



No more meeting place

By DWIGHT SYMS

Katimavik: Inuit meaning "meeting place".

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the federally-funded program under the name Katimavik.

It was started in 1976 by Barney Danson, a former Liberal cabinet minister, and Senator Jacques Hebert. Ten years ago, Hebert said he wanted to "get young people involved in their own educational and personal development while... providing needed and worthwhile service to Canadian communities."

It was a noble undertaking. Young people from across Canada between the ages of 17 and 21 would be placed in groups of nine to twelve. These groups travel to three different projects in three different parts of the country and work at a variety of community projects under the supervision of a Katimavik sponsor and group leaders.

In the Atlantic region, young people participated in a wide range of work, from adult education tutoring to renovating old train cars to improving tourist and sports facilities.

For their work, participants received \$1.00 a day and \$1,000 at the end of the program.

Sonia Howte is from Scarborough, Ontario. She is a Katimavik participant working with a physically and mentally handicapped girl in Annapolis Royal. She left university for a year of Katimavik.

"It was at first hard living with ten people," said Howte. "But I'm learning to live with other people and ways."

For most of the time in Katimavik, the group stays together and must organize household duties and living arrangements. Kathy Allan, Howte's group leader, says the participants learn to have patience. They learn to live together.

"Every person changes. Sometimes you have a rough group — but even they improve," says Allan. "How better to spend \$20 million. A lot of participants admit after the program they know where they want to go (in life)."

Since its inception, Katimavik has seen over 17,000 participants working on nearly 1500 projects in 1283 host communities. The value of labor is estimated at close to \$50 million.

Greg MacKim is the director of education and vocational services at King's Regional Rehabilitation Centre in Waterville, N.S. During the past six years, MacKim has seen over 150 Katimavik volunteers at the centre.

"They have assisted us in the developmental phase of our mentally retarded program and programs around adult life skills. They've helped with vocational rehabilitation in the centre and in the community," says MacKim. "They've been a tremendous help."

At the time of Brian Mulroney's victory sweep in September of 1984, Katimavik was experiencing their second boom year. The nonprofit organization had a \$19.7 million contract with the government, however, the Liberals had decided to increase funding for a second year in a row.

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"They wanted to see how we handled the expansion and they made it clear that the extra funds were not guaranteed," says

John Graham, the Atlantic region staffing/program activities officer. "When the Conservatives came to power they realized there was only a contract of \$19.7 million. They were eager to reduce the deficit and in Katimavik they saw a way to do so."

Graham says the board of directors of Katimavik decided not to protest the cuts openly but to make a more diplomatic effort to convince the new government of the value of the program.

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On January 29, the Secretary of State Benoit Bouchard informed Katimavik's executive director Paul Phaneuf and its board of directors' chair Hal Hooke that his department would no longer fund Katimavik and it was to be shut down by June. All involved in the program were shocked, dismayed and some saddened.

Saddened, because another door had been closed to youth. A door to cultural awareness, work skills and personal development.

The government, in cutting Katimavik, cited the high expense of the program and job creation as reasons for its demise.

Andre Champagne, the minister of youth, defended the government action in a CBC Sunday Morning interview.

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While Katimavik is not a job creation program, Brian Arsenaault, regional director for Katimavik in the Atlantic provinces, is quick to point out that of the ex-participants polled independently, only 9% were unemployed as opposed to 22% official youth unemployment figure of the entire population.

"There are nearly 600,000 - 700,000 youth unemployed, a problem which the government has to address. The solution is not a simplistic one. Not one program, not the private sector, not just job training... an array of options is needed and Katimavik is an important option," says Arsenaault.

"We guarantee three job experiences. Our contribution to first employment has been overlooked."

Dr. Tony Richards of Dalhousie University is part of the youth Leadership Council formed in 1982. The council works predominantly as advocates for youth, helping youth groups organize and providing youth leadership programs.

"Katimavik provides a balance to work skills. Young people may have job skills but not life skills. (These skills) make them more employable," says Richards. "Katimavik was never designed to be a job creation program but it made people more employable."

It also provided what Richards and Arsenaault call service learning. With community organizations having less and less resources to rely upon, Katimavik supplied young people with energy to service the community and from this learn. It was a unique opportunity for youth to get hands-on experience with social problems.

In February, the special Senate Committee on Youth released its report. The bipartisan committee was chaired by Senator Hebert, the same senator who is now in the tenth day of a hunger strike to protest the cancellation of Katimavik.

The report outlines the problems of young people in Canada today and their prospects for the future. Titled *Youth: A Plan of Action*, the report lists 26 recommendations unanimously supported by

the committee members designed to alleviate youth problems.

One of the recommendations concerns Katimavik. It asks that the program be expanded.

"The message we are trying to get across is that we are not facing an ordinary situation," says Hebert. "The situation is intolerable."

Hebert refers to the situation of youth unemployment. He says this unemployment has a price: more suicides, a higher rate of alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution, etc.

Hebert wants more options for young people. He wants Katimavik back.

"I don't think it's cancelled yet. I would not be fighting if I didn't know there were hundreds of thousands of people concerned," says Hebert.

In fact, the Friends of Katimavik has been formed. Composed of ex-participants, group leaders, and concerned citizens, the organization has circulated petitions and form letters to Brian Mulroney. Their work, however, did not receive as much media attention as did Hebert when he announced his intention to go on a hunger strike for Katimavik.

The senator is saying he will continue his hunger strike until government reinstates Katimavik. He sees the existence of the program as symbolic of the government's intention to address the problems of youth.

"They are destroying an organization that has been working for ten years and won awards as a model of this type of organization from across the world," says Hebert.

Australia, New York, and San Francisco have all begun programs using Katimavik as the model. As well, Katimavik was awarded the United Nationals Environment Program Medal in recognition of efforts devoted to the protection and improvement of the environment.

Hebert can find little reason why the program should be cut. Independent studies have established many positive points about the Katimavik program. A Touche Ross study reported that the organization was well-managed. Econsulte, a Montreal-based firm, showed that each dollar spent by Katimavik generates \$2.43 in production value for the economy as a whole.

Government officials, such as Benoit Bouchard, secretary of state, have even stated that they thought Katimavik was a good program.

What puzzles Hebert is that the government acted three weeks before his senate report was tabled and three months before a \$280,000 report commissioned by the government was due to be released.

"They stopped (the program) without knowing what it gives to young people," says Hebert.

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Bouchard has announced that plans for youth employment are in the works but he has not been specific. He has stated that some of these programs may reflect the Katimavik idea while in the same breath dismissing the idea of it being in any way connected to the senator's hunger strike.

As for Hebert, he sits, fasts and waits while occasionally receiving old friends like former prime minister Pierre Trudeau and new ones, the hundreds of young people who come to visit him each day.