



Amundsen Gulf, Great Bear Lake, and numerous small lakes in the northern reaches of Canada's Northwest Territories and Nunavut ([NASA](#))

What the “Lords of the Arctic” teach us about Inclusive Peace



[Our planet is broken](#). This lament from UN Secretary General António Guterres comes as no surprise, least of all after what the last 12 months have wrought. In the same speech, pointing to the dramatic effects of climate change in different parts of the world, the Secretary-General proclaims that we are at war with nature and pleads that this suicidal behaviour must be reversed.

The Inuit in the Arctic know better than most what it means to be confronted by a hostile environment and how to adapt to it. They need no lessons in climate change, species extinction and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) — because they are living it every day.

Over the last 30 years, the Arctic has warmed at twice the rate as the rest of the planet, a phenomenon known as Arctic amplification. This has disrupted [every aspect of traditional Inuit life](#). And yet, in a culture where everything — from the [intellectual to the social, the political and the material](#) — rests so finely on survival in a harsh environment, notwithstanding the massive disruption, the Inuit have continued their millennia-long practice of [living in peace](#).

For the Inuit, the Arctic is enemy enough, taking an exacting toll on young and inexperienced hunters. Young lives cannot be wasted on fighting and killing others. Survival in this harsh environment necessitates peace between tribes.

By exploring and understanding the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the Inuit approach to inclusive peace, we might learn about applying their wisdom to the challenges we face today. This can guide how we establish and maintain peace in the future, particularly as climate crises increase and intensify, forcing displacement and social upheaval.

So, what can we learn from the Inuit in this moment about living without war?



The author's granddaughter Pisukti named after her grandmother with her nephews Tulurialik named after his cousin who received his name from his grandmother and Nutaraaksuk named after his grandfather. Inuit live for ever by passing on their name/spirit (Amber Pisukti Irwin).

A culture without war

The culture of the Inuit is one without war. Unlike the Europeans who now share the Arctic with them and the Indian First Nations below the tree line, the Inuit of the Central Canadian Arctic had no word for war. The closest word being 'mass murder'. There are no warrior heroes in Inuit mythology. [The only dead heroes](#) in the Inuit world are those who lived their lives for others, and they now live forever, named again and again among children born to the next generation.



Author leaving Kotzebue, Alaska in yacht Endeavour for Northwest Passage (Allan Frank 1971)

How I learned from the Lords of the Arctic

I first went to the Arctic in 1971 to sail singlehanded through the Northwest Passage, down the Yukon river and around Alaska, reaching Cambridge Bay in the Central Canadian Arctic for my first

winter. Unlike my countrymen of the ill-fated Franklin expedition, who relied exclusively on one another for support, I lived with and learned from the Inuit. They generously taught me everything I needed to know to survive in their world: from [navigating through zero visibility](#) using the patterns etched in the snow by the prevailing winds; to keeping warm at 50 below using native furs; to running a dog team and adjusting to a high calorie vitamin rich raw meat and fish diet; and never complaining about the cold, hunger and discomfort. Complaining does not help.



The author eating frozen high calorie bone marrow, raw and rich in vitamins (Etibloena — Arctic Trek 1973)

For us the frozen lakes and seas, covered in snow and ice, turned our supposed hostile world into a majestic wonderland, populated with the animals that sustained us. All 129 men of Franklin's ships, the Erebus and Terror, perished but I travelled on by dog team to the

Eastern Arctic that first winter, and then [crossed Arctic North America](#), from Hudson's Bay to Alaska in 1973 in the company of Inuit companions. Had Franklin and his men listened to and learned from the Inuit, I believe they would have lived.



Nunavut (Our Land) is a lithograph made by Kenojuak Ashevak (1927–2013), C.C., RCA, and printed by Pitseolak Niviaqsi. It was commissioned to commemorate the 1993 signing of the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement* with the federal government. On April 1, 1999, the territory of Nunavut was created as part of a settlement of land claims launched in the 1970s (*Canadian Museum of History*, UN CD 1993–001, IMG2009–0063–0040-Dm)

The Inuit way of addressing land claims and the creation of 'Nunavut'

In 1988, the Inuit were in negotiations for a land claim settlement with the government of Pierre Trudeau, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's father. As many now know, the settlement of the Inuit into permanent villages created as many problems as it solved. Still, a favourable land claim settlement with Ottawa was enticing, as it would give the Inuit a degree of self-government, and the opportunity to shape a future of their own choosing.



“As many now know, the settlement of the Inuit into permanent villages created as many problems as it solved.” Colin's traveling companion Tipana and his family outside their 'Matchbox House' in Cambridge Bay (Colin Irwin — Arctic Trek 1973)

Having just completed my [Doctoral Dissertation](#) on the Inuit, I was charged with the task of writing a report with recommendations on

the issue for the Canadian Government. Fortunately, the Inuit also entrusted me with the responsibility for researching and writing this critical report on the clear understanding that it should be based on their opinions and views. To that end, I completed surveys in the Arctic settlements of Western Hudson's Bay.



Aupudluk and Kako who patiently instructed the author in every aspect of Inuit ethics, social norms and religious belief.

The report ['Lords of the Arctic: Wards of the State'](#) had the desired impact on [Canadian public opinion](#) and the Inuit were given their own Territory, Nunavut, which translates as 'Our Land'. All done by mutual consent without a shot being fired in anger. While granting that the Canadian Government acted more wisely than many others

do in the face of indigenous land claims, the peaceable manner in which the Inuit comported themselves in the face of such a charged situation merits special praise.

Inuit consensus-based decision making

We often refer to ourselves as a warring species, as though fighting is in our very nature. So, how did the Inuit address group conflict, whether tribe on tribe or nation on nation?

Then, as now, cooperation is the key, specifically a recognition of mutual interests and formalising those relationships with rules. For example: holding and using natural resources in common; expanding the ties of kinship with sharing partnerships; and, most importantly, [resolving difficult conflicts of interest by consensus](#).



Inuit gathering and discussion in an igloo (Library & Archives Canada/Qikiqtani Truth Commission)

In general, older more experienced Inuit made difficult decisions for those who were younger, but when peers had to resolve a critical issue, it was by consensus. In practice, everyone at such meetings, from village councils to Arctic forums, has a veto, but they must not use it. Their political culture requires that they seek a consensus. Everyone has a responsibility to understand the other's point of view and find common ground. Additionally, there can be no abstentions,

as responsibility is collective. In general, this has worked well in small communities and Arctic settlements.



Inuit gathering and discussion in modern times, circa 1980's ('Above & Beyond' article January 2015)

When I was working for Inuit land claim organisations and attended community meetings, the minutes of those meetings would time after time show a list of motions that were “accepted unanimously,” even though under Canadian law, only majority decisions were required. When I attended a gathering of all 51 Inuit settlements from across the Canadian Arctic, decisions were still taken unanimously although, with two representatives from each community, over one hundred individuals had to find agreement. No small feat. Critically, everyone back home in their villages expected nothing less as all the Inuit shared the same political culture.



Protestant 'Orange Men' marching through Belfast, Northern Ireland (Colin Irwin)

Applying Inuit wisdom to Northern Ireland

In an Inuit worldview, war is ‘mass murder’ and life changing decisions must be taken collectively, without abstentions or vetoes. Most people in the world do not share the Inuit worldview. In the overwhelming majority of contexts, it is the political elites who decide.

The UN’s political machinery is designed to advance consensus decision making, and in practice, the UN does sometimes help make important collective decisions, such as the 2016 Paris Agreement on climate change. Regrettably, however, when it comes to questions of ‘mass murder’ or war, consensus-based decision making is rarer and more peace agreements fail than succeed.

Following my life changing experiences in the Arctic, I thought I could apply the lessons of the Inuit experience to certain intractable conflicts around the world. With the support of the Canadian government, I thus relocated to Northern Ireland in the 1990s and then to the Middle East. At that time, little progress was being made on the Israel/Palestine conflict. In Northern Ireland on the other hand, after twenty years of civil war and political failure, a novel process was being tried, one built on consensus. To the surprise of many, it worked. Here’s how.

TUESDAY
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PEACE
DEAL

Belfast
Telegraph

On Tuesday 31 March 1998 the Peace Poll published in the Belfast Telegraph informed the negotiating teams that the deal they had drafted was acceptable to the people of Northern Ireland. Subsequently the Belfast Agreement was made on Good Friday 10 April 1998 in the knowledge that it would be passed in the referendum on 22 May 1998.

Firstly, the UK Government established the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue in 1996 as part of a process of negotiations that eventually led to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. It included 110 members democratically elected by proportional representation. The top ten parties were guaranteed at least two seats, so everyone, from long established parties, to rebel groups with paramilitary connections, and the Women's Coalition participated in the peace negotiations. Then — [and this was my contribution](#) — public opinion polls were run on [every element of a potential peace settlement](#) package. The elected negotiators wrote and agreed to all questions by consensus. All Northern Ireland communities were surveyed, and all the results were made public. Most significantly, when the time came for the parties to make their agreement, they knew the agreement would have the support of their respective constituencies. In 1998, peace was achieved by consensus and endorsed in a referendum.



Peace protesters in the UN Green Zone on Cyprus. Without compromise “Cyprus remains a frozen conflict to this day” (Colin Irwin)

No way forward without compromise

Consensus requires compromise. I remember, on one occasion, some years ago, discussing the prospect of running peace polls with one of the two Presidents lead negotiators of the divided island of Cyprus. He thought it a very good idea to poll peoples on both the North and South of the island to find out what compromises they would be willing to accept to get peace. Of course, I was delighted with this outcome. But a couple of days later, as I was going through the details of how we would do this with the President’s legal counsel, I encountered a problem. I explained how the respective preferred negotiating positions of the two sides would be tested against a series of compromises. Crucially, this would help identify the most

acceptable compromises. An invaluable bit of information. This process had worked in Northern Ireland, I assured him. He looked a little shocked. “But that will weaken our negotiating position” he explained. “Yes,” I agreed “But equally for both sides, and that is how we get to peace.” He was clearly downhearted. “I don’t think I can recommend my President to do that!” And so we didn’t. Cyprus remains a frozen conflict to this day.

When we ask the important ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ questions of Inuit nonviolence, it is clear that they would not have been able to survive as a people in the Arctic if they engaged in the costly behaviour of war. This outcome was achieved through rules of conduct that governed the equitable sharing of the natural resources of the Arctic. When difficult decisions had to be made it was done by consensus. Arguably a just peace anywhere in our modern world is governed by the same simple imperatives. Today, the ‘why?’ has to be to mend a planet on the verge of climate collapse and the ‘how?’ must be to set, respect, and follow meaningful international norms.

Global peacemaking the Inuit way after the pandemic

The world’s scientific community has worked wonders through cooperation to bring us vaccines that suppress the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. And yet, we still struggle with finding an antidote against the multitude of persistent armed conflicts around the world. The UN Secretary-General’s call for a [global cease fire](#) has been ambitious with some results, but significant change is still pending. Finding global consensus for joint action remains tough.

Having now run peace polls in a dozen countries around the world, I find one truth shines through. Those directly caught up in conflict almost invariably have a sound understanding of their conflict and its consequences. Accordingly, they are more willing to make the compromises needed to get to peace than the leaderships who claim to speak for them are willing to admit. This truth needs to be exposed and acted on. But how?

The UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) has established an [Innovation Cell](#) to introduce new ways of working, including lessons learnt from indigenous peoples. Peace polls like those run in Northern Ireland and cutting edge technologies where [Artificial Intelligence \(AI\)](#) can be used, in real time, to find consensus between warring parties. They will be vital in our path forward.

Already, in the lead up to its 75th anniversary in 2020, the [UN polled the peoples of the world](#) on their priorities for peace and the UN's [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). [Mainstreaming World Peace Polls](#) and consensus decision making is now a real possibility. Post COVID-19 peace making can go global. The world is in need of a collective paradigm shift to forge consensus. With all the tools at our disposal, running peace polls to identify both compromises and common ground to mend a 'broken planet' is now a real option. The question remains are we up to the vital task that history has presented us with. Not long ago, the Inuit faced a similar momentous challenge and worked together to find consensus. Now more than ever, we need to draw inspiration from their powerful example.



Colin's yacht Endeavour with a Chinese junk rig and Hasler self-steering gear for singlehanded sailing, pulled up on the shore of Cambridge Bay, then part of the Northwest Territories in the Canadian Central Arctic before the Nunavut land claim settlement (Colin Irwin)



"Had Franklin and his men listened to and learned from the Inuit, I believe they would have lived". Colin with his mentor, teacher and brother by adoption Karmoyak (Nakashook)



“As many now know, the settlement of the Inuit into permanent villages created as many problems as it solved.” Colin’s traveling companion Tipana and his family outside their ‘Matchbox House’ in Cambridge Bay (Colin Irwin — Arctic Trek 1973)



Tipana demonstrates the secret of successful Igloo construction by placing his snow blocks ‘one-on-one’ in a spiral (Colin Irwin — Arctic Trek 1973)



Mud sled runners slicked with freezing water to create 'ice-on-ice' runners that are totally frictionless (Colin Irwin — Arctic Trek 1973)



The patterns etched in the snow by the prevailing winds provide the experienced Inuit navigator with a 'wind compass' that allows them to know their direction of travel even in a 'white out' (Colin Irwin — Arctic Trek 1973)



An Inuit family walk across the Spring ice to spear Arctic Char with a Kakivak near Taloyoak (Colin Irwin)

About the author: Dr Colin Irwin is an aquanaut, Arctic explorer and social scientist. He developed 'peace polls' to bring the views of 'the people' into the negotiation of the Nunavut settlement in Canada and Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland. With commissions from governments, NGOs and the UN he has extended his work on peace building and public diplomacy around the world including The Balkans, Middle East, Kashmir and Sri Lanka all available on his website at www.peacepolls.org.

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