

-A Minority Government and Climate Change Action- What does Canada's new political landscape mean for northern residents now experiencing the impacts of climate change?

By Mary May Simon

As Canada's new Liberal minority government works to build a coalition with the New Democratic Party and the Bloc Québécois, the implementation of Canada's plan to meet our Kyoto Protocol obligations will likely become a much higher priority. While all three parties declared their support for Kyoto, there was really very little said about climate change during the election campaign. Moreover, what we heard during the campaign and in the televised debates was in the context of whether the Kyoto Protocol is adequate. There was not a single word about the real and present threat climate change poses to 40 percent of Canada's landmass. In Canada's Arctic, climate change is already felt; the evidence is clear. It affects how people live, travel, eat and work. Our new government must engage in environmental protection and stewardship and deal with the growing threat to Canada and its northern peoples.

At the end of May I visited my home in Nunavik (northern Quebec) near the Ungava Bay. We flew over the Ungava Coast, which was ice-free, something that until recent years was unheard of at this time of year. Normally this area would be full of Arctic sea ice until mid- or late July. However, such surprises are becoming disquietingly familiar as the weather in Canada's north becomes increasingly unpredictable. Sea ice is declining in thickness; permafrost is melting; the snow season is shorter. While it may be the subject of rhetoric and debate in the south, the people in Canada's north

know climate change is real and is already affecting their lives.

Scientists are discovering what permanent residents have known for some time – many adverse changes are taking place. Average Arctic temperatures have increased by more than twice the global average. The thickness of late summer and early fall Arctic sea ice has declined by 40 per cent since the 1950s

and ice cover has declined by 10–15 per cent. The melting permafrost is affecting the topography

of the north. In some places, there is widespread erosion; in others the land is sinking as the ice beneath it melts, threatening buildings, power lines, pipelines, mining operations and air strips. Continued melting would force some Inuit communities to relocate, at a cost of millions of dollars.

Arctic wildlife is also threatened, especially the polar bears in the Hudson Strait, Hudson Bay and Ungava Bay. The changing weather ice cover forces them to scavenge for food along the shoreline. There are increasing reports of starving polar bears attacking the small fishing and hunting camps scattered along the coast.

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All of these climate change impacts have profound implications for the social, cultural and economic well-being of the 50,000 aboriginal people who live in the Canadian Arctic and the four million people worldwide living in the circumpolar Arctic.

For Canada's Inuit, the dramatic environmental changes have a profound impact on their livelihood and way of life. Inuit traditional knowledge, which for centuries has enabled Inuit hunters to travel safely, can no longer be relied upon to predict weather and animal migration patterns. The frozen rivers and lakes of the far north have long provided transportation routes, from traditional dog teams to heavy equipment over winter roads. Now, the season is shorter and safety is a factor. Current economic opportunities such as tourism, mining and the development of natural resources are affected by increasingly uncertain short- and long-term climatic conditions.

The changes in Canada's northern regions are of concern to all Canadians. Our common interest is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the predicted opening of the Northwest Passage. By 2070–2090, the Arctic Ocean could be ice-free in the summer, allowing for the shipping of goods through the Canadian Arctic archipelago. Opening of this sea-lane could create economic opportunities for northern communities; it could also expose sensitive Arctic ecosystems to increased pollution. Canada's ability to control future activity within the passage is questionable. Not only is Canada ill-prepared to monitor existing traffic and enforce its jurisdiction, the United States and the European Union have indicated they do not accept Canada's sovereignty claims. These countries may push for the Passage to be treated as an international waterway over which Canada would exert only limited control.

Arctic warming also has worldwide implications. Melting of extremely reflective Arctic snow and ice reveals darker land and ocean surfaces, escalating heat absorption and creating a feedback loop that further warms the planet. Moreover, Arctic climate change affects biodiversity throughout the world because migratory species such as whales, birds and fish from other regions depend on northern summer breeding grounds.

The process of climate change has already been stimulated by human-induced changes to the Earth's

atmosphere, and it will continue well into the future. Uncertainty remains regarding how quickly climate change will take place and the extent of its long-term impacts. However, there is general agreement within the scientific community that a doubling of atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations would be a poor legacy to leave future generations. Yet the global community is well on its way to reaching this threshold.

Over the past century, Inuit have been forced to adjust to a rapidly changing world. Now it is the industrialized world, and Canada specifically, that must cope and adjust to the changes taking place in our homelands. Kyoto is necessary and important, but insufficient on its own. We must pay more attention to the complex issues facing us and urgently develop appropriate policies.

Governing in a minority position will make it very difficult for our political leaders to continue to pay lip service to environmental protection. This new political landscape should lead to renewed national debate on the environment and a clear sustainable development policy recognizing the complexity and diversity of Canada's vast northern regions. The lessons we can learn about climate change today in the north are vital to understand the threats to the rest of Canada and to the world tomorrow.

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