

Making Modern Treaties Work  
Plenary 4: For a Better Tomorrow

Speaking Notes by Leena Evic

[Greetings and Intro in Inuktitut]

Two years ago, at the last gathering of the National Land Claims Coalition Conference, as part of my opening comments I talked about coming across an article a few years earlier that was so timely to the events we were discussing. But after checking the date on the article, I saw, in fact that it had been written almost 30 years earlier. That article was about our Inuit leaders who had gathered in Rankin Inlet – five years before the signing of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement. Inuit leaders urged the Canadian government of the day to recognize Inuktitut as an official language of Canada through a provision in the land claim. As we all know, there is no such article in our living Nunavut Land Claims agreement. Therefore, we are still today on the first verse of the same song. This morning, am I just going to add on more wording to the same verse? This was my question coming here today.

Qulliq, as you may know, is one of the many traditional, original, authentic innovations of my people, the Inuit of the Arctic. Besides our transportation technology, which was the dogteam, qulliq was our technology to thrive in our environment. Our own expert scientific based technological equipment built with everything from our Arctic world was a demonstration of our self-reliance and self-sufficiency that almost disappeared from our lives as we transitioned from our traditional culture to our relocated communities. Having travelled that difficult journey with us, the qulliq has become a powerful symbol of our resilience as a people of the Arctic. Today, as we think about what is happening right now across Canada in terms of the outcry of indigenous people, I ask myself, “How much more are we going to lose?”

I have been invited to speak to you today on the topic of sustaining indigenous languages. The title of this plenary is “For a Better Tomorrow,” which extends to ways to support wellbeing in the modern treaty context. So it says.

Two years ago, I echoed something along the lines of “In our traditional life, Inuit often spent time at a place called Aurniarvik. This was a temporary

place – a transitioning camp, where a family or hunters would stay while they waited for the trail to become passable for the upcoming season.

A stay at Aurniarvik would often involve proper prepping for the trip – for example – fine tuning tools and gear, waiting for the trail to be safe, hunting along the shoreline and, fundamentally, shifting the ease of mind from winter hibernation inside dwellings to life outdoors once again.

I also said at that same time that I believe that we – as indigenous cultures – are in our Aurniarvik era: a temporary stop as we search for our permanent place of resilience, freedom, and self-determination. We have begun to delve deep into our inner world of collective voice as we gather our strength and gear for the great change.

Well, today, I've come to conclude as the vision keeper of the Pirurvik Centre, that this Aurniarvik era I referred to two years ago is now embodied by a tangible, real group of young Inuit who have endured years of hunger to learn their own language and are now full-time students of our Aurniarvik Inuktut language program for Inuit second language learners. Just like the Aurniarvik I described they are only in a temporary phase - prepping their gear to master skills and knowledge required to advance to our Qimattuvik Inuktut First Language program for Inuit.

Two years ago, I was only able to share with you Pirurvik's aspirations of the potential of full-time Inuktitut programming that could only happen with adequate financial commitment from funders. After all, we were running ad hoc short-term language programs for 16 years knowing full well we only continued to scratch the surface of what was possible. Today, I have a new story to share.

Pirurvik has launched its pathways to excellence in Inuktitut that includes three new full-time accredited programs: the **Qimattuvik Certificate** for Inuit who are first language speakers of Inuktitut; the **Aurniarvik Certificate** for Inuit who are second language learners of Inuktitut; and **Aqqusiurvik**, which is Pirurvik's diploma program for training the next generation of Inuktitut instructors. All three programs are underway in partnership with the University of Victoria's Department of Indigenous Language Education and its School of Continuing Studies.

Each cohort of the certificate programs is taking a series of ten immersion courses, which are not mixed with English language courses as the status

quo has continued to provide. For the Qimattuvik program, Pirurvik offers the following courses for your background information and context:

- **Nunavut standardized Writing System**
- **Inuktitut Grammar course for Inuit**
- **Inuktitut Computing and Keyboarding**
- **Inuktitut Professional Writing in the Workplace**
- **Modern and Technical Terminology**
- **Variations of Inuktitut: Inuktitut Dialectology**
- **Inuktitut Creative Writing and Articulate Speaking Skills**
- **Uqqaritsautit (Inuit Traditional Terminology)**
- **Learning From Inuit Life Stories: Voices of our Elders**
- **Inuit Timeline: Past to Present Era**
- **Inuit Makimaningat: Inuit Wellbeing (RTWW and RTWM)**

Aurniarvik students, who are also enrolled in ten immersion courses in Inuktitut second language, will graduate over to the Qimattuvik program - no longer second language learners but as first language speakers.

A few months ago, we put out an ad for applications to register for the two certificate programs hoping that we would get enough interest. To our amazement, we received applications from all of our Inuit regions in Canada as well as Alaska. It was very telling that we Inuit today run a deep hunger for our own language and cultural stability – yearning for the potential that has been pushed down dormant upon us, our dull identity full of potential – spoke a silent motto stating, “please provide us the means and support to learn Inuktitut.”

Almost a year ago, we received approval from the Makigiaqta Training Corporation to develop and deliver these three core programs I mentioned. What we are now realizing is if sustaining Indigenous language training is to be successful and long term, it has to come with a bigger package. Firstly, student financial support to enable learners to pursue their studies full-time; Secondly, due to housing costs in Nunavut, subsidized student housing is crucial; Currently, a private institute like Pirurvik has two classrooms to deliver these full-time courses. Running multiple full-time, accredited programs requires a facility that is designed for student success.

We are grateful to our Inuit land claim organization and the Makigiaqta Inuit Training Corporation for investing in Pirurvik's Inuktitut language legacy program.

To fully appreciate the impact these programs are already having, let me share with you some testimonials from our students:

Student 1:

- During the Opening Ceremony I sat there, listening to all of you speaking Inuktitut. I sat there in awe even not understanding one single word of what was being said. I thought to myself in amazement, almost to a level of disbelief, 'this is the last opening

ceremony of anything that I will attend and not be able to understand anyone'. I actually wanted to get up to the podium and speak to everyone and say -- It was Canada that made sure I grew up knowing English and French, and it will be Pirurvik who will be responsible for bringing me 'home'. I actually had some silent tears sitting there.

- And now, only a mere 2 weeks into the 8-month long full-time Inuktitut class, I am gaining so much knowledge in our mother tongue.
- My uiga is astounded that I am coming home everyday asking questions, speaking to him in Inuktitut and asking questions in Inuktitut. I asked him one day, suqqauvit?

#### Student 2

- Through this program, I am building and using tools to equip myself and others to reclaim and restore our identity as Nunavut Inuit, to help navigate through the acute social, cultural and linguistic erosion we face today.

#### Student 3

- Pirurvik is so much more than a place to learn Inuktitut, though it undoubtedly is the safest place to do so. We may be individual students of Aunniarvik but we carry what we learn with our peers, our families and our community.
- There are no words to express how meaningful it is to have a conversation with a unilingual Inuktitut speaking elder, when just 3 years ago, it was not possible.
- Generations once forced apart by colonization are now being reconnected thanks to those at Pirurvik.

#### Student 4

- Pirurvik Centre is the heart of cultural and linguistic renaissance in Nunavut.

- It is our beacon of light as Inuit advance toward self-determination.

To conclude, I want to leave with you a few of my personal impressions:

- Since we started our full-time classes, students attending their program all day, five days a week in an immersion environment is a dream come true for me.
- The laughter from both classrooms is contagious and is inspiring because it's an energy of Inuit-ness.
- Being immersed with the Aurniarvik cohort, I've realized how much we need to be gentle with each other as Inuit: the lateral violence drains us at some point; we know it's going to take great strength to flip the status quo and we need each other for that for the sake of tomorrow's children.
- In our traditional Inuit culture, the husband and wife or mother and father worked together because they knew they were in it together for their family; Nunaqqatigiit, meaning the whole society, practiced the same belief that "we're in this together"; At Pirurvik, we're practicing

with our students that “we’re in this together; My hope is all of us in this room can commit to just that – “we’re all in this together;”

- full-time accredited certificate and diploma programs for our indigenous languages;
- adequate student financial support or sponsorship;
- adequate space and facility to house our full-time indigenous studies as if they’ve always been at par with English and French.
- help us to graduate multitudes of thriving young Inuit today and in decades to come.

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