

# **INDIGENOUS CONTENTIOUS COLLECTIVE ACTION IN CANADA: THE LABRADOR INNU AND THEIR OCCUPATION OF THE GOOSE BAY MILITARY AIR BASE**

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

Over the last fifty years or so, a number of Aboriginal groups in Canada have used protests, blockades, and occupations to oppose the Canadian state. Although most of these conflicts have received significant scholarly attention, a number of important phenomena related to Indigenous contentious collective action remain relatively unexplored or untested. One particular phenomenon that is in need of further study is why Aboriginal groups decide to engage in contentious collective action in the first place. To address this question, this paper uses the theoretical lenses of rational choice and political opportunity structure to analyze the Labrador Innu's decision to mobilize and occupy the Goose Bay military air base during the 1980s and the 1990s.

Au cours des quelque cinquante dernières années, un certain nombre de groupes autochtones canadiens ont eu recours aux manifestations, aux barrages routiers et aux occupations pour s'opposer au gouvernement canadien. Bien que ces conflits aient bénéficié d'une attention importante des chercheurs, certains phénomènes importants liés à l'action collective contentieuse des Autochtones demeurent relativement inexplorés ou non vérifiés. Un des phénomènes qui exige plus d'étude est une explication des motifs de l'adoption par les groupes autochtones d'actions collectives contentieuses. Pour aborder cette question, le présent article se sert de la lentille théorique du choix rationnel et de la structure des possibilités politiques pour analyser la décision des Innus du Labrador de se mobiliser et d'occuper la base militaire aérienne de Goose Bay au cours des années 1980 et 1990.

## **Introduction**

Over the last fifty years or so, a number of Aboriginal groups in Canada have used protests, blockades, and occupations to oppose the Canadian state. One of the most publicized confrontations between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state occurred during the 1980s and the 1990s. Since 1941, the federal government and its allies have conducted military airplane exercises over the traditional lands of the Labrador Innu. For the most part, the Innu tolerated these exercises because they occurred infrequently and at high altitudes. In 1979, however, the Crown and its allies initiated a new low-level flight training program out of the Goose Bay air base in Labrador. In contrast to the previous flights, these flying exercises were extremely disruptive not only to the environment, but also to the Innu's health, hunting stocks, and ways of life. In response, the Labrador Innu began a domestic and international campaign against the governments partaking in these exercises. The result was significant domestic and international media coverage of their situation, as well as frequent confrontations between the Labrador Innu and the Canadian state, culminating in a series of Innu occupations of the Goose Bay military base in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Although many of the conflicts between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state have received significant scholarly attention over the last several decades (Miller, 2000; Coates, 2000; Richardson, 1989, Hodgins et al., 2003), the existing literature has yet to address a number of important theoretical puzzles relating to Indigenous contentious collective action. This paper seeks to address one particular lacuna in the literature: what causes an Aboriginal group to use confrontational tactics, like blockades and occupations, against the Canadian state? To address this puzzle, I use the theoretical lenses of rational choice and political opportunity structure, and numerous primary and secondary sources to examine the Labrador Innu's decision to mobilize and occupy the Goose Bay military air base during the 1980s and the 1990s.

This paper begins by setting out a theoretical framework for understanding and explaining an Aboriginal community's decision to engage in contentious collective action in Canada. Next, it provides some background information on the case study, the Labrador Innu, before turning to a history of the events surrounding their occupations of the Goose Bay military air base. The paper then analyzes the events using its theoretical framework before concluding with a brief discussion of some of the implications of this particular case for understanding Indigenous blockades and occupations writ large.

## **Contentious Politics and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: A Theoretical Framework**

Aboriginal confrontation with the Canadian state can be conceptualized usefully as episodes of contentious collective action. Contentious collective action occurs when a group of individuals decide to mobilize against other individuals, organizations, and/or governments who are interfering with the realization of their preferences. Contention can take the form of either institutional tactics, such as letter-writing, lobbying, litigating, and voting, or non-institutional tactics like protesting, marches and sit-ins (Wilkes, 2006: 514-516). Although the literature on contentious collective action is particularly large, the majority of the literature can be divided into two camps, with scholars from both trying to find ways to synthesize them. The two camps are: political opportunity structure theorists (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001), and rational choice theorists (Lichbach, 1995).

Both camps provide valuable tools for scholars interested in understanding the emergence and outcomes of Aboriginal contention against the Canadian state. As a starting point, both schools of thought agree that individuals do not mobilize only in response to raw grievances. Rather, participants of contentious collective action also mobilize in response to changing incentive and opportunity structures that encourage action (Tarrow, 1996). At this point, however, rational choice theorists deviate from political opportunity structure theorists by placing more emphasis on individual preferences and the ability of individuals to conduct cost/benefit analyses of collective action versus free riding. Building on the ground-breaking work of Mancur Olson (1965), individuals are assumed to be self-interested actors who free ride unless they are the ones who benefit the most from collective action. As a result, as Lichbach observes, “less than 5% of the supporters of a cause become actively involved in the cause, and activists outnumber nonactivists 19 to 1” (Lichbach, 1998: 408). Supporters may also decide to participate if selective incentives are offered (that is, benefits that only members can access), or, as I will argue below, if the costs of not participating become so large that free riding is no longer a sensible option.

However, not all groups can offer selective incentives nor do high costs by themselves always lead to contentious collective action. Indeed, many Aboriginal groups have suffered from extreme colonial interference on their lands and in their lives, yet collective action has not always occurred. Hence, we need to draw upon the work of political opportunity structure theorists, who stress the need to understand the context under which contention is occurring. Sidney Tarrow (1994), among others, suggests that mobilization occurs when there are changes

to the opportunity and constraint structures affecting marginalized groups. In particular, he suggests that the presence of influential allies, the emergence of divisions among ruling elites, increased access to state institutions, and a decline in the state's capacity to engage in repression, all encourage the emergence of contentious politics.

Taiiaki Alfred suggests that scholars interested in studying episodes of Aboriginal contention need to focus on political opportunity structures that are relevant to the situation of Aboriginal peoples. Drawing on the work of Gerard Chaliand (1989), Alfred hypothesizes that five conditions are necessary for the successful mobilization of Aboriginal peoples against the Canadian state. They are:

1. the movement must have access to institutional power, such as government organizations and the media;
2. there must be political and social divisions among the Settler elite, in terms of either political parties, economic classes, or ideologies;
3. the movement must have the support and cooperation of allies in the Settler society;
4. the state's ability or capacity for repression must be in decline, in either physical terms or due to legal constraints or the political or social context; and,
5. the movement must be capable of advancing its claims and delegitimizing the state in the mass media (Alfred, 2005: 64).

These contextual conditions matter because they affect the costs of collective action versus non-action. Access to institutional power, divisions among elites, the support of allies, the decline in state repression capacity, and access to media, can all lower the costs of individuals engaging in contentious collective action by increasing the likelihood that collective action will lead to a successful outcome. Combined with rising costs as a result of increased state interference in Aboriginal lands, contextual conditions can encourage collective action by showing Aboriginal peoples that action is not only necessary, due to the increasing extent of state interference, but also has the possibility of leading to a successful and preferable outcome. According to Alfred, "The goal is to achieve a situation in which opportunities (potentialities) are changed to resources (realities), thus lowering the individual costs of fighting against the system. This makes resurgent actions and militant contentious politics a plausible option for people and a real, viable alternative position to that of continuing to cooperate with injustice" (Alfred, 2005: 227-228).

Unfortunately, Alfred does not provide any empirical evidence to support his hypothesized contextual factors. Therefore, the rest of this paper builds on his work by identifying those contextual factors that led to

the mobilization of the Labrador Innu against the Canadian state during the 1980s and the 1990s.

## **The Labrador Innu, Military Flight Training, and the Occupations of the Goose Bay Air Base**

### **Who are the Labrador Innu?**

The Labrador Innu, also known as the Montagnais, were a nomadic hunting culture, traveling throughout the interiors of what are now Quebec and Labrador in the winter to hunt, and migrating to the coast of Labrador in the summer to fish. Prior to contact, most Innu made their living by hunting, fishing, and trading amongst themselves and with other Aboriginal groups in the south. After the arrival of European peoples to Labrador and northeastern Quebec, however, most Innu turned to the fur trade as their primary means of earning cash. The Innu remained relatively isolated from European settlement until the 1830s when missionaries and traders began to set up permanent structures on Innu lands in Labrador. As well, more and more non-Innu hunters, trappers, and settlers began to encroach on Innu traditional hunting and fishing grounds. In 1916, the Hudson's Bay Company opened a permanent trading post at Davis Inlet and the Newfoundland government forcibly settled the Innu bands of Barren Ground and Davis Inlet there (Henriksen, 1981: 666). Over time, these Innu members became dependent on European goods from the trading post (Backhouse and McRae, 2002: 12). In 1927, the border between Quebec and Labrador was created, dividing the Innu and their traditional lands in two. This action created two distinct Innu groups: the Innu in Quebec and the Innu in Labrador (Samson, Wilson, and Mazower, 1999: 15).

By the middle of the twentieth century, the Innu were heavily involved in the fur trade and were becoming increasingly exposed to missionary activities and sustained contact with non-Aboriginal peoples. In 1941, the government built a military airbase on Innu lands in central Labrador, which eventually became the city of Happy Valley-Goose Bay. In 1949, Newfoundland and Labrador joined Confederation. In the late 1950s and the late 1960s respectively, the provincial government relocated the Innu to Sheshatshiu and to Davis Inlet II (Ryan, 1988). Government officials forcibly settled the Innu in these two communities because caribou populations and fur prices had dropped dramatically during these decades; in the government's view, the Innu could no longer survive solely on hunting and trapping. More importantly, the government saw sedentarization (the settling of a nomadic culture) as a means to remove the Innu from lands that it believed had vast potential for economic development (Samson, Wilson, and Mazower, 1999: 16-17).

Federal and provincial interference in Innu traditional lands would continue during the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. In 1972, the Quebec and Labrador provincial governments built the Churchill Falls hydroelectric project, diverting major waterways and flooding 4,130 square kilometers of Innu hunting, birth, and burial lands. Seven years later, the federal government gave permission to NATO to use the Goose Bay Military Airbase to conduct “low-level flight training, air-defence exercises, and bombing practice” over the Innu’s traditional lands (Samson, Wilson, and Mazower, 1999: 30-31). In 1994, a mining company discovered a multi-billion dollar nickel deposit in Voisey’s Bay, an area claimed by the Labrador Innu prior to the discovery (Alcantara, 2007). Three years later, the provincial government proposed to extend and improve the Trans-Labrador Highway from Churchill Falls to the southern Labrador Coast, again through Innu hunting lands (Samson, Wilson, and Mazower, 1999: 32-33). In December 2002, the federal government moved the Innu from Davis Inlet II to Natuashish, a new \$200,000,000 community that had built it for them.

Today, the majority of Labrador Innu live in Sheshatshiu (about an hour’s drive west of Happy Valley-Goose Bay) and Natuashish (on the coast of Labrador in Sango Bay just south of Nain), with some members living in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. According to 2004 INAC data, the Labrador Innu population is 2,100, with 700 members living in Natuashish and 1,400 in Sheshatshiu. 2001 census data indicate that the Innu population is younger than provincial and national populations (60.7% of the Innu population were aged 0-24, 25.8% were aged 25-44, 10.6% were aged 45-64, and 2.9% were 65 and above). The majority of Innu (86.8%) speak Innuaimun, the Labrador Innu language. In terms of religion, most Innu are Catholic, with some adhering to the Protestant faith (88.8% of Innu are Catholic, 9.1% are Protestant, 0.6% are “other religion,” while 2.1% have no religious affiliation). In terms of education, the Innu are generally less educated than national and provincial populations (65.7% of Innu lack a high school graduation certificate, 21.2% have completed high school and/or some postsecondary, 7% have a trades certificate or diploma, 4.7% have a college certificate or diploma and 3.8% have a university certificate, diploma, or degree). Moreover, these trends persist across age groups. Finally, in terms of income, the average Innu person in Sheshatshiu and Davis Inlet earned \$16,734 and only 5.5% of Innu worked full time in 2000. In terms of sources of income, the average Innu received 71.4% of her income from employment earnings, 27.2% from government transfers, and 1.4% from other sources.

Both the Sheshatshiu and Natuashish communities became *Indian Act* bands in 2002 after successful community referendums in 1999. In

addition, both communities have long been represented by the Innu Nation, a non-profit organization designed to protect the rights, interests, and lands of all Innu members in Labrador. Innu Nation is also responsible for conducting comprehensive land claims negotiations with the federal and provincial governments on behalf of the Labrador Innu communities.

### **The Labrador Innu and the Occupation of the Goose Bay Air Base**

In 1941, the American government constructed a military air base near present-day Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador, to facilitate transatlantic flights during World War II (Samson, 2003: 108). After the war, Canadian, American, and British air forces used the base as a strategic support and training facility, conducting aircraft maneuvers and operations over Labrador and northern Quebec (Innu Nation, 2000). Up until 1979, the Innu tolerated the military flights because they were infrequent and at altitudes that were not disruptive. Things changed, however, after 1979 when the Canadian government and some of its NATO allies began conducting low-level flying exercises from the base. As well, after 1979, the number and frequency of flights dramatically increased. In essence, the previously unobtrusive exercises became much more intrusive, inflicting severe noise pollution and other negative effects on the environment, animals and Innu of Labrador.

According to Peter Armitage, "The unexpected, and extremely loud, jet noise induces psychological and physiological reactions typical of human responses to adverse environmental stimuli. Informants were particularly upset about the negative effects of jet noise on their children. They spoke of children being awakened by jet noise, of children crying and screaming in terror, of children standing paralyzed with fear, while others frantically searched for their parents. Several Innu reported they were so startled by the planes that they fell to the ground." Innu hunters described the jet noise from the low-level flying aircraft as sounding like a "blowtorch," "something exploding or ripping apart," a "12-gauge shotgun," and "a loud, screeching noise." Another hunter said the noise felt "like a big smack right in the ears" (Armitage, 1992: 134).

Marie Wadden's account is also illustrative of the impact that the jet noise had on the Innu. During a hunting trip with some Sheshatshiu Innu in May 1988, Wadden was suddenly "hit by an abrupt, incredible blast of noise. The tent canvass shook. I fell back on the floor, my ears rang, and I felt my heart begin to pound painfully. Before I had time to recover I heard Janet scream my name.... Another blast of noise struck, and the recorder's volume meter jumped crazily in the split second it took another jet to fly over us. I felt shaken and stood up unsteadily. My initial

fear changed to anger.... According to experts, the startle effect is produced when noise increases dramatically in a short time. A low-flying bomber will cause normal ambient sound, usually measured at about 40 decibels, to increase to about 120 decibels in half a second. The twenty-tonne jet bomber had swooped just thirty meters above our heads, flying at 900 kilometers an hour. Scientists say that jets traveling that quickly create noise measured at between 110 and 140 decibels. (A jackhammer, for purposes of comparison, is measured at 80 decibels.) One hundred and twenty decibels causes pain in humans" (Wadden, 2001: 36).

This sudden change in type, pattern, number, and frequency of flights quickly mobilized the Innu's elected leaders to take action. In 1980, Innu Nation leaders wrote a series of letters to the federal ministers of Indian Affairs, Environment, and National Defence. In that correspondence, the Innu wrote about the effects that the low-level training flights were having on the environment and on the health of their lands, wildlife, and people. The federal government responded by reassuring the Innu that it had and was continuing to take action to mitigate the negative effects of its training flights on human health and wildlife (Armitage and Kennedy, 1989: 802).

The Innu, however, were unconvinced and over the next two years continued to write letters to the federal ministries of Indian Affairs, Environment, and National Defence to express their opposition to the flights. In 1983, a delegation of Innu leaders from Sheshatshiu traveled to West Germany to seek the support of NATO, the German Green Party, and Survival International (Lackenbauer and Farish, 2007). Although NATO reacted negatively to the visit, the Green Party and Survival International expressed their support, mainly because West Germany flew the most low-level flights in the world and had been promoting the flights in Labrador as a way to protect West Germany's environment (Koerner, 1987: 17). Both organizations saw an opportunity to forge links with a group that could help them advance their similar political goals.

The support of the Green Party and Survival International were important because they provided the Innu with resources to connect with other supportive non-governmental organizations. In 1984, Project North, the Ligue des droits et Libertés, and the Native Peoples Support Group of Newfoundland and Labrador sponsored a delegation of Innu from Sheshatshiu to go on a ten-day tour of Ottawa to meet with federal officials, curry public opinion through national media events, and drum up support from NGOs headquartered in the nation's capital. In response to these efforts, then-Newfoundland and Labrador Minister of Rural Agricultural and Northern Development, Joe Goudie, released a statement that disputed the Innu's claims about the negative effects of the flights.

The statement also mentioned that the flights were crucial to the economic health of Labrador and therefore had to continue (Armitage and Kennedy, 1989: 803).

In May 1985, the Sheshatshiu Innu held a gathering of Innu leaders from Labrador and Quebec to sign a declaration prepared by the La Romaine Band Council that stated that the federal government and NATO must end its military training activities immediately. In October, Innu leaders from Sheshatshiu and the La Romaine Innu band in Quebec met with Greenpeace to form the Innu Campaign Against the Militarization of Nitassinan, to commence in January 1986. In May 1986, Sheshatshiu Innu leader Ben Michel led a delegation to tour Britain, Italy, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and West Germany. The purpose of the trip was to relay their concerns to government officials from these NATO countries and to drum up institutional and public support for their cause. Unfortunately, NATO and government officials ignored the Innu delegation, but the Innu were able to garner some support from peace and environmental groups.

Overall, although the Innu were unsuccessful in influencing government officials in Europe, their success at building public and non-governmental support generated some concern among Canadian federal officials. Later that same year, the federal government formed an Environmental Assessment Panel to investigate the concerns raised by the Innu and their environmental allies. This panel, however, was not due to make its report until 1995.

Despite six years of using institutional tactics such as letter writing, and media and lobbying campaigns, the Labrador Innu were unsuccessful in achieving an end to military flight-training over their lands. However, two developments at the end of 1986 and early 1987 helped to change not only the type of tactics employed by the Innu, but also the nature of those involved and the outcomes that had been generated up until that point. The first development was the multinational memorandum of understanding (MMOU) signed between Canada and its NATO allies, Britain, West Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States, to allow military aircraft training out of Goose Bay to occur for a period of ten years. The result of this MMOU was the rapid escalation of low-level training flights out of Goose Bay, from 6,300 to 18,000 a year, for a period of ten years (Barker and Soyez, 1994: 17; Wadden, 2001: 97). The second development was Canada's aggressive lobbying for a new NATO tactical fighter weapons training centre in Goose Bay, after NATO had already awarded the facility to Turkey. If successful, the relocation of the training centre would bring live weapons training to the Innu's traditional lands, waterways, and oceans, resulting in significantly more damage to

the lives, animals, and lands of the Innu than had been experienced previously.

In response to these alarming developments, a group of Sheshatshiu Innu in the fall of 1987 decided to investigate a proposed live weapons bombing range 100 kilometers outside of Goose Bay. Members of this group not only included elected leaders who had been heavily involved in the use of institutional tactics against the low-level flights, but also some members of the community who had not been involved previously. What they saw at the bombing range shocked them to such an extent that they decided to set up tents on the bombing range, forcing the Canadian military to close the range for ten days until the Innu returned home. The range was heavily damaged and littered with left-over testing ordinance, including large bomb shells. Increased flights and live weapons testing, the Innu imagined, would only result in even more damage. Therefore, this small group of Innu, who were frequent users of the hunting grounds near this bombing range, felt compelled to occupy the lands to protest the MMOU and the proposed tactical fighter weapons training centre.

In early September 1988, a NATO survey team arrived in Goose Bay to assess the possibility of building the \$555 million tactical fighter weapons training facility at the Goose Bay air base. The arrival of the NATO team was a significant achievement for the Canadian and the Newfoundland and Labrador governments and was the result of their aggressive lobbying tactics, including \$93 million in proposed federal funds to upgrade the Goose Bay air base. Alarmed by the arrival of the NATO team, Sheshatshiu Innu leaders quickly moved to meet them as they arrived in Goose Bay. The NATO officials, however, refused to meet with the Innu delegation. Therefore, the elected leaders of the Sheshatshiu Innu called a meeting of the entire community to decide what to do. At that meeting, consensus could not be reached on what to do. Elected leaders continued to counsel institutional tactics but some community members, including some of the younger members and some of the older hunters, were more interested in direct action. As the meeting progressed, two Innu teenagers and Father Roche a Catholic priest who had worked with the Sheshatshiu Innu for some years (see Cox, 1990a), became frustrated with the lack of consensus at the meeting and decided to travel to the bombing range to camp out in protest of the NATO team's refusal to meet with the Innu delegation.

This occupation sparked the Sheshatshiu Innu community into action. On September 15, 1998, a group of approximately seventy-five Sheshatshiu Innu illegally entered and occupied one of the airstrips at the Goose Bay air base. The group of seventy-five Innu included elected

Innu Nation and band council leaders like Ben Michel and Daniel Ashini, but also community members and elders who had previously not been involved in the institutional tactics leveled against the Canadian state. Military and civilian authorities quickly arrived at the occupation and arrested Michel and Ashini. The rest of the Innu were promised the opportunity to meet with the NATO team if they boarded a bus to the Billy Bishop meeting hall, which was located away from the airstrips. The Innu agreed and were granted an audience with the head of the NATO survey team, who listened impassively until the Innu were finished presenting (Wadden, 2001).

At the same time, the Innu protests and occupations began to escalate. Two additional Innu joined the two teenagers and Father Roche at the bombing range. On 22 September 1988, 100 Innu travelled to the military airport singing hymns and waving protest placards denouncing the proposed weapons centre and the low-level flights, resulting in the arrest of several of the Innu elected leaders and the dispersion of the Innu protestors by military and civilian authorities (Canadian Press Staff, 1988). As well, Father Roche and the Innu at the bombing range were arrested and brought to the courthouse to be tried with the Innu arrested at the air base. In response to these arrests, Tshaukuesh Penashue, an elder and mother to Peter Penashue, one of the individuals arrested at the air base, mobilized about 200 Innu men and women to set up a protest camp outside of the fenced perimeter of the main runway. Several days later, the Innu occupied the airstrip for a couple of hours to coincide with the eleventh annual Interprovincial Northern Development Ministers' Conference in Goose Bay. Overall, from September to December 1988, the Innu engaged in seven protests on the Goose Bay runway. The protests were usually organized by elected Innu leaders or elders like Tshaukuesh Penashue in response to national or foreign media coming to Goose Bay or when Canadian and provincial officials said something particularly inflammatory about the Innu's claims.

By the time that these protests were occurring, the Innu were framing their opposition to the low-level flying exercises and the weapons base by stressing the highly negative environmental and health effects of the exercises and the base on the land, wildlife, and peoples of Labrador, and by reaching out to peace activists who wanted to see an end to the militarization of the north (see for instance, Barron, 2000; Armitage and Kennedy, 1989). These frames were highly effective tools for building support among non-Aboriginal peace and environmental groups. According to Marie Wadden, "representatives of Germany's Green Party sponsored legislation to ban low-level flight training on both sides of the Atlantic. Dutch peace activists, following the example of the

Innu, held sit-ins on runways in their country, while Survival International conducted a public education campaign in Britain.” Support also came from Canadian peace and environmental groups who staged demonstrations outside of Ottawa department offices in support of the Innu (Wadden, 2001: 124-125).

At the end of December, the Innu dismantled their camps and ended their occupations because jet bomber training was suspended until the springtime due to extremely cold weather. “One by one, tents started to come down. People were tired of protesting, and Christmas was seen as a good time to return to the village” (Wadden, 2001: 131). In the meantime, the Innu’s peace and environmental allies continued their protest campaigns in Europe.

In the springtime, the Sheshatshiu Innu tried to return to the base but the military had tripled their security, resulting in twenty-one arrests. A few days later, in response to growing public support of the Innu, federal Indian Affairs Minister Bill McKnight arrived to meet with the Innu to discuss their concerns. Midway through the meeting, however, he walked out. In response, the Innu immediately tried to set up another runway camp at the air base but were arrested, with five members sent to jail for eleven days. At the end of those eleven days, the federal government moved to prosecute four of the members: Tshaukuesh Penashue, Peter Penashue, Daniel Ashini, and Ben Michel. The trial judge ruled that the four members were not guilty based on the fact that they honestly believed they were not trespassing on the runway. Rather, they believed they were occupying land that their people had never surrendered.

Several weeks after the judgement, Innu elected leaders tried to visit the base to deliver a letter to the base commander, but were again arrested for trespassing. This time, however, the judge ruled that the convictions would stand because the ownership of the base had been transferred from the province to the federal government. This meant that federal laws, like the National Defence Act, which contained provisions relating to illegal occupations of military property, were now in operation. Although the arrested Innu lost this judicial decision, the court proceedings generated a lot of public support for the Innu and their cause. The Inuit Tapirisat and the International Inuit Circumpolar Conference, for instance, expressed their support, as did the editorial staff at the *St. John’s Express*, and Douglas Roche, a former Canadian ambassador who wrote a supportive editorial in the *Toronto Star*. At the same time, however, local businesses and Happy Valley-Goose Bay city officials quickly organized pro-military rallies and distributed literature touting the crucial economic benefits (\$150,000,000 injected into the local economy and 500 new jobs in 1988) that the base provided to the re-

gion. There were also some allegations raised by pro-military supporters that the Innu were being funded by communist governments and agents. Indeed, at one point, agents from CSIS visited the Innu to investigate these claims, which were later found to be false.

In June 1989, Minister of Indian Affairs Pierre Cadieux visited Sheshatshiu in response to growing public support for the Innu. Nothing positive was generated from that meeting, so later that day, five Innu and a photographer decided to visit the air base to disrupt flights in the morning for half an hour. The five Innu individuals were quickly arrested, brought to court, and found guilty. The judge, however, ordered their release since the Innu had a right to be tried in their own language and no translator could be found.

On 22 May 1990, NATO announced that it was not building the tactical fighter weapons training centre in Labrador. Although NATO officials claimed that this decision was made based on “technical, financial, and geographical factors” (Cox, 1990c: A1-A2), some Innu interviewees mentioned that their efforts at building public opinion by framing their claims in a particular way, seeking the help of non-Aboriginal peace and environmental groups, and using protests as a means to access the media, were the key causal factors. Although the training facility proposal was dead, the MMOU remained in effect, which meant that low-level flying continued over Labrador Innu lands.

The cancellation of the NATO base encouraged the Innu to continue their protesting efforts. In 1992, a number of Innu women returned to the base to picket the continuing flights (Helwig, 1993: 52). In 1993, a group of Sheshatshiu Innu surrounded a Dutch F-16 and wrote slogans on the aircraft (Brewster, 1995). In 1994, a group of Innu from Sheshatshiu, led by Tshaukuesh Penashue, occupied the NATO bombing range at Minipi. Finally, in 1995, the Environmental Assessment Panel, which had been formed in 1986 to study the concerns raised by the Innu and their environmental allies, finally presented its report. It recommended that the federal government undertake some mitigative measures and create the Institute for Environmental Monitoring and Research to continue to study the effect of low-level flying on human and animal health and the environment. The Innu, the Inuit, and other stakeholders, they suggested, should have significant representation on the Institute’s board of directors.

Despite these generally positive recommendations, the Environmental Assessment Panel ruled that there was not enough scientific evidence to support the Innu claims that the flights were harmful. Therefore, no ban on the flights was necessary (Samson, 2003: 116). The federal government agreed with the Panel’s ruling by maintaining the flights,

creating the Institute, and instituting some of the measures that the Panel had recommended. In particular, the Department of National Defence “implemented a satellite monitoring system to track caribou, began to plot human and animal patterns of land and air use, promised to stop low-level overflights at designated thresholds, and set up toll free lines so that hunters and fishermen could notify the military when they planned to use the land” (Lackenbauer, 2007: 227).

So what were the outcomes of the contentious collective action employed by the Labrador Innu? After 1995, there was a general decline in the number of flights and an increase in the number of mitigative measures, including more effort to determine Innu hunting patterns prior to the flights and then avoiding those areas. Rather than Indigenous collective action resulting in the reduction in the number of flights, however, it may be that other factors were at play. According to Senator Jason Kenney, Chair of the Senate Standing Committee on National Security and Defence, “NATO had long used the base as a low-altitude training facility for its jets, but stopped when low-altitude bombing went out of fashion. Too many low-flying jets got shot down during the first Gulf War” (Kenny, 2007). Peter Chapman and Bill Robinson agreed, arguing that low-flying missions became unnecessary and unduly risky in light of a number of technological innovations, such as smart bombs and cruise missiles (Chapman and Robinson, 1995). According to Lackenbauer and Farish, Goose Bay became less important because of shifting strategic interests. They write that “the collapse of the Berlin Wall sounded the death knell for expansion plans at Goose Bay. With no Soviet adversary, NATO and Canadian priorities shifted away from the eastern sub-Atlantic” (Lackenbauer and Farish, 2007; see also Watkins and Macdonald, 1995). Today, the Goose Bay air base is much less active. According to a CBC news report, “The base was once busy with fighter jet training, especially during the Cold War, but diminishing activity in recent years has called into question whether the base is still viable” (CBC, 2007). Overall, although one can probably attribute the defeat of the tactical weapons fighter training centre to the actions of the Innu, the decline in the number of low-level flights is probably the result of other factors.

### **Analysis – Why Contentious Collective Action?**

The puzzle that this paper seeks to address is: what led the Labrador Innu to engage in contentious collective action? More specifically, why did the Innu decide to occupy the Goose Bay military base? As a starting point, our theoretical framework suggests that we need to specify the preferences of the actors. In essence, government officials were very

much driven by the economic benefits that came from low-level flying and the potential benefits from a tactical weapons fighter training centre (Armitage, 1992: 143; Kenny, 2007; Armitage and Kennedy, 1989: 799). Frequently, federal and provincial officials emphasized the crucial role that the air base and its flights had on the economic health of the region. According to federal Defence Minister David Collenette, the training exercises were crucial because they injected \$100,000,000 a year into a local economy that really had very little else. Indeed, the West Germans by themselves, at one point, were paying 25,000,000 deutsche marks a year to use the military air base and airspace (Koerner, 1987: 17). Without the air base and the training exercises, there was little, if any, economic activity in the area that could sustain the town of Happy Valley-Goose Bay. Therefore, in the eyes of the federal, provincial, and local governments, it was very “important for the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador and Canada that this continue” (Ward, 1995; see also Dutton, 1990).

On the other hand, Innu preferences were centered on protecting their lands, their hunting stocks, and their health from external damage and interference. Primary and secondary sources indicate that Labrador Innu were not interested in gaining economic benefits like revenues and jobs from the low-level flying exercises or the construction of the NATO tactical weapons fighter training centre (Dutton, 1990; Gazette Staff, 1987: B4; Maher, 1990; Ashini, 1995; Brewster, 1995; Branswell, 1995). Rather, the Innu were concerned about protecting their traditional lands from environmental pollution. They were concerned about the effects of the noise and exhaust on their health and on the health of their children. And they wanted to protect the Labrador vegetation and wildlife that their culture has depended heavily on for generations (Helwig, 1993; Niemans, 1995; Canadian Press Staff, 1989; Cox, 1989; Cox, 1990c).

Yet, differences in preferences alone do not automatically lead to contentious collective action. Rather, one needs to take into account the changing costs and benefits of collective action versus non-action and the changing political opportunity structures affecting the actors. From 1942 to 1979, the Goose Bay air base was used for military flights and flight training. Yet the Labrador Innu did not engage in institutional or non-institutional collective action to oppose the flights or the construction of the base. In 1979, however, the nature of the state’s interference on the Innu’s lands and lives changed when the federal government allowed low-level training exercises to occur. This federal decision resulted in Innu elected leaders mobilizing to engage in institutional tactics against the flights. The fact that the elected Innu leaders mobilized can be explained by their generally precarious situation in Innu society.

According to Colin Samson, “the idea of electing leaders was profoundly alien and still generates intense animosities, especially between the few Innu elected officials and the many others who feel overlooked and spoken for. It also exacerbates the widening rift between old and young,” resulting in Innu elected leaders frequently having to prove their usefulness to the community due to the lack of political legitimacy they have (Samson, 2003: 35-36; see also Ryan, 1998). According to one hunter, he “couldn’t understand how Innu Nation could tell people to do anything – like protesting, for example. If people wanted to protest, he thought, they would have to come to that themselves. They would have to make up their own minds as to what was right and what was wrong...it is not up to Innu Nation to tell people what to do” (Samson, 2003: 37).

This Innu leadership style helps to explain why the period of 1979 to 1985 only involved elected Innu leaders engaging in institutional tactics. As well, it explains why only elected Innu leaders mobilized and why they had little influence on the mobilization of their community members on this issue. Therefore, rather than emphasizing the influence of elected Innu leaders, I argue that changes to the relevant political opportunity structure and to the nature and extent of the interference on Innu lands (i.e. the MMOU and the proposed live weapons facility), resulted in community mobilization and the use of non-institutional tactics.

In terms of the political opportunity structure, one important change was that domestic and international media became interested in the plight of the Innu during the mid 1980s (see, for instance, Barron, 2000: 89) and tended to give the Innu occupations, including the first ones, positive coverage. According to Murrell and Spaven, the media at this time were generally anti-military (Murrell, 1990; Spaven, 1989), which may have encouraged Innu community members to mobilize since their position on the issue coincided with the media’s (Barron, 2000: 91). It also helped that Innu leaders adopted a “David and Goliath” frame, where “images of Innu hunting, trapping and fishing, dressed in ‘traditional’ clothing, eating ‘traditional foods,’ as well as statements about respect for the land and the elderly are used to convey the message that the Innu are a people who love nature, peace and tradition. When juxtaposed with images of military aircraft and the base at Goose Bay,...the image emerges of a peaceful people being crushed by a huge and impersonal war machine” (Armitage and Kennedy, 1989: 809).

Another important change in the political opportunity structure was the emergence of domestic and transnational allies, beginning in 1983 when the first Innu delegation traveled to West Germany and was successful in courting the support of the German Green Party and Survival

International. These connections eventually allowed the Innu to procure the support of other peace and environmental groups, who provided funds and organizational help to the Innu, helped them to influence the public through media events, and undertook their own protests and occupations in support of the Innu (Barron, 2000: 91-93). As well, as described above, the Innu's first illegal occupation occurred with the help of the local Catholic priest, Father Roche, who accompanied two Innu teenagers to a bombing range outside of Goose Bay to set up a protest camp. This action helped encourage Innu leaders and community members to undertake other occupations, including one which involved half of the Sheshatshiu community camping out on the tarmac of the Goose Bay air base in the late 1980s (Wadden, 2001).

Finally, the state's ability and capacity for repression was in decline during the 1980s as the legal climate, reflected in the newly amended Constitution Act of 1982 and related jurisprudence, was generally favorable to Aboriginal peoples and their rights. Amendments to the Constitution like sections 25 and 35, and case law such as *R. v. Calder*, among others, strengthened Aboriginal rights against the interference of the Canadian state on Aboriginal lands (Macklem, 2001; also see Alcantara, 2008).

These changes in the political opportunity structure coincided with two important developments in 1986 and 1987, all of which encouraged Innu contentious collective action. Specifically, the signing of the MMOU in 1986 and the federal government's aggressive lobbying for a NATO tactical fighter weapons training facility in Goose Bay, dramatically raised the costs of inaction and free riding since an increase in the number of flights and the possibility of the use of live weapons testing on Innu traditional lands had the potential to negatively affect all Labrador Innu living in the affected airspaces in dramatic ways. Therefore, the changing political opportunity structure, which increased the Innu's perceptions of a successful outcome occurring if they mobilized, the lack of policy change despite six years of institutional efforts, and the two developments described above, which significantly raised the costs of inaction and broadened the number of Innu affected, combined to facilitate Indigenous contentious collective action in the form of multiple occupations of the Goose Bay military base.

## **Conclusion**

The main purpose of this paper is to explain why the Labrador Innu engaged in contentious collective action during the 1980s and 1990s. Using rational choice and political opportunity structure theories, I argue that the decision to engage in contentious collective action depends

on the preferences of the actors, the type and impact of state interference on Aboriginal lands, and the political opportunity structure affecting the Indigenous actors.

In terms of the first factor, it matters whether government and Aboriginal preferences coincide or diverge. If they diverge, then contentious action is likely. If they are similar, then contentious action is unlikely. In the case of the Innu, government actors were interested in reaping the economic and military benefits of low-level flying. In contrast, Innu actors were uninterested in these benefits and were strongly opposed to the flights. As a result, Innu contentious collective action was likely, although it could not occur without the other factors below.

The second factor facilitating Indigenous contentious collective action is the nature, scope, and frequency of the intrusions on Aboriginal lands; these features affect individual cost/benefit analyses of action versus inaction. In the case of the Innu, the initial military exercises from 1979 to the mid-1980s were infrequent and were at an altitude that did not bother many Innu. Since relatively few Innu were affected, Innu leaders employed conventional strategies such as lobbying and media campaigns to oppose the flights. However, once low-level flying exercises began, Innu leaders were pushed to use protest tactics because the nature and frequency of the interference changed. Now, most Innu were subject to frequent and highly disruptive noises that interfered significantly with their lands and lives. In essence, individual and collective inaction became costly and action became more likely.

Finally, in terms of the political opportunity structure (POS), it matters whether Aboriginal peoples think they can successfully frame their preferences to generate positive local and national media coverage. Aboriginal groups also need non-Aboriginal allies who can help them organize and communicate with governments, non-government organizations, and the general public. Lastly, there must be some sense that contention will be tolerated by the Canadian state. All three of these POS factors were present during the mid to late 1980s. As a result, the Innu engaged in protests because they felt confident that these activities would be tolerated and maybe generate positive outcomes.

Future research needs to examine the applicability of these factors to other cases. Policymakers and practitioners might also find this paper helpful for identifying Aboriginal groups that are likely to engage in protests. Once identified, government officials can work to diffuse possible protests by reducing the distance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal preferences, and most importantly, reducing the nature, scope, and frequency of non-Aboriginal intrusions on Aboriginal lands.

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