

DAVIS INLET IN CRISIS: WILL THE LESSONS EVER BE LEARNED?

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Abstract / Resume

The author reviews the history of the Mushuau Innu who now live at Davis Inlet on the Labrador coast. He examines the policy context of the contemporary community and looks at the challenges facing both the Innu and governments in the future.

L'auteur réexamine l'histoire des Mushuau Innu qui habitent à présent à Davis Inlet sur la côte de Labrador. Il étudie la politique de la communauté contemporaine et considère les épreuves qui se présenteront aux Innu et aux gouvernements dans l'avenir.

We have only lived in houses for twenty-five years, and we have seldom asked ourselves, "what should an Innu community be like? What does community mean to us as a people whose culture is based in a nomadic past, in six thousand years of visiting every pond and river valley in Nitassinan?

- Hearing the Voices

While the front pages of our local newspapers are replete with accounts of violence, poverty and abuse throughout the world, not often do we encounter cases, particularly in this country, of such unconditional destruction that have led to the social disintegration of entire communities. One such case was Grassy Narrows, starkly and movingly brought to our collective attention by Shkilnyk (1985). The story of Grassy Narrows is one of devastation, impoverishment, and ruin. Shkilnyk describes her experiences in the small First Nation's community this way:

I could never escape the feeling that I had been parachuted into a void - a drab and lifeless place in which the vital spark of life had gone out. It wasn't just the poverty of the place, the isolation, or even the lack of a decent bed that depressed me... What struck me about Grassy Narrows was the numbness in the human spirit. There was an indifference, a listlessness, a total passivity that I could neither understand nor seem to do anything about (Shkilnyk, 1985:4).

But this essay is not about Grassy Narrows; it is about Davis Inlet. Many of the images described of events in Grassy Narrows are the same images evident in Davis Inlet today: poverty, substandard housing, inadequate water and sewage, pollution, government dependency, violent death, substance abuse, sexual and physical abuse, cultural deprivation, and more. While such images may not be uncommon in many First Nation communities, the systemic nature of their existence in Davis Inlet is. There are few examples of the almost total destruction of the basic cultural fabric of a whole community. The lessons of Grassy Narrows have yet to be learned.

The purpose of this essay is threefold: to trace the events which led up to the current state in Davis Inlet; to examine the policy context in which this community finds itself and, finally, to serve as another part - albeit a small one - of a much bigger effort which is needed for collective action to take place. The Mushuau Innu (meaning people of the barrens) are most worthy of our attention.

Background

For 6,000 years or more the Innu (Naskapi) had been nomadic hunters, ranging throughout the entire interior region of the Labrador/Ungava Peninsula, encompassing virtually all of Labrador and major portions of northern and eastern Quebec above the St. Lawrence River (*Nitassinan*). They organized their lives around those activities that enabled them to take advantage of the natural resources of the area (Ryan, 1988:4).

Fitzhugh describes a migratory cycle consisting of five phases: summer fishing and gathering, fall caribou hunting, winter trapping, winter caribou hunting, and spring gathering (cited in Ryan, 1988:4). At the centre of the Innu culture was the caribou. The Caribou (*mukushan*) served as a staple food supply, as a source for clothing and other supplies, and as a prominent figure in Innu religion. Often referred to disparagingly as "savage hunters" (Speck, 1935), the Innu were indeed skilful hunters. Bruemmer (1971) describes their hunting practices this way:

[They] snared rabbits, hunted wildfowl, caught fish, and killed bears with ingeniously constructed deadfalls. But most important to them was the caribou. It supplied them with food and nearly everything else they needed: warm clothing; tent covers; thong for snowshoe netting; sinew for thread; and bone for utensils. They drove caribou into cleverly built ambushes; they ran them down on snowshoes in the deep snows of winter; and they lanced them from birch-bark canoes in lakes or rivers (1971:97).

The nomadic lifestyle of the Innu was far from easy. For the most part, they lived in teepees (*innutshuap*) which had to be set up and taken down several times a year. The caribou hide teepee was built around a large rock (even in winter) on which the Innu would build a fire for cooking and heating. Life inside the teepee was simple and ungarnished. The Innu described it as follows:

We would prepare pitshikuan when we would be staying a long time. We would stretch out the dry meat and tie it to a pole. Then we would pour a mixture from the caribou stomach and blood over the meat. Anything that was hard to chew, like the caribou ligament, that's how we would keep it and make it soft. Fish could also be made into pimikuan in the same way caribou meat was. We would dry the caribou meat, pound it and make it into a powder. The pimin from Mukushan could also be mixed with red berries. When people were in the country, we were always healthy and strong (Innu Nation and Mushuau Innu Band Council, 1992:12).

Survival for the Innu did not come without its price. During the 16th and 17th centuries the Innu were attacked by the Iroquois and forced to move eastward into the Labrador peninsula (Henriksen, 1973), and later by the Micmacs when they were forced to move even further east and north. The Innu hunted in the interior for most of the year and visited the coast of Labrador during the summer months.

About 1924, during a cycle when the caribou were particularly sparse, the Mushuau Innu began to spend their summers around the shoreline near the mainland of Davis Inlet and Voisey Bay.¹ There they took advantage of the accessibility of the site, a better supply of other food sources, and the presence of a trading post operated by the Hudson's Bay Company. In the years that followed, the Innu would travel inland as far as the George River to hunt caribou during the fall and winter, and return to Davis Inlet in the spring. There the Hudson Bay Company would supply traps, ammunition, tobacco, butter, sugar and flour to the Innu in exchange for furs: fox, otter, beaver, martin, weasel, squirrel and muskrat. The Innu were entering the new cash economy of the 20th century.

Another reason for coming to the coast was the presence of a priest. Around this time, Roman Catholic missionaries began regular visits to Davis Inlet during the summer (Henriksen, 1973:13). Father O'Brien, the first priest to come to the area, was helpful to the Innu and promised to return every summer if his appointed Chief could gather all the Innu in Davis Inlet for the event. Over the years, the priest became such an influential figure in Innu life that he would tell them when to come to Davis Inlet and when to return to the country (Innu Nation and Mushuau Innu Band Council, 1992:14). From 1927 on, the priest made annual summer visits to Davis Inlet.² Over time, the Innu became increasingly dependent on the location, returning every year from the country to spend their summers there. Henriksen described some of the reasons for this increasing dependency on Davis Inlet:

Having moved their families to the coast, it was then a large undertaking to go inland. At that time, the Naskapi had few dogs and this meant that it took a long time to travel into the Barrens. Very little store-bought food could be carried on the sleds to guard against hunger. These factors, coupled with the greater uncertainty of finding caribou after the herds had changed their migration routes, meant that the Naskapi stayed closer to the coast and relied on the store and its supplies whenever necessary (1973:13).

As a result, the Innu gradually adopted a more sedentary lifestyle.

The Hudson's Bay Company encouraged only the use of traps; however, hunting and trapping at the same time proved difficult for the Innu. Further, the company gave only limited credit, and usually only to those who regularly got plenty of furs. The transformation of the hunting patterns from traditional hunting methods to fur-trapping for profit made the Innu particularly vulnerable to disease and starvation. It was also during this period that government assistance began to be provided. Social problems among the Innu, particularly those resulting from the use of alcohol, began to emerge.

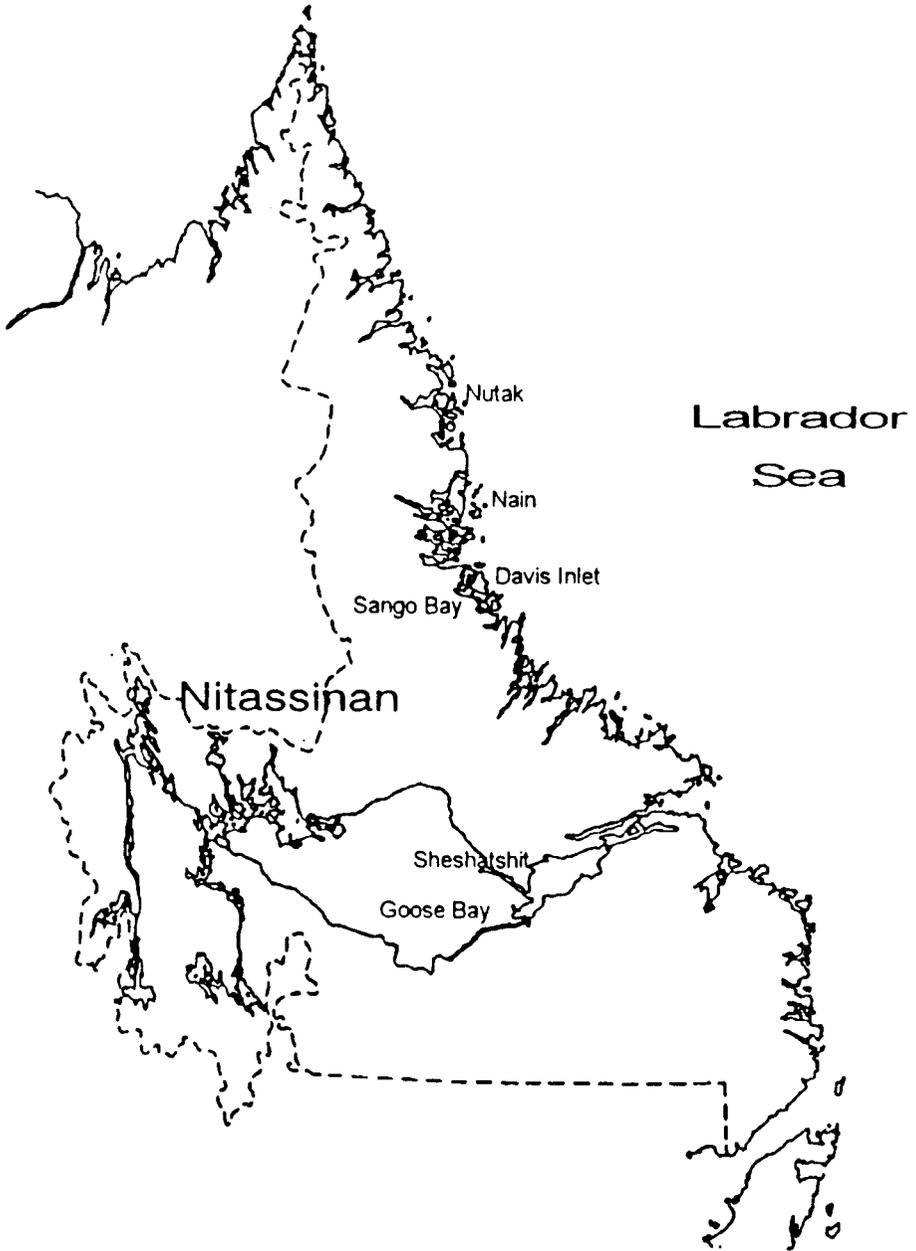
Settling along the coast brought them in periodic collision with the Inuit (Eskimo) of coastal Labrador. In stark contrast to the Innu, the Inuit lived in small communities along the coast and on the bleak and barren off-shore islands from Hopedale in southern Labrador to Nain in the far north. The sea is the predominate domain of the Inuit, who often travel great distances to hunt seals and whales. The relationship between the two cultures has at times been strained. Even today there are overlapping land claims between the two groups, particularly over Voisey Bay where a new mine has been discovered. Inuit travelling along the coast would try and avoid Davis Inlet or, if they had to stop, would ask the parish priest to put them up for the night (Bruemmer, 1971:97).

In 1948, an ill-conceived attempt by the government at the time was made to relocate the Innu to Nutak, a small community on the far northern coast of Labrador (see Map 1). The Innu were told that in their new community they would have better opportunities for fishing, hunting and cutting wood.³ Without any prior consultation, the Innu were transported to Nutak in the hold of a coastal boat, the *Winnifred Lee*. The conditions in Nutak were little different than those in Davis Inlet. Some Innu were taught to fish and others were put to work cutting wood for the Inuit. They surprised officials when, after two years,⁴ they showed up back in Davis Inlet, having walked the entire distance through the interior of Labrador. In the final analysis the decision to move the Innu to Nutak was largely driven by economic considerations. McRae describes it this way:

[T]he decision to relocate the Innu in Nutak was a consequence of the decision to close the government depot at Davis Inlet. It was a decision guided by a belief that the Innu should become economically productive and based on the administrative convenience of the location of the government depot (1993:37).

McRae continues:

This is not to deny that the government officials involved may have believed that they were acting in the best interests of the Innu. But their assumptions had nothing to do with the Innu's



Map 1: Innu of Labrador

view of the world, nor did they attempt to understand what that view was through discussions with Innu... No-one asked the Innu if they wanted to change from their traditional hunting activities to commercial fishing. No-one asked if they wished to move away from an area with which they had been associated for many years (1993:38).

Another priest, Father Whitehead, picked out the first Innu Chief, Joe Rich. Prior to that, the Innu had no single leader. Whenever they travelled into the country different people would assume leadership roles depending on the circumstances. No one questioned the leadership; everyone respected it (Innu Nation and Mushuau Innu Band Council, 1992:13). Father Joseph Cyr was the first permanent priest in Davis Inlet. One of the first things he did was to arrange for a saw mill to be brought to the area in order for work to begin on, among other things, a new school for the children. Two years later when Father Cyr left, so did the saw mill.

During the fifties and sixties, the idea of again moving the Innu was discussed in detail. The idea given greatest prominence was that of moving the Innu to North West River in an effort to combine the two Innu populations of Labrador. In 1967 it was determined - time by the post-confederation Smallwood government - that the old site was no longer suitable and a decision was made to move the Innu. With the urging of Father Peters (the next priest), Joe Rich and several government officials, 150 Innu were moved to an Iluikoyak Island where they settled at the present site on a year-round basis.⁵ There was no public consultation on whether to move to the new island site nor any vote on the decision to move. The Innu were simply told that the land was good for building, they would be given new houses, there would be lots of water; a well had been dug to ensure that there was water. Feeling the decision of government and the church would mean better housing and living conditions, most did not question the move.

The government provided the Innu with building materials but without the skills training for them to know how to use the materials. Many Innu used them to build wooden walls on which they would use their tents as roofs. To travel to their hunting grounds, they have to cross 11 kilometres of sea ice. There are long periods in the fall and spring when the conditions for crossing the rattle to the mainland are too dangerous. Because of the fall freeze-up and spring break-up in the rattle, and because the Innu are inland hunters rather than skilled boat people, drowning accidents are not uncommon. Often, it is not until Christmas that the Innu can venture onto the ice, and frequently late spring before the ice leaves. The result has been the disengagement of the Innu from their traditional hunting grounds for significant periods of the year. The nomadic lifestyle of the Innu is, for all intents and purposes, now over.

As early as 1969, problems with the site started to surface. With fewer opportunities to go into the country for hunting, people began to depend more upon store bought foods. The houses were small and were not designed for extended families.⁶ They had no basements, construction was substandard at best, and no water or sewage services were installed - at least in the Innu houses. It was soon discovered there was insufficient water and much of it was contaminated. Garbage began accumulating and different kinds of diseases began to appear, among them tuberculosis. Snowmobiles replaced dogs, boats with outboard motors replaced canoes, and government assistance replaced the traditional way of life. It was not long until some Innu began to talk of relocation, again.

The Context

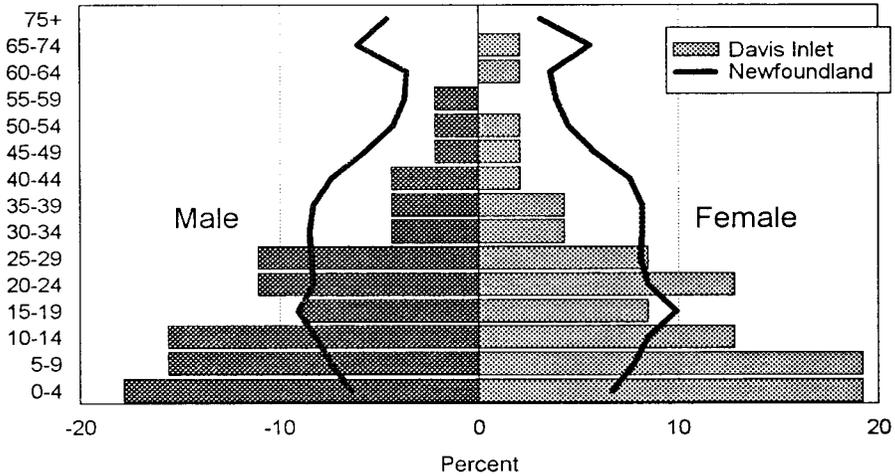
Utshimasits (the Innu name for Davis Inlet) was incorporated in 1969. However, in 1984 the municipal council was superseded by the Mushuau Innu Band Council of Davis Inlet which was formed under the authority of the federal Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs. The Chief and Band Council are now elected according to procedures set out in the federal *Indian Act*, and the Band functions as an administrative unit to receive and disperse funds. However, because the Mushuau Innu have chosen not to register under the *Indian Act*, they are not entitled to receive the full range of programs, services and other benefits available to other First Nation peoples who are registered and resident on Reserves.

The situation in Davis Inlet today is the result of many events, conditions, and decisions, some radiating from within the domain of the Innu themselves and some emanating from the external environment. All have, to some degree, exacerbated rather than alleviated the harsh living conditions of the Innu. A number of these circumstances are described below.

Demography

According to the most recent census (Statistics Canada, 1991:326), the population of Davis Inlet is 465, almost all of whom are Innu (93%).⁷ Most (87%) communicate in the traditional language of *Innuaimum*. While the primary language of instruction in the school is English, it is unclear as to how many use English as their primary language of communication. The population of Davis Inlet exhibits many of the characteristics of a developing country. More than half (55%) of the population, for example, is under the age of 20 (compared with 32% for Newfoundland). More surprising is the difference in the age structure of the population of Davis Inlet when compared with the population of the Province of Newfoundland and Lab-

rador (see Figure 1). On the one hand, it appears that fertility rates in Davis Inlet are significantly higher than those found elsewhere in Newfoundland. On the other hand, the life expectancy of the Innu is considerably shorter than for the other citizens of Newfoundland. Fully, 80% of the Innu of Davis Inlet are below the age of 30 years.



Source: Statistics Canada, Profile of Census Divisions and Subdivisions, 1992.

Figure 1: Population by Age and Gender, Davis Inlet and Newfoundland, 1991

Housing and Health

Housing and health conditions in Davis Inlet have been described as particularly impoverished. While, the average number of people per dwelling is over seven, the average number of bedrooms per dwelling is 2.4, low even by Newfoundland standards.

Over the years, the government built new houses for the Innu. However, the houses were not large (750 square feet), were built close together, had only a 40-watt light service, had no furniture, and, while equipped with tubs, toilets and sinks, had no water or sewage to enable their use. The type of soil on which the houses are constructed, combined with extreme frost conditions, means that each year the houses shift causing considerable frost damage: walls crack and floors warp. The houses are dangerous to live in, develop leaks and are cold. At the very least, they are not warm and comfortable places in which to live.

Health concerns centre around the provision of safe drinking water and

sewage disposal. Soil conditions - a thick clay soil underlying a sandy surface - are not conducive to the installation of septic systems and because of surface water trapped above the clay, even outhouses don't work. Most residents simply dispose of human waste at will. There is no garbage disposal and household waste is also scattered throughout the community. With only two drilled wells for the entire community, drinking water is insufficient and much of it is contaminated because of inadequate sewage disposal. Where water and sewage services exist, for the most part they are confined to the residences of non-Innu such as the local priest, the White teachers and White nurses, and the RCMP.

Social Conditions

Over the years a severe alcohol problem has developed among adults in the community, much of it leading to neglect, family violence, and physical and sexual abuse. When their parents are drinking, the children are ignored, unfed, abused, or otherwise neglected. They are also vulnerable to the same sicknesses as their parents. Many are addicted at a very early age. To say there is also a serious solvent abuse problem amongst young people in the community is an understatement. Young people start gas sniffing⁸ at a very early age. This behaviour eventually leads to alcohol addiction and, for many, to fighting, stealing, vandalism, sexual abuse, and much more. It has been estimated that between 40 and 50 children - fully one-half of the adolescent population - are at some degree of risk. Many sniff gasoline on a daily basis. Many other children are victims of sexual and physical abuse. Attempts at intervention have met with limited success. About 75% of the young people placed in a group home in the Innu community of Sheshatshit are from Davis Inlet. However, rather than a punishment or learning exercise, many youth see their stay at the group home as an opportunity to get new clothes, good food, and plenty of attention.

Different groups have made claims as to the causes of such high levels of drinking in Davis Inlet. Some claim that the transient nature of the people is a large part of the problem. Others have suggested that the problems are largely the result of a government which continues to tackle pieces but not the entire problem. Others suggest it is the lack of productive work, either in the country or within Davis Inlet, while others maintain it is the result of generations of dependency, on the Hudson's Bay Company, on the church, and on government.⁹

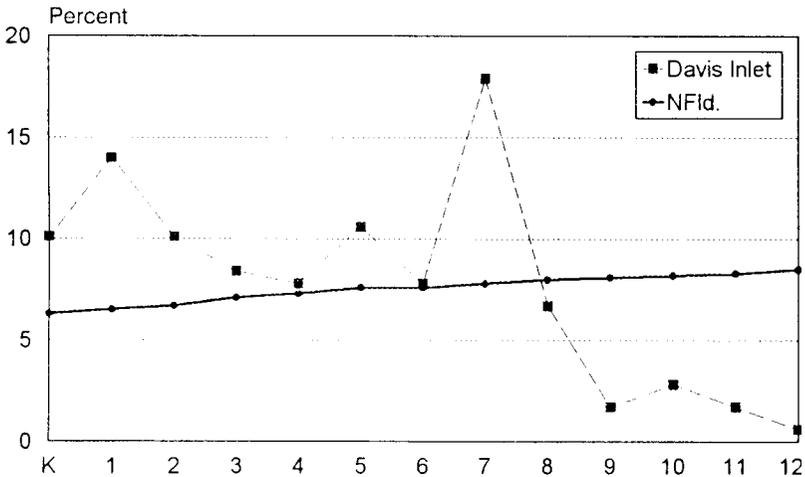
There is a large government store in the community. However, food is expensive; there is little in the way of fresh fruits or vegetables, and many perishable items are kept long past their shelf-life. A youth centre was built

to provide recreation activities for young people. While the centre has a sound system, video games and pool tables, it has little else. Most families have snowmobiles, cable TV, and video recorders, but many children are poorly clothed, particularly in winter. Many families no longer prepare regular meals, and as a result, a large number of children exist on a steady diet of potato chips, candy, soft drinks, and other foods having little or no nutritional value.

Education

The first school in Davis Inlet was built in 1963 with Father Frans Peters, a Dutch-born Oblate missionary, serving as the first teacher. The school was destroyed by fire in 1978, after which temporary facilities were used until a new school could be constructed and opened in 1981. *Nukum Mani Shan* is an all grade school operated by the Labrador Roman Catholic school board. Today, the school has about 180 students enrolled, up from 127 students in 1986 (Department of Education, 1994). The principal, Sister Joan Baldwin, has a staff of 14 non-Innu teachers, five Innu teacher-aides, and an Innu vice-principal. Increasing enrolment and the extension of the program to include a full high school program has led to overcrowding. The school has no library, resource centre or multi-purpose area. It complements its academic program with a nutrition program, a shower program, an evening recreation program, and a life skills program to promote Innu traditions. Only recently have serious efforts been made to introduce students to formal education in their own language. Younger children are now taught social studies and religion in their own language (*Innu-eimun*).

Among the most serious problems in the school are absenteeism, fighting, gas-sniffing and alcohol use. However, most serious - particularly from a pedagogical point of view - has been the high dropout rate. Indeed, over the years few students have completed their schooling in the community. In the current year, for example, the school has 18 children enrolled in kindergarten but only one student taking grade 12. Figure 2 compares the enrolment by grade for the school in Davis Inlet with enrolment for Newfoundland. While there is a great deal of variance in enrolment in the elementary grades in Davis Inlet due to the small population base, there is an obvious and significant drop in enrolment in the secondary grades. A comparison of graduation rates - the percentage of grade 10 students to graduates two years later - shows that, while the provincial graduation rate for the 1992-93 school year was 70.6 percent, only one in four graduated in *Nukum Mani Shan*.¹⁰



Source: Newfoundland Department of Education and Training, Education Statistics, 19

Figure 2: Enrolment Distribution by Grade, Davis Inlet and Newfoundland, 1993-94.

What these data do not show are the staggering levels of absenteeism in the school. Data indicate that as much as one-third (33.1%) of the school year is missed for various reasons.¹¹ The total days lost per month are shown in Table 1.

One of the biggest concerns of the Innu is a sense of alienation in their own school. Many parents feel disenfranchised; that is, they feel that the school is not meeting the cultural and language needs of their children; that they do not have any say in the "real" decisions of the school, and that non-Innu teachers don't understand the Innu and are unsympathetic. Some of the sentiments toward the school are described by an Innu teacher in the following:

Some teachers complain about how the children dress. Once a teacher I worked with complained about the smell, that the children smelled, they had no clean clothing. I really hated it when she said this. It hurts me too because they are my people, my children. The White teachers can't even wash the children. They let the Innu teachers do this. We feel that these teachers think the children are too dirty. The teachers should understand that there is no water and sewage in Innu homes (Innu Nation and Mushuau Innu Band Council, 1992:35).

Table 1: Total and Percent Student Days Lost by Month, Nukum Mani Shan, 1993-1994

	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Total
Total days lost	1,586	1,141	1,184	655	768	992	1,081	1,443	1,062	510	10,422
Percent	51.8	32.0	34.8	24.1	23.8	29.2	33.5	56.6	29.8	16.7	32.8

Source: Compiled from data provided by the Newfoundland Department of Education and Training and the Labrador Roman Catholic School Board.

Religion

The role of religion in Innu life is complex and self-sustaining. For many, there is a dynamic tension between Innu spirituality on the one hand and Catholic religion on the other. For thousands of years the Innu had their own religion; deifying the spirits of the animals. Yet, the emergence of the Catholic church in the community led to conflict between divergent spiritual values. One could only hold one at the expense of the other; there was no room for both. As a result, the Innu were forced to give up their connection with the past and embrace something that is foreign and new.

The Roman Catholic church has had a profound impact on the Innu. On the one hand, the church has given considerable advice and guidance to the Innu, even when advice and guidance were not needed. On the other hand, the church has taken away many of the valued traditions of the Innu. Some of the comments made during the week-long Gathering Voices describe this dynamic tension between the two:

The church made a lot of mistakes in the past. Everyone here says that. The church damaged our culture. Instead of helping us, the priests made us lose our traditions and spirituality by taking control and running our lives. We listened to the priests too much (p.29).

I respect my religion as a Catholic because I know I can never go back to my traditional religion [Shuash] (p.29).

I was baptised and I believe in the Church, but I also believe in our own religion, our own spiritual beliefs. I want the children to learn our way of life. This is very important. I respect the Church very much, but we have to go back to our old ways too. Our children are learning the Catholic religion, but they must learn our traditional way of life as well [Kaniuekutat] (p.30).

One of the important early influences of the church had to do with schooling. Formal schooling, since it was first introduced by missionaries in 1952, has presented a dilemma for the Innu. The nomadic lifestyle has meant that attendance in school was sporadic at best. Ryan cites two methods the church used to pressure the Innu of Sheshatshit to send their children to school. First, when discovering that children were missing from school, missionaries would search them out and physically - sometimes by twisting their ears - bring them to school themselves. Second, the church applied pressure upon the government to withhold family allowance payments to families who neglected to send their children to school (1988:14-15).

Many Innu have mixed feelings about the presence of the Catholic church. While they want the church to remain part of their lives, they also want to begin the process of relearning their own spiritual beliefs. Teaching their children about the *Katipinimitaoch* (the caribou spirit which is the supreme spirit and master of everything), about the *mukushan* (a special ceremony to give thanks to the Caribou God), and to do the "drum dance", have become critically important to the Innu.

Labour Force

Employment in Davis Inlet has not improved much since the early cash economies of the fur trade. On the other hand, a number of Innu are now employed in the service sector. Statistics Canada (1994:328,330) reports that the unemployment rate (21.1%), while double the Canadian rate (10.2%), is lower than the rate for Newfoundland (27.8%) and significantly lower than many coastal Labrador communities (e.g., Charlottetown, 72.7%; and Cartwright, 63.3%). The youth unemployment rate (15-24 year olds) exhibits some of the same differences: 40.0% for Davis Inlet, 15.5% for Canada, and 38.2% for Newfoundland. One possible explanation is the presence of extensive government services; 68.4% of the labour force is employed in education, health and other government services. Another factor is the presence of government related programs. The youth council, for example, has been successful in securing a number of youth employment projects.¹²

The Crisis

Davis Inlet grabbed world attention in 1993 when six children were found intoxicated from sniffing gasoline fumes in an unheated shack in the middle of winter, some screaming they wanted to die. As a result, 18 children from the community were sent for treatment to Poundmaker's Lodge - a Native-run addiction - treatment centre in Alberta. But this was not the only incident in Davis Inlet in recent years. What has surfaced in recent years is a dismal tale of poverty, widespread alcoholism, solvent abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse of women and children, teenage suicide, and chronic unemployment. While the world spotlight shone on this one event, it was by no means an isolated incident. Since 1973, 50 lives in the community have been lost to alcohol-related deaths. In February 1992, six children died in a house fire while their parents were away drinking. The parents are facing abandonment charges.

To some, these chilling incidents signalled a total breakdown in the social structure of the community, while to others, they signified a clash

between two cultures, what happens when a minority culture is subsumed by a dominant culture. Some critics have charged that government neglect is clearly to blame. Others have accused the federal government of renegeing on its fiduciary obligation. Cites McRae:

Although the 1967 relocation was carried out by the government of Newfoundland, the government of Canada, in accordance with its constitutional mandate under section 91(24) and its fiduciary responsibility to aboriginal peoples in Canada still bears ultimate responsibility (1993:48).

On the other hand, many Innu have said they must accept some of the responsibility. During the discussions at Gathering Voices, in an open penetrating display of self-analysis, some Innu openly declared: "We blame the white man for our troubles. But we are the ones to blame, not the white man. The white man doesn't bring alcohol to us. We go to alcohol" (p.7).

Policy Implications

Policy has been defined as "a course of action or inaction chosen by public authorities to address a given problem or interrelated set of problems" (Pal, 1992:2). Public policies are collections of values, goals and instruments constructed around a particular public problem. Although this definition speaks of both action and inaction, the policies evolving in Davis Inlet, at least for the present, are characterised by inaction. Pal describes the policy process in terms of three stages: the problem definition stage where problems are first recognized and then continually reassessed, the design stage where instruments are chosen, and the implementation stage when policy is actually put into practice (1992:118-119). The policy process in Davis Inlet clearly is just getting to the problem recognition stage. The more difficult design work has yet to begin.

The importance of understanding the historical context of the policy development process was recognized by Majone. Majone asserts that, particularly in complex public policy issues, the importance of examining "the historical continuity, persistence and drift of public policy" cannot be understated (1989:42). Nowhere is the sense of history more important than in First Nations communities such as Davis Inlet. The Innu have been uprooted and relocated many times over the centuries, each time a result of the policies of others. On the surface, the suicide attempts by the young people were the precipitating event of a recent policy initiative by the Innu to relocate their community. However, relocation has been pursued actively by the Innu of Davis Inlet for many years. The Innu have advocated moving to Sango Bay, a mainland site some 15 kilometres from Davis Inlet.

Nutuaiashish (the Innu name for Sango Bay) is close to the traditional hunting grounds, is a much larger site (it can accommodate over 600 houses), has a waterfall that can be harnessed for hydroelectricity, and has a good site for an airstrip. However, to date no soil tests have been completed.

In March 1992, the Mushuau Innu organized a community consultation process, in which they attempted to probe some of the causes of the social disintegration in their community. As a result, a policy document entitled: *Hearing the Voices: Government's Role in Innu Renewal*, was developed. The document contained a seven-point plan for change:

- relocation of Davis Inlet;
- sending chronic solvent abusers to a treatment lodge in Alberta;
- setting up a community resource team to deal with the abusers when they return;
- establishing a family and cultural renewal centre;
- acknowledgment by Canada of its constitutional obligations to the Innu;
- high-level meeting between the Innu and government leaders; and
- recognition of Innu land and resource rights.

Premier Wells of Newfoundland called the document unacceptable because it included a requirement that all points, including land claims, had to be dealt with collectively. He said that the issues dealing with relocation and social renewal were quite acceptable, but linking them to land claims and an inherent right to self-government would be tantamount to blackmail. He also suggested that other sites - such as near Goose Bay or near the Quebec boarder where other Innu have established themselves - should be considered before a move is made. In an interview with the *Globe and Mail* newspaper Wells was quoted as saying:

The two governments and the community leaders would do the Innu a great disservice if we didn't make sure that we create a comfortable secure community with maximum economic viability. If you look at the problems, what economic opportunity is there in Nutuaiashish? Really none. Isolation of the community is probably a factor of the problem. Nutuaiashish is only slightly less isolated than Davis Inlet (Valpy, 1993:D1).

On the other hand, Peter Penashue, president of the Innu Nation, accused Premier Wells of not dealing "holistically" with the problem. He argued that all the issues have to be dealt with at once, including land and resource claims. At the same time, Ovide Mercredi, of the Assembly of First Nations,

accused both governments [provincial and federal] of what he called confrontational paternalism (Platiel, 1993:A6).

One of the obstacles perceived as being in the way of the relocation process is that the Innu are not status Indians; that is, they are not registered under the *Indian Act*. While registering would provide the Innu with access to considerably more funds, the Innu do not feel that the benefits outweigh the losses. Bart James of the Innu Nation referred to the *Act* as "outdated and paternalistic." He argued that if the Innu were to register under the *Indian Act*, government would have authority over how Band Councils are chosen, and would be able to veto Band by-laws, pass their own regulations on local matters, and unilaterally decide how local monies are spent (Muscati, 1993). In a report prepared for the Canadian Human Rights Commission, McRae argued that what is needed is a dramatic gesture of confidence on the part of the federal government:

An acknowledgement of the constitutional responsibility of the federal government towards the Innu and a commitment to deal with them directly as if they were registered under the Indian Act and on reserve. This would involve replacing the existing Canada-Newfoundland contribution agreement in respect of the Innu with an agreement directly between the government of Canada and the Innu that would provide funding to the Innu from the federal government at a level available to Indian bands that are registered and on-reserve (1993:53).

McRae maintained that requiring the Innu to register under the *Indian Act* would be "to elevate form over substance. It would be nothing more than a "symbolic act of subordination" (*Ibid.*:53).

The Challenge

The challenges facing First Nations peoples in Canada today are no less perilous than they were when those peoples first came in contact with the European culture. They are framed within a context of competing cultures, competing in the sense that there are a dominant and a minority culture both attempting to coexist in the same house. Berger, in a penetrating vignette in the report of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline, depicts the attitudes which likely have contributed to the crises in First Nations communities today.

To the Europeans, the native's use of the land, based upon hunting and gathering, was extravagant in extent and irreligious in nature... The assumptions implicit in all this are several. Native religion had to be replaced; native customs had to

be rejected, native uses and way of living on the land could not, once the fur trade had been superseded by the search for minerals, oil and gas, be regarded as socially important or economically significant (1977:85).

The history of Aboriginal relocations in Canada, indeed in North America, has been a saga of failure. Nowhere is this more evident than with the Innu of Davis Inlet; yet another failed relocation would be unacceptable. Nonetheless, maintaining the status quo in Davis Inlet is equally unacceptable. Everyone involved seems unwilling, at least for the moment, to take that perilous first step. In discussing some of the potential alternatives for the Innu, McRae offers a simple caveat:

A "remedy" for the Innu Nation cannot... provide a panacea for the problems the Innu face. In this regard, the Innu are acutely aware of the precarious position they are in as a people. They are aware of the "lost" culture of the elders; of the fact that their children have been inundated through television with a southern, white culture; they are aware of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of turning the clock back for their children; they are aware of the impact of losing the cultural values of their traditional ways; they are aware of the fragility, if not non-existence, of the economic base on which their communities presently rest (1993:52).

The anthropologist Georg Henriksen investigated the social and economic conditions of the Innu and the potential of Sango Bay as a relocation site for the Newfoundland government. Henriksen concluded that, given its better access to the hunting rounds, Sango Bay would be the preferred site. He also concluded that such a move would help the Innu regain "their spiritual power... social and psychological health, and... their collective identity and self-esteem."¹³

The current inaction seems less an issue of economics and more a fear of repeating the mistakes of the past. Questions about who was at fault seem of little importance. However, facing vexing questions about why it happened is essential if we are to fully understand why relocation failed in the past and what must be done differently to ensure its success in the future. These events in our past cannot be treated as parts of our history that can now be put aside. Clearly, there is a responsibility to start letting these people determine their own future. The central issue for non-Innu is about mobilizing resources to enable these people to put their lives back together and to provide them with the same dignity and self-respect as other Canadians. This is the only issue that matters.

Postscript

In the aftermath of the horrific events in Davis Inlet, little seems to have changed. Many of the children involved in the gas-sniffing incident who went to Poundmaker's Lodge for treatment, along with their parents, translators and youth workers, are now back sniffing gasoline.¹⁴ While everyone in this case appears genuinely to have the best interests of the Innu at heart, no one seems willing to take an unqualified risk. The Innu have made relocation conditional upon settlement of land claims and their inherent right to self-government. The federal government has committed \$80 million to facilitate the relocation conditional upon Newfoundland's participation. The Newfoundland government has agreed to participate conditional upon the consideration of other locations and land claims being separated from discussions about resettlement. Meanwhile, the Innu remain in Davis Inlet.

Notes

1. Another Innu group began settling in Sheshatshit, located to the south on the shore of Lake Melville.
2. There has been a permanent mission in Davis Inlet since 1952.
3. The basis of this decision is incomprehensible given that the immediate area surrounding Nutak was barren. Not only would wood cutting prove to be rather difficult under those conditions, but hunting would also prove to be onerous.
4. There is some discrepancy in the precise length of stay in Nutak. Georg Henriksen, an anthropologist who completed extensive field work in Davis Inlet between 1966 and 1968, said that they returned from Nutak "five months later" (1973:14). On the other hand, Donald McRae, Dean of Common Law at the University of Ottawa, who completed an extensive report on the complaints of the Innu for the Canadian Human Rights Commission, said that they returned from Nutak "at the end of their second winter" (1993:36).
5. A detailed examination of this can be found in McRae (1993:30-48).
6. At the time, one Innu, Chief Joe Rich, was provided with a two-story house.
7. Local estimates place the population at over 500.
8. Often using whatever solvents are available, such as Javex.
9. On careful examination, one can probably identify each of the interests in this enigma.

10. Provided from school profiles, prepared by the Division of Student Evaluation and Statistics, Department of Education and Training, November 1994.
11. This is drawn from the Innu document "Gathering Voices" and from interviews with school board and Department of Education officials.
12. One example is a project organized by the Mushuau Innu Band Council in collaboration with the Innu Youth Council and the Mennonite Central Committee and funded, in part, by the Canada-Newfoundland Cooperation Agreement for Human Resource Development. The purpose of the project is to avail of local leadership to help young adults acquire the skills and competencies and develop the confidence to enable them to work with young people in the community.
13. See, Move Innu community, Nfld. urged. (1993, November 27). *The Toronto Star*, p.A17.
14. Of the 18 children sent to Poundmaker's Lodge for treatment, 12 have been reported using solvents again (Valpy, 1994:A2).

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