



The Honourable Edna Ekhivalak Elias
Commissioner of Nunavut

Celebrate Growing Multiculturalism in the Arctic
Canada 150 -- 2017 Starts Now North
June 20, 2013 – Yellowknife, NT

Check against delivery

As I pondered this invitation and wracked my brain for an inspiring, thought provoking, or even a gut-wrenching story or topic, I tried to think outside the box; outside the box that is Nunavut.

I decided that I needed to look at the whole picture. I, as Commissioner of Nunavut, represent ALL residents of the territory

- be they Inuit making up 85 per cent of our population,**
- or one who came to the Arctic to visit or to try out -- and who now – 10 to 15 years later may own a home.**
- OR be they a member of one of the growing ethnic groups in one of our communities...in any one of the three northern territories.**

In my Northern travels, I am continually surprised at the growing number of people with ethnic backgrounds who are making their homes in Northern communities. Marriages between Inuit and Qablunaat (or white people) have been common for decades, but we are now seeing Inuit invite other ethnic groups into their families. The Arctic, while a

small population of 33,000 people in 25 communities, is truly becoming a melting pot!

Celebrations of Inuit culture abound in the North and fill our calendars. The promise of the beat of a drum, the chanting of a song, the eeriness of throat singing, dancing, games or even a feast, all draw crowds to Inuit events.

Inuit and aboriginal people often entertain those from other cultures who have come to call the Arctic home.

Celebrations of Northern culture are certainly not weak in substance or lacking in number north of 60.

Inuit celebrate land claim agreements with territorial, provincial and federal governments throughout the North. We celebrate the seal – a mainstay of our culture, we celebrate the return of the sun, we celebrate births, deaths, marriages, graduations and we celebrate all of it with Inuit music, country food, stories and games.

But isn't it time celebrations of other cultures mark our Northern calendars too? Isn't it time Inuit, the original Arctic dwellers, be entertained by other cultures who are now our neighbours, family members or friends. Isn't it time for a two-way exchange of culture?

People bring their culture to the North but there are very few opportunities for groups, other than Inuit, to showcase their song, dance, traditional clothing and food.

In other speeches I often mention that Nunavut is multicultural. And, I think I can safely say, the both Yukon and the Northwest Territories are, as well. But never or seldom do we acknowledge or experience the diversity.

I believe that Canada 150, and beyond, is a time for ALL cultures in the North to join hands in celebrating this great country's 150th birthday.

But I would be remiss, if I did not take this opportunity to talk about Nunavut – When we talk about celebrating

Canada, it should be from west coast to east coast to north coast.

The north is vast – almost 2 million square kilometers or 20 percent of Canada’s land mass – it is beautiful and our presence there/here keeps Canada strong.

Inuit have lived on the land that is Canada’s Arctic for millennia and have been resilient and adaptable to the changes that have taken place.

And believe me, life for those of us born in the North has changed drastically these past several decades.

60 years ago Elders hunted for survival by dogsled – and last month an Elder recorded his grandchild’s high school graduation on an iPad. Oh, how times have changed in Nunavut.

150 years ago few knew we even existed ...for a long time we were ‘colonized’, and today the North is establishing and building its strong place within the identity of Canada.

We’ve done this by sharing our gifts with the world...gifts that include:

The Igloo – architects marvel at its innovative construction

The Kayak – known and used worldwide as a fast mode of water transportation.

Dog sledding – there are competitions taking place in many countries throughout the Northern hemisphere

The Amauti- the woman’s garment that includes a large Pouch under the hood in which we carry our children is being adapted for the south

and the Inukshuk – a symbol of the north that was used for the Olympic Games in Vancouver and forever a symbol of Canada.

There is a huge focus on Inuit language and culture as part of Canada's identity – We are writing Canadian history books from an Inuit perspective, in our own words – and we're writing school curriculum in our language that matches the Canadian standards. Inuit history, culture, language and people are being woven into the very fabric of Canada – the north is truly strong and free.

Many things have changed in the past 150 years. And bridging the gap between when we lived on the land and now, has its challenges and has not been without hardship for many. But we continue to thrive, to grow, to adapt, and to move forward, just like we always have.

As you move forward with your plans to celebrate Canada 150 – I ask that you don't forget to celebrate the people and culture of Canada's Arctic coast – and remember, Inuit do

not just live in the North. We can be found living throughout Canada, with large numbers in Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg and Edmonton and many in small towns like Chatham, Ontario or Barrhead, Alberta.

I ask you to celebrate Northern music -- drum dancing, throat singing – celebrate Inuit art through the great works of the Cape Dorset Print Collection or the Pangnirtung Weave shop – celebrate the role Nunavut plays in Canada’s sovereignty over the North – and celebrate the resiliency of our people.

(Read last paragraph in Inuinnaqtun AND THEN English)

In closing I would just like to say – I am proud to be Canadian. I am proud to be an Inuk. And I look forward to celebrating Canada 150 with people from all cultures that now call the North their home and I hope you look forward to celebrating Canada’s North in your own Canada 150 activities.

Quana, Nakurmiik, Thank You, Merci