THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Nunavut's birthday sparks debate about future

Even before its existence, residents had faced social and economic challenges. But new issues now exist

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Forget balloons and streamers.

The people of Grise Fiord - Canada's most northerly community - plan to wake up this morning and launch Nunavut's 10th birthday celebrations in their town by going on a seal hunt. Most of the Ellesmere Island community's 150 residents are Inuit, and the rest of the day will include traditional games such as a harpoon toss competition, seal skin sledding, and a community feast featuring "country" foods.

"Like everywhere else, this is nowhere near a perfect place, but the people of Grise Fiord are happy to be in Nunavut," said Marty Kuluguqtuq, who helped organize today's festivities with a $5,000 grant from the territorial government. "We look forward to the future."

What the future holds for Canada's 13th jurisdiction is being hotly debated these days inside Nunavut, a constellation of 25 mainly Inuit communities and 31,400 people. About 60 per cent of the population is under the age of 25.

Even before Nunavut - which means "our land" in Inuktitut - came into existence on April 1, 1999, its residents faced a host of serious social and economic challenges. Very few have been solved and lots of new ones, such as the rapid environmental changes brought on by climate change, have been added.

"[The problems] are difficult but somebody has to do them ... We have to keep plugging away," said John Amagoalik, a veteran Inuk leader often referred to as the Father of Nunavut. Mr. Amagoalik began calling for an Inuit homeland in the early 1970s and later played a key role in the historic land-claims settlement that led to the creation of Nunavut, Canada's youngest child of Confederation.

"Back in 1999, a lot of people up here, including myself, had some doubts about whether we'd be able to run this new government," he said. "I think after 10 years those doubts have disappeared. Most people now accept the fact that Nunavut is here, there is no turning back."

But creating and running the vast territory - it is spread over one-fifth of the country's land mass and three time zones - hasn't been cheap, and Ottawa has been footing most of the bill since Day 1. This fiscal year, Nunavut will receive more than $1-billion in federal transfers - or $32,373 per capita - to help pay for its schools, health centres and territorial bureaucracy.

Mr. Amagoalik said it has been money well spent because the building up of Nunavut and its communities has been an effective way for Canadians to assert Arctic sovereignty, a pressing policy issue for the Harper government.

Still, Mr. Amagoalik said it is essential that Nunavut reduce its financial dependence on Ottawa in the coming years by building an economy. Unemployment is rampant in the territory and many existing jobs are government-related.

A recent economic report written for the territorial government cited several possibilities for Nunavut, including large-scale mining projects and building up its fishing industry.

However, the report's authors warned "the single greatest challenge" facing the territory's "future wealth creation" is its inadequate education system.

The researchers found that nearly three-quarters of Nunavut's working-age population do not "meet the minimum level required to participate in a modern knowledge-based economy."

In a final report on the original Nunavut Land Claims Agreement released in 2006, former B.C. Supreme Court justice Thomas Berger wrote that Nunavut was facing "a moment of crisis." And he blasted the territory's education system, its high-school dropout rates and high illiteracy and unemployment numbers.

Mary Simon, a prominent Inuk leader, is heartened by Nunavut Premier Eva Aariak's plans to make education and healthy communities a key priority in the coming years. Social ills, including suicide, family violence and substance abuse occur at much higher than national rates.

Ms. Simon, who heads a national organization that represents the more than 40,000 Inuit who live across the country, said devolution talks with Ottawa also need to speed up so the territory can be given more power over its own affairs, as well as control of natural resource royalties.

"We just can't blame Nunavut if it failed on certain things ... We all need to take responsibility for it," she said.

Stacey Aglok MacDonald was 16 years old when Nunavut was born a decade ago, and today the young Iqaluit-based Inuk filmmaker and media artist is considered one of the territory's many young, bright stars.

The 26-year-old recently finished work on a documentary called *Staking the Claim*, which chronicles the history behind the creation of Canada's four Inuit land claims areas, including Nunavut.

"When we started taking control back over our lives and having a voice on a government level, our pride and self-confidence began to soar," she said.

Ms. Aglok MacDonald said pride and the growing determination, especially among young Inuit, to finish the work people such as John Amagoalik helped start, shouldn't be ignored or discounted as Nunavut turns 10. "We do believe that we are a very unique people," she said. "...We have a lot to offer the world."

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SOUTHERN CANADIANS' VIEWS ON ARCTIC

More Canadians support the build up of people than of the military as an effective way to guarantee Arctic sovereignty, according to a new Ipsos Reid online poll released today.

The survey, which was conducted on behalf of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship and the Dominion Institute, asked Canadians living south of the 60th parallel a wide range of questions about the Arctic.

John Ralston Saul, who co-chairs the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, said the survey is believed to be the first time southern Canadians' views on the North have been gauged.

In recent years, climate change has transformed the resource-rich Far North and prompted pressing questions about its future. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has warned Canadians that when it comes to the North, the country has to "use it or lose it."

However, while six in 10 respondents to the survey knew the United States and other countries dispute Canada's sovereignty over the fabled Northwest Passage, many thought the actual squabble was over another body of water, including the Hudson Strait.

When respondents were asked whether the presence of people mattered to sovereignty, 36 per cent strongly agreed while 52 per cent somewhat agreed. When respondents were later asked whether the presence of military forces would guarantee sovereignty, only 15 per cent strongly agreed while 38 per cent somewhat agreed.

The online survey of 1,011 Canadian adults was conducted from March 18 to 23.

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