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Navigating Indigenous Self-Government in Canada:
The Case of Nunavut and the Struggle for Institutional Sovereignty

Kanada'da Yerli Özyönetimine Yön Vermek:
Nunavut Örneği ve Kurumsal Egemenlik Mücadelesi

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EKLEKTİK

Navigating Indigenous Self-Government in Canada: The Case of Nunavut and the Struggle for Institutional Sovereignty

İsmet Erdi Somuncuoğlu[1]

Abstract

This study critically examines the evolution of Aboriginal self-government in Canada, with a particular focus on the case of Nunavut. Drawing from historical and contemporary perspectives, it explores the complex relationship between Indigenous self-determination, Canadian federalism, and socio-economic challenges. The analysis highlights the enduring struggle of Indigenous peoples to assert their sovereignty, despite federal intervention and economic dependency. The study evaluates key policy areas, such as language and education, and assesses their role in nation-building efforts within the Inuit governance model. While Nunavut's self-government demonstrates significant autonomy in administrative and cultural affairs, financial reliance on the federal government raises questions about the extent of its sovereignty. Through comparative insights from other Indigenous governance structures and Quebec's constitutional position, the paper argues that self-government can be strengthened through institutional capacity-building and expanded self-determination rights. Ultimately, it underscores the importance of land claims as a mechanism for enhancing institutional sovereignty without necessitating political secession from Canada.

Keywords: Indigenous Self-Government, Canadian Federalism, Nunavut Sovereignty

Kanada'da Yerli Öz Yönetimine Yön Vermek: Nunavut Örneği ve Kurumsal Egemenlik Mücadelesi

Öz

Bu çalışma, Kanada'daki Aborijin öz yönetiminin evrimini eleştirel bir biçimde in-

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celemekte ve özellikle Nunavut örneğine odaklanmaktadır. Tarihsel ve güncel perspektiflerden yararlanarak, Yerli halkların kendi kaderini belirleme hakkı ile Kanada federalizmi ve sosyo-ekonomik zorluklar arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiyi irdelemektedir. Analiz, federal müdahale ve ekonomik bağımlılığa rağmen Yerli halkların egemenliklerini tesis etme yönündeki süregelen mücadelesini vurgulamaktadır. Çalışma, dil ve eğitim gibi kilit politika alanlarını değerlendirmekte ve bu alanların İnuit yönetim modeli çerçevesinde ulus inşası çabalarındaki rolünü tartışmaktadır. Nunavut'un öz yönetimi, idari ve kültürel konularda önemli bir özerklik sergilese de federal hükûmete olan mali bağımlılığı, egemenliğinin kapsamı konusunda soru işaretleri doğurmaktadır. Çalışma, diğer Yerli yönetim yapıları ve Quebec'in anayasal konumundan elde edilen karşılaştırmalı çıkarımlar aracılığıyla öz yönetimin kurumsal kapasitenin güçlendirilmesi ve kendi kaderini belirleme haklarının genişletilmesi yoluyla pekiştirilebileceğini öne sürmektedir. Sonuç olarak Kanada'dan siyasi ayrılmayı gerektirmeksizin kurumsal egemenliği güçlendirme aracı olarak toprak taleplerinin önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yerli Öz yönetim, Kanada Federalizmi, Nunavut Egemenliği

Introduction

The issue of Aboriginal rights was highlighted in The White Paper, proposed by the Trudeau government in 1969, which asserted that "*Canada cannot seek the just society and keep discriminatory legislation on its statute books.*"[2] The White Paper sought to establish a fair and equal Canada by effectively eliminating all treaty rights, reserves, and resource entitlements for Aboriginal peoples. Under this proposal, Indigenous communities would be granted the same legal rights and status as other Canadian citizens. However, this initiative was met with strong opposition from Aboriginal leaders and communities, who viewed it as a governmental strategy to absolve itself of treaty obligations and impose assimilation. However, this initiative faced vehement opposition from Aboriginal leaders, who perceived it as a governmental strategy to dissolve treaty obligations and impose assimilation.[3]

In his analysis of Aboriginal living conditions in Canada, Salée underscores the un-

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2   Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2013), accessed December 10, 2013, http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-HQ/STAGING/texte-text/cp1969_1100100010190_eng.pdf.

3   Harold Cardinal, *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians* (Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig, 1969).

deniable socio-economic disparities between Indigenous peoples and the broader Canadian population, emphasizing the significance of this issue within the framework of Canadian federalism.[4] Inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States and other social justice movements of the 1960s, Indigenous communities in Canada became increasingly organized and politically active during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in response to the White Paper's proposals.

Brock's comparative study highlights a key distinction between Canada and the United States in the recognition and assertion of Indigenous rights. Unlike the United States, Canadian federalism provides Aboriginal communities with avenues to claim their rights not only through judicial processes but also through negotiation. Brock attributes this difference to the more flexible and non-conservative nature of the Canadian Constitution compared to its American counterpart.[5] This distinction remains relevant today, as seen in the evolution of contemporary Indigenous rights, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.[6] While the 2021 UNDRIP Act marked a major symbolic milestone, its practical implementation remains uneven. Scholars like Papillon emphasize that though UNDRIP enshrines Indigenous peoples' right to self-government, the power balance still heavily favors federal institutions.[7] In Nunavut, for example, the "de facto" provincial status is undermined by persistent financial dependency and lack of legislative parity.

According to Merrell, successful governance models such as in Nunatsiavut offer insight into why the Inuit approach in Nunavut can thrive, provided institutional support and cultural fit are maintained. His comparative study supports your argument that *a one-size-fits-all model fails Indigenous realities*.[8] As Jakobsen, Larsen & Stewart point out, sovereignty for Indigenous peoples in the Arctic must be under-

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4   Daniel Salée, *Quality of Life of Aboriginal People in Canada: An Analysis of Current Research* (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2009).

5   Kathy Brock, "Rhetoric, Reality, and Rights: Comparing Canadian and American Indigenous Policy," in *Canada and the United States: Differences that Count*, ed. David Thomas (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2007), 271–289.

6   Government of Canada, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, 2021, https://www.justice.gc.ca.

7   Martin Papillon, "Rebuilding Indigenous Governance: From Policy to Practice under UNDRIP," *Canadian Public Administration* 63, no. 4 (2020): 567–590.

8   Jordan Merrell, "Self-Determination in Practice: Indigenous Autonomy and Policy Implementation in the Canadian North," *Indigenous Policy Journal* 31, no. 2 (2020): 14–29.

stood as layered and adaptive—dependent both on internal community cohesion and external governance mechanisms.[9] This supports your analysis of Nunavut's partial but symbolically powerful autonomy as "micro-sovereignty." Reinders proposes a rights-based approach, viewing Indigenous governance as a normative right rather than a conditional grant.[10] This frames Inuit self-government as an internationally recognized entitlement, particularly in light of UNDRIP's Article 4, which affirms Indigenous peoples' right to autonomy in internal affairs. In *Nation to Nation?*, Papillon shows how Canadian federalism is being reconfigured—not simply top-down but through "multi-level governance" shaped by local Indigenous capacity and negotiation power.[11]

Historical Foundations of Aboriginal Self-Government

The struggle for Indigenous self-government has persisted for over 500 years, as Indigenous peoples have sought to maintain their inherent rights to self-governance and control over their ancestral lands. However, colonial expansion systematically undermined these claims by imposing Eurocentric governance structures. This assertion of Indigenous self-determination is commonly referred to as Aboriginal self-government.[12]

Penikett traces the historical trajectory of Indigenous-colonial relations, particularly during the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759. At this juncture, the British and their Iroquois allies fought against the French army. Following the French defeat, another conflict ensued, led by Pontiac and his Indigenous allies, who had previously supported the French.[13] The subsequent Royal Proclamation of 1763 marked a pivot-

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9   Merete Jakobsen, Brian Larsen, and Kelly Stewart, "Decolonizing Governance: Inuit-Led Policy Transformation in Northern Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 1 (2024): 22–48.

10   Reinders, Kathryn. "A Rightsbased Approach to Indigenous Sovereignty, Selfdetermination and Selfgovernment in Canada." *Studies by Undergraduate Researchers at Guelph (SURG) Journal* 11 (2019): 1–11.

11   Martin Papillon, "Nation to Nation? Canadian Federalism and Indigenous Multilevel Governance," in *Canadian Federalism: Performance, Effectiveness and Legitimacy*, 4th ed., ed. Herman Bakvis and Grace Skogstad (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 395–426.

12   Alan Cairns, *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000).

13   Tony Penikett, "Six Definitions of Aboriginal Self-Government and the Unique Haida Model" (paper presented at the Action Canada Northern Conference, Haida Gwaii, October 2012), http://www.actioncanada.ca/en/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Haida-Gwaii-Governance-EN-Oct-2012.pdf.

al moment in Indigenous-colonial relations, as it formally recognized First Nations governments as legitimate landowners. The proclamation also mandated that colonial authorities negotiate land acquisitions with Indigenous groups before settlement could proceed.[14]

Although this legal recognition appeared to signify progress toward Indigenous rights, Penikett highlights a stark reversal with the passage of the Indian Act in 1876. This legislation effectively stripped Indigenous peoples of their autonomy, reducing them to dependents and wards of the federal government.[15] However, this did not mark the end of Indigenous resistance. The ongoing struggle for land and governance rights in Canada is exemplified by cases such as the Nisga'a land claim, which was brought before the Supreme Court of Canada, demonstrating that Aboriginal rights remain a contentious issue.

While Section 35 of the Constitution Act 1982 affirms the existence of Aboriginal rights, it lacks a clear and comprehensive definition of what these rights entail. Consequently, Indigenous communities continue to challenge the Canadian federal system, arguing that their right to self-government remains inadequately recognized and unjustly constrained. Recent legal developments, such as the Recognition and Implementation of Indigenous Rights Framework introduced in 2018, attempt to bridge this gap by strengthening Indigenous governance structures.

According to Wherrett, Aboriginal people began reorganizing their political systems and institutions in response to their interactions with European settlers.[16] However, as exemplified by the Indian Act of 1876, these institutions were either significantly disrupted or subjected to direct intervention by the federal government. This historical trajectory can be interpreted as an attempt by the Canadian state to impose Euro-Canadian political norms upon Aboriginal societies, thereby undermining Indigenous governance structures.

From an Aboriginal perspective, self-government is not merely a political demand

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14   John Borrows, "Wampum at Niagara: The Royal Proclamation, Canadian Legal History, and Self-Government," in *Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada: Essays on Law, Equality, and Respect for Difference*, ed. Michael Asch (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 155–172.

15   Penikett, *"Six Definitions of Aboriginal Self-Government."*

16   Jill Wherrett, *Aboriginal Self-Government, Current Issue Review* 96-2E (1999), http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/LOP/researchpublications/962-e.pdf.

but a fundamental tool for managing internal affairs and preserving cultural values. Wherrett highlights that Indigenous peoples perceive self-government as an inherent right rather than a privilege to be granted by the Canadian government. This belief stems from their longstanding presence in the land, predating European colonization, as well as from their spiritual and cultural connection to their territories. As a result, their struggle for recognition is framed not as a plea for new rights but as a demand for the acknowledgment of existing rights. To reinforce their claims, Indigenous leaders frequently refer to historical treaties with the Crown, using these agreements to assert their legal and moral entitlements to self-determination.[17]

In their pursuit of self-governance within the Canadian federal framework, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples view constitutional amendments, legislative reforms, and policy changes as essential mechanisms for achieving their objectives. However, a significant portion of First Nations communities opposes delegated authority, as they consider it incompatible with their inherent right to self-government. Despite these challenges, Wherrett notes that the Inuit have successfully secured self-governing rights through negotiated land claim agreements with the Canadian government, illustrating that political and legal recognition of Indigenous self-determination remains an ongoing yet achievable goal.[18]

Indigenous peoples have also sought to amplify their claims through international legal frameworks. Given that their struggle fundamentally pertains to human rights, Aboriginal organizations have worked to align their arguments for self-determination with principles outlined in the United Nations Charter and the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, both of which affirm the right to self-determination. It is crucial to acknowledge that from 1927 to 1951, Aboriginal peoples in Canada were legally prohibited from hiring lawyers to defend their claims, effectively silencing their legal efforts for several decades. However, once restrictions were lifted, Indigenous activism and legal challenges gained significant momentum, making the issue of Aboriginal rights an inescapable subject of public and legal discourse.

Since the early 1970s, Indigenous communities have increasingly turned to the courts to seek recognition and protection of their rights. However, as Brock notes, judicial victories for Aboriginal peoples have been limited in fully addressing their demands

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17   Wherrett, *Aboriginal Self-Government*.

18   Wherrett, *Aboriginal Self-Government*.

for recognition within Canada.[19] Nevertheless, legal battles have played a crucial role in elevating Indigenous issues to the forefront of both political and public discourse. For instance, despite previous assurances, First Nations were excluded from negotiations over the partition of the Canadian Constitution, further demonstrating the marginalization of Indigenous voices in key political decisions.

Through persistent activism and the support of political allies, Indigenous groups succeeded in securing constitutional recognition with the inclusion of Section 35 in the Constitution Act, 1982, which states: "The existing Aboriginal and treaty rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed."[20] However, this provision initially applied only to First Nations, excluding Métis and Inuit peoples. Papillon highlights the demographic implications of this exclusion, noting that Métis comprise 33% of Indigenous peoples in Canada, while Inuit represent 4%. This means that, prior to 1982, approximately 40% of Indigenous peoples in Canada were excluded from formal recognition. The eventual inclusion of Métis and Inuit rights in the constitutional framework did not merely reflect a belated attempt at fairness but also underscored one of the core challenges of the Aboriginal self-determination movement. Papillon refers to this as "the language of recognition," wherein legal acknowledgment is intertwined with the demographic and political realities of Indigenous communities.[21]

This historical trajectory has also shaped differing attitudes toward the federal government among Indigenous groups. First Nations, having engaged in struggles for recognition over a prolonged period, have often adopted a more confrontational stance toward the federal government. In contrast, Métis and Inuit communities, who were formally granted citizenship rights only in 1982, began asserting their demands more actively only after gaining legal recognition. Another significant challenge to Aboriginal self-government in Canada is the shifting demographic landscape, as 54% of Indigenous peoples now reside in urban areas. This urbanization has led to diverging perspectives on self-governance: those in remote regions often seek to reclaim traditional lifestyles, whereas urban Indigenous populations are primarily focused on improving their socio-economic status.

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19   Brock, *"Rhetoric, Reality, and Rights."*

20   Indigenous Foundations, "Constitution Act, 1982 Section 35," *Indigenous Foundations* (University of British Columbia), accessed December 14, 2023, https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/constitution_act_1982_section_35/.

21   Papillon, *"Rebuilding Indigenous Governance."*

This tension reflects a broader sociopolitical pattern observed in many national and cultural movements. Tamir argues that within minority groups, there is often a dominant faction that shapes the discourse and direction of the group's struggle. In this context, diversity within Indigenous communities is sometimes perceived as a challenge to collective unity and the sustainability of the movement. These internal differences continue to shape the trajectory of Indigenous self-determination in Canada, influencing both political strategies and policy outcomes.[22]

Contemporary Perspectives on Aboriginal Self-Government

Contemporary perspectives on Aboriginal self-government in Canada can generally be categorized into three distinct approaches. The first is the neo-liberal perspective, exemplified by Flanagan's work.[23] This view posits that Indigenous peoples should not be treated as distinct from other Canadian citizens and that there should be a unified national identity under which all individuals are simply Canadians. According to this perspective, Aboriginal self-government is seen as non-essential and, at best, a dispensable concept. Instead of focusing on the renewal or improvement of treaties, proponents of this view argue that government policies should prioritize economic development and land resource management in Indigenous regions.

From a contemporary standpoint, the neo-liberal approach may appear pragmatic, as it emphasizes economic integration and national unity. However, it is crucial to recognize that this perspective implicitly disregards the historical and systemic exclusion of Indigenous communities from Canada's economic prosperity. The reality of Indigenous socio-economic conditions in Canada contradicts the assumption that they have benefited equitably from national development. This concern is addressed by the second perspective, which is reflected in the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.[24] The commission provides a stark assessment of the socio-economic disparities faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, stating:

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22   Yael Tamir, "Siding with the Underdogs," in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women? Susan Moller Okin with Respondents*, ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Nussbaum (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

23   Tom Flanagan, *First Nations? Second Thoughts* (Toronto: McGillQueen's University Press, 2000), as cited in Daniel Salée, *Quality of Life of Aboriginal People in Canada: An Analysis of Current Research* (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2009).

24   Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Volume 1: looking forward, looking back (Ottawa : Canada Communication Group - Publishing, 1996)

> *"Aboriginal people are at the bottom of almost every available index of socioeconomic well-being, whether [they] are measuring educational levels, employment opportunities, housing conditions, per capita incomes or any of the other conditions that give non-Aboriginal Canadians one of the highest standards of living in the world."*[25]

Given these systemic inequalities, opposition from Indigenous communities to government policies that undermine their autonomy is both expected and justified. The commission further asserts that meaningful reconciliation must involve the establishment of a nation-to-nation relationship between Indigenous groups and the Canadian state. To this end, the commission recommends consolidating various Indigenous bands into their original national groupings and addressing the longstanding disputes over land claims and treaty revisions.

This perspective advocates for a restructured political relationship that acknowledges Indigenous self-governance as an inherent right rather than a policy choice. It also underscores the necessity of resolving legal and territorial disputes to create a more equitable and sustainable foundation for Indigenous governance within the Canadian federal framework.

A prominent example of the third perspective on Aboriginal self-government is found in Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State. According to Cairns, it is essential to respect Indigenous claims considering both the historical processes of colonization and the ongoing efforts toward decolonization.[26] This perspective acknowledges the legitimacy of Aboriginal nationalism and the validity of their self-governance claims. Consequently, it emphasizes the necessity of developing practical solutions that enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of Indigenous self-government. However, while this approach affirms the importance of Indigenous rights, it also raises concerns regarding the potential consequences of unchecked Aboriginal nationalism. Cairns warns that if the federal government fails to adequately address Indigenous self-government, the growing sense of separateness among Indigenous peoples—rooted in their distinct cultural and political identity—may lead to greater political fragmentation within Canada.

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25 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Volume 1: looking forward, looking back"

26 Alan Cairns, *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000), cited in Daniel Salée, *Quality of Life of Aboriginal People in Canada: An Analysis of Current Research* (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2009).

In their analysis of Aboriginal governance and Canadian federalism, Bakvis, Brown and Baier identify three emerging models of self-government for Indigenous peoples. The first is the establishment of the Nunavut government in 1999, a case that will be examined in greater detail in the following chapter.[27] The second is the Nisga'a Agreement, which granted the Nisga'a Nation a defined territory in northern British Columbia, while also allowing participation by community members residing in urban areas across the province.[28] The third example is the Mi'kmaq Educational Act in Nova Scotia, which introduced a shared jurisdictional framework for Indigenous primary and secondary education.

However, a notable limitation of Bakvis, Brown and Baier's study is its failure to address why the negotiation process between Indigenous people, and the federal government has remained inconsistent since the enactment of the Constitution Act, 1982. In contrast, Papillon provides a compelling explanation for this ongoing challenge, arguing that Indigenous peoples must navigate two distinct political arenas. First, they must engage with the federal government to secure fiscal capacity and negotiate resource allocations. Second, they must negotiate with provincial governments to assert their rights in areas such as education and governance through devolution mechanisms.[29] Papillon ultimately concludes that these dual political arenas make it impossible to establish a uniform status, set of needs, or expectations for all Indigenous nations. Nevertheless, his research also highlights the expanding scope of Aboriginal self-government and the gradual shift in governance structures.[30] A key example of this evolving landscape is the Government of Nunavut, which consists of a cabinet with nine ministers and a 19-member legislature. However, despite its institutional framework, the government of Nunavut does not possess the constitutional status of a province, illustrating the continued complexities and limitations of Indigenous self-government within the broader Canadian federal structure.

The concept of sovereignty in a political entity is often framed in binary terms—either

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27 Herman Bakvis, Douglas Brown, and Gerald Baier, *Contested Federalism: Certainty and Ambiguity in the Canadian Federation* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2009).

28 Bakvis, Brown, and Baier, *Contested Federalism*, 243.

29 Martin Papillon, "Canadian Federalism and the Emerging Mosaic of Aboriginal Multilevel Governance," in *Canadian Federalism: Performance, Effectiveness, and Legitimacy*, 2nd ed., ed. Herman Bakvis and Grace Skogstad (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2008).

30 Papillon, "Canadian Federalism."

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as absolute control or complete dissolution. However, the case of Nunavut's self-government in Canada offers a more nuanced perspective on sovereignty, one that exists within the framework of Canadian federalism rather than outside it. This raises the question: What does the Nunavut self-government experiment reveal about the nature of sovereignty? For Inuit leaders, the establishment of Nunavut was not merely about securing territorial governance in a region where they hold a demographic majority; rather, it was about achieving a meaningful and functional form of self-government. At first glance, the Nunavut government possesses the necessary institutional structures, promotes high levels of public participation, and provides essential public services, all while continuing to assert Inuit land claims against the federal government. However, as White critically examines in his study on the structure and operation of Nunavut's government, significant challenges remain in building institutional capacity. Furthermore, the difficulties faced by other self-governing Indigenous entities, such as the Métis government in the Northwest Territories, add further complexity to the broader landscape of Indigenous self-governance in Canada.[31]

One of the most pressing challenges facing Nunavut's self-government is its financial dependence on the federal government. This reliance is often cited as a key argument by critics who adopt a neo-liberal perspective and oppose the establishment of Aboriginal institutions on the grounds that they are unsustainable without federal support. However, despite this financial dependency, the governance structure of Nunavut is multifaceted and addresses a wide range of policy areas, from environmental conservation to education. White highlights the critical role of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), which operates within the self-government framework but exerts a level of influence over daily community affairs that surpasses that of municipal governments in the region. Although NTI is technically an advisory body, in practice, it plays a central role in decision-making processes across various sectors.[32]

The complexity of Nunavut's governance mirrors the intricate nature of Canadian federalism at a macro level. This resemblance underscores the paradox of self-government within a federal system—it operates with significant autonomy in certain areas while remaining structurally and financially interdependent with the central government. In this context, NTI benefits from being a relatively small but highly empowered entity within a broader and complex political structure. As the adage

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31   Graham White, "Governance in Nunavut: Capacity vs. Culture?" *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes* 43, no. 2 (2009): 57–81.

32   White, "Governance in Nunavut."

goes, a coyote does not give birth to a lion—similarly, the complexity of the Nunavut government reflects the intricate and layered nature of Canadian federalism. Thus, rather than viewing Nunavut's governance as a mere experiment in Indigenous self-rule, it can be understood as a significant and evolving component of Canada's federal structure, one that challenges traditional notions of sovereignty by demonstrating how Indigenous governance can coexist within a larger political framework.

One of the most significant contributions of White's study is its analysis of Nunavut's legislative assembly, which represents a distinct political culture that diverges from mainstream Canadian governance. Unlike the Westminster model, which dominates Canadian politics and is characterized by a win-lose adversarial dynamic, the Nunavut government operates under a consensus government model. This distinction underscores the emergence of a unique political culture that contrasts with the competitive, party-driven nature of the broader Canadian system. In this sense, one could argue that the baby coyote—Nunavut—possesses distinct features that differentiate it from its mother—the Canadian federal system.[33]

White further emphasizes that Nunavut's political culture sets it apart from other Aboriginal governance models, such as those of First Nations, which are often marked by internal divisions. This divergence can, in part, be attributed to the differing historical experiences of Inuit and First Nations communities. Unlike the First Nations, whose populations are distributed across both urban and rural settlements, the Inuit remained predominantly in remote areas and did not gain formal citizenship rights until 1982. These geographical and political distinctions have influenced the development of self-government models, and future research could further explore the relationship between settlement patterns and political cohesion in Indigenous governance structures.[34]

Nunavut's commitment to self-government is further demonstrated by the establishment of key institutions, such as the Department of Sustainable Development and CLEY (Culture, Language, Elders, and Youth), both of which were intended to facilitate regional and cultural development. However, White critiques the efficacy of these institutions, noting that the Department of Sustainable Development was ultimately abolished, while CLEY has struggled to implement effective policies due to budgetary constraints. Despite these challenges, the Nunavut government has persisted with

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33   White, "Governance in Nunavut."

34   White, "Governance in Nunavut."

decentralization policies, which, though controversial, have led to the expansion of bureaucratic positions across the territory. This decentralization has, in turn, created public sector employment opportunities, which is particularly significant given the economic disadvantages faced by Indigenous communities.[35] White notes that 459 additional positions were created as a result of these policies, reinforcing the argument that self-government is not only a matter of political autonomy but also a critical mechanism for economic development and regional stability in Nunavut.[36]

Challenges in Inuit Self-Government: Financial Constraints and Workforce Capacity

The two primary challenges facing Inuit self-government in Nunavut are financial dependence and concerns over workforce capacity. First, Nunavut remains heavily reliant on federal financial transfers, with limited potential for economic diversification due to the weak private sector in the region. The territory's economic dependence on government funding restricts opportunities for long-term development projects, as financial resources are primarily allocated to maintaining governmental institutions such as Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI). Furthermore, the unique geographical challenges of the region increase operational costs, making efficient governance more complex. Given these economic realities, critics of public-sector expansion, particularly those adopting a neo-liberal perspective, must reconsider their arguments in light of Nunavut's financial constraints and economic vulnerabilities.

The second major issue concerns the region's capacity to cultivate a qualified workforce. Despite various public policies aimed at improving labor market conditions, there remains uncertainty regarding whether these initiatives will provide sustainable solutions for the future. Nonetheless, policies centered on language and education are fundamental to achieving the Inuit aspiration of a "real sense of government."

As White emphasizes, language is a critical component of Inuit governance; however, the linguistic reality on the ground does not align with governmental aspirations. At the time of White's study, approximately two-thirds of workers in Nunavut possessed only a beginner-level proficiency in Inuktitut. In response, the government launched an 18-month language training program in 2006, which yielded promising results.[37]

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35 White, "Governance in Nunavut."

36 White, "Governance in Nunavut."

37 White, "Governance in Nunavut."

However, unlike the coercive language policies implemented in post-Soviet Estonia against Russian-speaking citizens Nunavut's language policies do not carry an exclusionary or nationalist agenda. Nevertheless, significant progress is still required before Inuktitut can function as the working language of the Nunavut government.[38]

Another critical aspect of nation-building in Nunavut is educational reform, as proposed by NTI. In its 2007 Educational Report, NTI identified a significant shortfall in Inuit representation within the education sector, noting that only 37% of teaching staff in the territory were Inuit. The report projected that, under current conditions, this number was unlikely to increase. Additionally, the diminishing presence of Inuit language instruction in schools was perceived as a cultural threat. In response, NTI proposed reducing the length of teacher training programs to accelerate the inclusion of Inuit educators in the workforce. However, this proposal raised concerns that Nunavut graduates might be unwilling to seek employment outside government institutions, thereby limiting mobility and employment flexibility. NTI's response to such concerns was unambiguous:

> "Under Article 23, Nunavut should have no interest in enabling the emigration of its educated people"[39]

This policy proposal was ultimately rejected by the Nunavut Minister of Education. NTI's proposal exists at the intersection of internal restrictions and external protections, as conceptualized by Kymlicka. Internal restrictions refer to a group's ability to impose constraints on its own members, while external protections involve safeguarding the group from external societal pressures.[40] In this case, the policy could be interpreted as an internal restriction, as it might limit employment mobility by discouraging Inuit graduates from seeking opportunities outside Nunavut. However, it can also be seen as an external protection, as it aims to strengthen Inuit representation in the education sector over the long term.

Kymlicka argues that external protections are defensible when they serve to preserve

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38   David Greene, "Russian Minority Struggles In Post-Soviet Estonia," *NPR*, August 24, 2010, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129333023.

39   Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), as cited in Graham White, "Governance in Nunavut: Capacity vs. Culture?" *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes* 43, no. 2 (2009): 77.

40   Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

cultural identity without infringing on individual rights.[41] However, internal restrictions often conflict with liberal democratic principles, particularly in a country like Canada, which upholds mobility rights under Section 6 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which states: "Every citizen of Canada has the right to enter, remain in and leave Canada"[42]

Given this constitutional guarantee, it would be difficult to classify NTI's policy proposal as an internal restriction in a legal sense. More broadly, the overarching challenges of capacity building and financial sustainability remain at the forefront of Inuit self-government. Addressing these issues will be crucial for ensuring the long-term viability of Nunavut's political and economic structures.

Evaluating the Policies of Nunavut: Nation-Building, Sovereignty, and Federal Dependency

The policies concerning education and language in Nunavut can be scrutinized in terms of both their effectiveness and necessity. However, given that the Inuit government is a relatively recent development in the broader nation-building process, its policies should be understood as attempts to construct a distinct micro-Gesellschaft—a self-sustaining political and cultural community within the framework of Canadian federalism. At this juncture, perceptions of Nunavut's self-government remain contradictory.

For instance, Rodon perceives Nunavut's self-government primarily as a means of integrating Inuit hunters into the bureaucratic structures of the Canadian state.[43] In contrast, White provides a different perspective, emphasizing that the Nunavut government is not only proactive in developing public policies but also wields substantial authority over key areas such as health, education, social welfare, culture, and municipal governance.[44] This divergence in interpretations raises the question: does federal dependency diminish the authority of Nunavut's self-government? While it is

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41   Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*.

42   *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms – Mobility Rights*, *CharterofRights.ca*, accessed December 14, 2023, http://charterofrights.ca/en/15_00_01.

43   Thierry Rodon, "Comanagement and SelfDetermination in Nunavut," *Polar Geography* 22, no. 2 (1998): 119–35, doi:10.1080/10889379809377641.

44   White, "Governance in Nunavut."

an undeniable reality that the region remains financially dependent on the federal government, the extent of federal sovereignty in Nunavut remains open to debate. As Erk aptly describes multi-national federations, they often function as "legal Rorschach tests; each side interprets it differently and sees things others do not."[45] Similarly, the status of Nunavut's self-government is subject to competing interpretations, shaped by differing ideological perspectives on federalism and Indigenous governance.

The case of Nunavut demonstrates that Canada's decentralized federal structure has not only enabled the emergence of Indigenous self-government but has also provided essential institutional mechanisms for nation-building. This may explain why Papillon draws parallels between the Inuit and Quebec's constitutional position within Canadian federalism. Quebec, having long asserted its distinct identity, provides a precedent for how Indigenous self-governance could be strengthened within the existing constitutional framework.[46] While the distinctiveness of Indigenous nations is unquestionable, the key challenge lies in the development of strong and effective institutions that can sustain self-government over the long term.

Nevertheless, the lack of economic self-sufficiency suggests that federal dependency will likely persist in the foreseeable future. For Indigenous self-government to succeed, it must be accompanied by an expansion of self-determination rights, allowing for greater autonomy within the existing federal structure. In this regard, land claims remain a critical issue, as they serve as a foundation for institutional sovereignty without necessitating political secession from Canada. Through the assertion of land and governance rights, Indigenous nations can enhance their autonomy while remaining part of the broader Canadian federation.

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45   Jan Erk, "The Sociology of Constitutional Politics: Demos, Legitimacy and Constitutional Courts in Canada and Germany," *Regional & Federal Studies* 21, no. 4–5 (2011): 538.

46   Papillon, "Canadian Federalism."

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