undefined balance between the two roles.

It is worthwhile to compare the two statements to see the difference in content. We are running the risk that if we do not watch it, the Arctic Council will become a well publicized and most desirable institution that will be launched, but because of its broader composition it may become even more process-oriented.

On June 17, the Standing Committee presented its first report. We called on the Standing Committee of

Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region to have a permanent and substantive role on the Arctic Council.

We also recommended:

- that the Government of Canada make appropriate representations in support of the proposition that the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region have a substantive and permanent role in the Arctic Council.
- that the Parliament of Canada, through the Canada-Europe Parliamentary Association, consider the advisability of recognizing the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region, and provide adequate financial and other support for representation by a Canadian Parliamentarian to the Standing Committee.

Conclusion

The Arctic region and its people require more than ever before tangible and substantive action for the protection of their health and ecosystems. For too long they have been "downwind" to the pollution created by the industrial activities to the South. For too long they have

sat impotent in front of ecological degradation. For too long they have heard political declarations of good intentions.

Does the Arctic Council bode well? If an international agreement can be concluded for the reduction of persistent organic pollutants and heavy metals which pose a risk to human health and the sensitive Arctic environment, yes! If the protocol concerning the Control of Emissions of Volatile Organic Compounds or their Transboundary Fluxes is ratified and brought into effect, yes! If steps are taken to monitor the emissions and transport of air pollutants and their environmental effects, yes! If the pristine Arctic waters will be protected from oil tanker traffic, yes! If the Arctic's biodiversity will be protected and strengthened, yes! If traces of PCBs in mother's milk will be eliminated, yes! And, if lifestyle and culture of Arctic Aboriginal people will be respected and allowed to flourish, yes!

The gap between the Ministerial Inuvik statement and the Yellowknife Parliamentary statement must be narrowed and eventually eliminated. If not, the Arctic Council runs the risk of becoming an empty shell, a temple for the invocation of good intentions, another institution devoted mostly to process at the expense of substance.

Editor's Note:

A meeting of the Senior Arctic Affairs Officials was held April 17-19, 1996, to finalize negotiations for the Arctic Council. It was officially established at a ceremony in Ottawa on September 19, 1996.