
Quebec Inuit to Sign Historic Self-Governance Agreement

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From Monday's Globe and Mail

August 13, 2007 at 1:48 AM EDT

OTTAWA – A giant swath of mineral-rich land covering one-third of Quebec is on track to become a self-governing region for the province's 10,000 Inuit.

To be called the Regional Government of Nunavik, it will have its own elected assembly representing Quebec's 14 remote Inuit communities and a public service responsible for services normally delivered by provinces, such as education and health.

The Globe and Mail has obtained a copy of the agreement-in-principle between the Inuit, Quebec and Ottawa, which was initialled by the three sides last week, meaning it should be ready for a formal signing ceremony within weeks. A final agreement would then follow and the Inuit hope the new government will be in place by 2009.

The Nunavik government would be unlike any other resolved aboriginal land claim in Canada, both because of the region's massive size and because the system of government so closely resembles the British-inspired parliamentary systems found in Ottawa and provincial capitals.

The Regional Government of Nunavik will have an elected assembly representing Inuit communities. Dean Tweed/The Globe and Mail

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Also, unlike native self-governments such as B.C.'s Nisga'a, the agreement is not based on ethnicity, even though the vast majority of the region's residents are Inuit.

Jean-François Arteau, the head legal adviser for the Quebec Inuit, said he would expect all future maps of Canada to include the Nunavik region, which uses the 55th parallel as a southern border and makes up one-third of Quebec.

“This is going to be a special territory that I think we should see on any map of Canada,” he said. “It's something new. A regional government. That doesn't

exist anywhere.”

The historic agreement is the result of decades of negotiations that have had many setbacks, including court rulings and two referendums on Quebec sovereignty, that have complicated the lengthy process toward self-government.

Though the talks long precede the current federal Conservative government, the timing of the agreement would fit well with Prime Minister Stephen Harper's push to show the international community that Canada uses its North and will protect its sovereignty.

The Quebec Inuit would not own the subsurface mineral rights, but mining companies would be required to pay millions of dollars in royalties to the Nunavik government for projects in the region.

The Inuit have long welcomed a role in promoting Canada's claims to the North by maintaining traditional hunting practices and helping the Canadian Forces patrol the barren Arctic lands.

The use of parliamentary traditions can be found in the proposed assembly of elected officials who will elect a Speaker. The Nunavik Assembly will also have a five-member executive council – the five people with the most votes from the public – who will act as a form of cabinet. The assembly member who receives the most votes from the public will lead the government and be a member of the five-person cabinet. Each of the five will be responsible for at least one government department such as health, education and local and regional affairs.

The federal Indian Affairs Minister will host a conference in Kuujjuaq on Aug. 23 and 24. The community on Quebec's northern tip, just south of Iqaluit, is expected to be the capital of the new government. The federal minister is expected to discuss the agreement-in-principle with Inuit leaders and Quebec Premier Jean Charest to create the new government.

Though Nunavik will have close ties with its northern neighbour, the Inuit territory of Nunavut, it will remain part of Quebec and receive provincial funding to run traditionally provincial services, such as education. Ottawa will also contribute money and further revenue will come from taxes and royalties on natural-resources projects, which already generate millions each year for the Quebec Inuit.

In a sense, Nunavik will be like a territory of the province of Quebec. Because the existing territories of Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut are not

full provinces, the federal government continues to play a significant role in areas such as funding, regulations and the creation of parks. The Nunavik arrangement could be complicated by the fact that both Ottawa and Quebec City will retain all legal powers in the territory.

Given the sensitivities in the province when it comes to potential dividing lines, some of the terminology has been left deliberately vague.

Mr. Arteau, the Inuit legal adviser, said two previous attempts to reach a similar agreement fell apart mostly over what would happen in the event of a referendum vote in favour of Quebec sovereignty. By leaving that issue aside, Mr. Arteau said talks are more promising this time around.

The agreement does not address the issue directly, other than to say the laws of Quebec and Canada will apply to Nunavik.

“If Quebec were to separate, I don't know how it would play,” he said.

A copy of the 25-page agreement-in-principle calls for the amalgamation of the existing entities of Kativik Regional Government, Kativik School Board and Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services into a single government.

Operation Nanook, a 10-day arctic sovereignty exercise by the Canadian Forces, is also under way in the waters between Nunavut and what will become Nunavik.