

spiritually, socially and economically the environment is vital to aboriginal peoples. Self-government is potentially an opportunity for aboriginal peoples to restore and develop the sustainable relationship with the environment that was characteristic before external immigration and paternalism. As the witness from Inuit Tapirisat expressed it,

We have lived in the Northwest Territories, in northern Quebec and Labrador, for thousands of years and have come to see ourselves as the custodians of those vast lands. Our custodianship is based upon the fundamental beliefs about how humans should relate to the land. . .

Foremost among those beliefs is the respect for the land, the sea and all the living things that occupy the land and the sea. From this flows other principles concerning how and when to use the resources of our land and how to ensure its welfare for future generations. For Inuit, this approach to the environment arises out of life-and-death issues, not some fine-sounding, abstract philosophy. It has enabled our people to survive and flourish in an environment that seems daunting to many outsiders.²⁷

2.23 The legal basis, character and timing of aboriginal self-government are beyond the scope of this Committee. The potential impact of self-government on the environment is however a significant factor in our consideration of future environmental powers. Stated in the simplest form, it will create the need for new partnerships and new relationships, which will need to be developed as carefully as any traditional federal-provincial relationship.

Let me be a little bit more specific about the kinds of environmental powers we are talking about in relation to self-government. To Inuit, management of the environment means much more than control over administrative processes, such as environmental impact assessments and reviews. For us, environmental management must encompass a whole range of powers and responsibilities necessary to safeguard the lands and resources of our homelands. . .

Based on our past experience in negotiations with Canadian governments, we do not expect to achieve easily the power-sharing models that we feel are necessary. But regardless of how these negotiations on environmental jurisdictions turn out, there is for us an essential condition that must be met. No transfer of governmental powers over the environment, whether they are bilateral or not, is acceptable without Inuit consent.²⁸

2.24 The representatives of both Inuit and Indian organizations who appeared as witnesses went out of their way to emphasize that self-government would provide the opportunity for realistic partnerships, not increased separation of aboriginal peoples from the rest of Canada, and they also renewed their commitment to development, provided that development is sustainable.²⁹ Chief Wilson envisioned the desired relationship as it might develop in relation to his own people on Vancouver Island:

²⁷ Issue 8, p. 5.

²⁸ Issue 8, pp. 6-7.

²⁹ Issue 13A, pp. 5-7; Issue 8, pp. 25-26.