

CBC Interview with M. Gunther  
March 27, 1993

**CBC** Based upon your research into the issue of the High Arctic relocation in the 1950s, what was the Government of Canada's intention, what were the motives behind the relocation from Port Harrison, Inukjuak to the High Arctic Islands?

**MG** Well my work as you know, looking at what the government's motivations were of moving people from Inukjuak to the High Arctic Islands is based largely on a examination of archival material. So what I am looking at and what I have based everything on is really what the government's documents themselves say.

I think what one has got to bear in mind before I give the answer, what basically the answer is as the documents showed it to me is that the government was concerned about two things in the Inukjuak area; (1) was that there seemed to be excessive over-population or problematic over-population, and (2) that people seemed to be concentrating a great deal in settlements, and that the prevailing wisdom at the time was that settlements were bad in a number of senses. (1) They lived in unhealthy hygienic conditions, they lived too much on eating of what was called white man's food, and that Inuit health was deteriorating because there wasn't enough use of country food, and also a second point was that when groups concentrated in the settlement, they tended to deplete whatever game there was and also whatever fur there was in the area and so there was a combined problem of both game depletion and over-population. But I think, if I may, I want to give a little bit of background on this, because I think it is very hard to understand this in the 1990s where our sensibilities are so different of what government should do are very very different. Our views on how people should be treated are very very different from that early period, or not very very different, but **rather** different.

I think what one's got to understand is that the Inuit, or administration of the Inuit, went through a number of stages and generally speaking what one can call a period before 1945 was the "dark ages" as one Deputy Minister has called it. It was a period basically in which the Inuit were simply neglected. It was a "buck passing" administration, an administration that did not want to spend any money and was certainly not carrying out its responsibilities in the way that I think it should have been. Some people have talked about benign neglect and perhaps that was it, but I think it was straight neglect. Then in the forties, things did pick up a little bit under Mr. Keenleyside, but even by the early fifties, the range of services that were available to the 9,500 Inuit that were in the High Arctic was really very minimal, I mean, north of the tree-line, there were three doctors, there were six nurses and I can't remember

how many teachers, there were, there were certainly under ten teachers in that whole area to cover all of that.

Come 1950, a catastrophe hit the area, in fact, there were a number of catastrophes that hit the Inuit population at that time. Not ranking them necessarily an importance, but the first was, and this was one that then got the administration to move finally and to "do something" for these people. Maybe that is a little unfair, because Mr. Keenleyside's administration had started the process in the late 1940s.

But the catastrophe that hit the Inuit community was the precipitous decline in the prices of fox pelts which dropped from \$25 a pelt in the early forties to as low as \$3.50 a pelt in 1950. So the bottom was really knocked out of the Inuit economic structure at that time.

Now at the same time that this was happening, the Inuit community was being devastated with health problems. Tuberculosis was ravaging the community. The number of people who were ill, and the administration was trying to do something about this. But if you had TB essentially, you had to make a choice to go to a southern hospital where you might spend two and a half years in some lonely place where people might not talk Inuktitut, where you were pretty much on your own, where you did not understand when the treatment was going to be and roughly speaking, on average, from the late 1940s to mid-1950s, 15-20 percent of the communities were in the South, individuals, alone in these hospitals. I mean the staggering figure really on all of this is that in 1956, about 1,600 people out of close to 9,500 were in hospitals in the South in one particular year. So you can imagine the ravages of this problem with that. In addition, epidemics kept sweeping the area. To give two examples: In the mid-forties, it was reported that of 800 people who died in the Arctic, over 87 percent of them had neither a nurse nor a doctor in attendance.

When operation "Sun dog", a military exercise, was carried out near Fort Chimo in 1952, the contact with the whites brought the usual kinds of things, influenza and so on and it's estimated that 5-10 percent of the population died as a result of that in 1952.

One last point on all of this is that of all the Inuit areas in the High Arctic, northern Quebec was always the one that was worse off. There are various reasons for this. It was the one that always seemed to be where there was over-population and depletion of game was seen as the greatest problem. Part of the reason was, as one of the main reports that lead to this policy noted, that 30 percent of the Inuit population was living in northern Quebec, but northern

Quebec had 15 percent of the hunting area of the High Arctic and only 17 percent of the coastal area for seal and walrus and so on. So the problems are particularly acute in northern Quebec, and when the decision was made "something had to be done" to deal with this problem of over-population, it seemed that for northern Quebec, everybody had actually thought that the crisis was worse.

May I add one last point on this. Between the period of 1951 and 1953, the Inuit groups that were relocated to Resolute Bay and to Grise Fiord went in 1953. In December 1953 and January 1954, a fundamental change of policy occurred in Inuit administration. Where before, the government had been penny-pinching, cautious, giving very little money to funding of Inuit projects. Suddenly after 1954, when the new department of Northern Affairs and National Resources was created with a new Minister, a new young Minister, a new young Deputy Minister, all of a sudden the sluice gates open. So from 1954, ironically, all the things that perhaps today we think government should have done were starting to be done. Whereas this transitional period from 1951 to 1953, was one of penury, it was the time of the Korean War, the department that was responsible for this was cut back two years in a row in terms of financing, and essentially, they had to deal with the 9,500 people, they had three officers and four support staff in an office in Ottawa. After 1954, the joke used to be that there were more officials in the High North than there were in fact, Inuit.

**CBC** What you are telling me when you refer to the problems that subsistence, the health problems, and the bottom falling out of Inuit economy, is that the government was motivated primarily by its concern for the real human needs, the welfare of these people, is that essentially what you are telling me?

**MG** Yes. I think, that is what I think the documentation suggests.

**CBC** So, again, based on your research, how successful was this experience, especially from the government perspective as borne out by the documents that you've studied, how successful in the government's perception was this?

**MG** Well, surprisingly given all the criticisms that have been made, the government reports suggests that the whole exercise was extremely successful. There was a report in 1954, a year after people had gone to Grise Fiord and Resolute Bay, where Alex Stevenson, who is one of the important officials that used to spend time in the High Arctic looking after these things, says things "have

gone far better than we expected." People seem to be very satisfied, they seem to, in fact, be so satisfied they want all their relatives in Inukjuak to come up and more people want to come to the High Arctic. A little cautionary note was struck in 1956 when the Deputy Minister, Robertson, writes and says, "things are going unbelievably well, but we are still not sure that people will want to stay for a longer period of time and so we have to be cautious." But even in a review that was done as late as 1960, when there was a bit of a debate on the issue within the department the review concluded that, ultimately, the whole exercise had been a very successful one from the perspective of government.

**CBC** So how, then, do you explain that the Inuit have such a totally different view of the experience, they express it in the traumatic terms "great suffering" which they say continues even into the younger generations today and they perceive it as a fundamental violation of their human rights. How do you explain that very great difference in perception?

**MG** It very difficult for me to understand that. Clearly some of the people who were relocated, and it's interesting that the people who have made these claims are largely the children of the original settlers. The only accounts that we really have of the adults who went north suggests that, and they are far and few between, for instance, one of the adults who went north, wrote an article in 1977, saying that starvation levels have been very high in Inukjuak, that they had to eat lemmings, sometimes, not all the times, thank God. But that when the RCMP approached him, this was one of the seven male adults that went up and said look, there is an area you can go to where life could be better, he jumped at the opportunity. So there was one account. That is sort of one of the main ones. The government translator that went up, a woman who then became quite famous in the north, because she had a very popular radio program, she also says that, she as a translator, went up there two or three times, that she had relatives up there and that they basically were doing pretty well. There are some letters that have been saved out of a huge number of them. So how representative they are, one has to be a bit cautious about. But there are letters saying "we are doing pretty well over here, but we want this that and the other kinds of things." So there are letters from the adults.

Something happened with the younger people who feel very deeply aggrieved and I can really fully understand it. Is it perhaps that there were never reported in the documents, sometimes they do refer to those kinds of things. Is that they could see things differently, in other words, you know,

that a perspective change had occurred, perhaps because they had education or because they started participating more in the modern economy. I am not entirely sure, or maybe perhaps they were simply comparing the situation that they had at Grise Fiord and Resolute to what then happened in northern Quebec once the Quebec Hydro agreements came into place, and of course things picked up enormously in northern Quebec after that. They got a lot better.

**CBC** Are you referring to a kind of envy or jealousy, in a sense?

**MG** I don't think I am. I think there is a very deep sense of grievance that is there. I think that perhaps, and not only that, let me add one other thing. I think there was some very deep, particularly a couple of very deep misunderstandings between the Inuit and the government on what had been promised. So that may be another factor that certainly should be taken into account. I think there was a sense that perhaps because at the end of sixties, suddenly Resolute was in big trouble. The Co-op was not functioning, there were huge debts, some families seemed to not do well at all, I've have not found an explanation for that, but all of a sudden in 1968-1969, what seemed to be a very functioning community and one that had been commented on by anthropologists in 1966 as one of the wealthiest, most well integrated communities in the North, all of a sudden, three years later, and that's where my report really starts, seemed to be running into some very serious problems. So perhaps again in comparison to that, what was happening in northern Quebec looked better and gave people a feeling that they could have done better. I think also, one has to add that this is all developed into a major claim against the government, is probably going to be a 10 million dollar compensation claim, and perhaps that tends to sharpen the nature of the debate and the points that are being made. I don't even want to venture into that field. I am not that clear on this. My guess would be from the documentation is (a) there were misunderstandings and (b) certainly things were not perfect by any manner of means. You are dealing with the High Arctic, not with Alta Vista in Ottawa.

**CBC** Yet some of the adult survivors so to speak, did, in fact, testify at the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, in 1990, so it's not just children that are complaining, there are some that were at least in their late teens at the time and some perhaps a little bit older than that, even into their twenties, its not merely people who were born up there that are complaining!

**MG** No! This is true, but if you read those accounts, the strongest condemnations and strongest criticisms really come from people who were in the pre-teens when they went up in

1953. I think one has to take that into some account, because the way people see things is going to be influenced by their age and stage. One of the things I have criticized, for instance, is the easy assumption that there was sexual abuse carried out by the RCMP against the Grise Fiord women. If you look on the basis on which this was established by a five-year old person, a five-year old young women, who heard, she says at one point, three of the Inuit women stating that there was an "arrangement" with the RCMP. She says she assumes on that basis, but she never had any experience or heard anything further about it, that this meant a sexual arrangement. My feeling is that, that is too flimsy a basis to a very very startling kind of allegation and in that sense, while I think young people have to be respected, there is no doubt about that, and certainly, the Inuit have a perspective that the documents are not going to have, I mean, in fact, my report says that one of the great losses in this debate is that everybody claims to be speaking for the survivors. But we've only heard really from seven of them at Standing Committee hearings. So there is a really serious problem, in fact, systematically, we have not really heard from the Inuit who lived in the two communities.

**CBC** Your study relied almost entirely on the study of documents. Please explain the rationale behind such a study?

**MG** As far as I could understand, I mean you have to ask the government for their views on this. But as far as I could understand it, a number of articles and an MA thesis had appeared, one in the main, had appeared criticizing the government roundly and making a large number of claims about what the background to this was. The government did not feel that its own earlier commentaries on the criticisms were complete enough and they wanted someone to go in-depth into the archival material to check-out essentially all or as many of the criticisms that had been made and that could be dealt with by the archives. This was just an archival study, there was never an intention for me, in particular, to interview some of the people who had lived in the two communities.

**CBC** So how and where did you get the documents that you refer to in your study?

**MG** They are all in the National Archives of Canada and it involves going through thousands and thousands and thousands of documents and sitting there hour after hour checking them out.

CBC Did you yourself go to the Archives and search things, how did you get these materials?

MG I did this essentially day after day after day for a very long period.

CBC I am wondering then, because its a document search, how valid some of your conclusions are! For example, when you comment on some of the earlier researchers pointing out the very different climatic and basically environmental differences and the conditions between Inukjuak and the High Arctic communities and you quote certain geographic descriptions of these places, how valid is that if, as I believe you mentioned that to me a few days ago, if you have never been either place, how do you know that one was not far worse than another?

MG I think that is a bit of a loss. But frankly, if you had sent me up to Resolute or to Grise Fiord to spend a week there or ten days, it would give certainly a richer feel to things, but I would not have understood what the climate variations were, I would still have had to go to the government reports to indicate what the differences in climate were in 1953 between Inukjuak and Grise Fiord and Resolute. A visit of a few days would not have told me very much about what game was available from 1953 to 1959. How many whales and how many eider duck and how many walrus and bearded seals and so, it would not have helped very very much, I would still be looking for material, I still had to go to the archives and as I say, the purpose of this was, essentially an archival thing. In other words, a search for, was there a "smoking gun", if you like. In the government documents that would perhaps support what the claims were, because most of the Inuit claims have of course been verbal and oral and have been unsubstantiated by other sources of documentation.

CBC Of course that's kind of a culturally biased judgement to make because that is a culture that until one hundred ago had no writing system and that certainly did not begin to keep documents of any kind until about twenty years ago.

MG Very true! But of course, there were two other alternate sources on this. (1) the Inuit had syllabics and wrote letters in syllabic throughout the 1950s and 1960s and in fact, some of those have been kept. The other, which I think is very important, is to realize that the white imperial establishment was not all of one piece. The civil servants had people who were very very critical of them. Bishop Donald Marsh, who was a particular thorn in the flesh of the government, was always writing, I mean some of the reports he gives of things happening and so on, are quite

extraordinary. An interesting source of another white point of view on this, Margarie Hinds who was the welfare teacher at Inukjuak, in 1950 to 1954, who is a feisty, tough critic of the department and let everybody know when she disagreed with what they were doing. She is the one who actually who played a big role in preparing the groups going north. There was no hesitation on her part with criticizing government when need be. There are all sorts of letters, for instance, indicating when the Hudson's Bay Co. and the RCMP go at one another. They never liked one another very much. There are sharp letters at Inukjuak, for instance, when the Hudson's Bay Co. shelves were depleted, you know, in the store, and the RCMP complained. So there is a lot of diverse information in these reports.

CBC You got into great lengths to dispense with the sovereignty argument that had been made by previous researchers, I just want to deal with this very briefly, because, isn't the question not perhaps whether Canada's title was secure, because you go to great lengths to show that Canada's title was secure at that point, but whether the concern among departmental officials may not have been a motivation, at least partial motivation for this relocation two thousand kilometres north. Let's here what you say about that.

MG Very quickly on that, I come to the conclusion that you have got to make a distinction between Ellesmere Island and Cornwallis Island. At Ellesmere Island, the claim was made that there was a threat to the de facto, that there was a possible de facto loss of sovereignty, it's not very clear to whom, assumption being at that time, 12 Greenlander Inuit had spent two winters on Ellesmere Island and essentially, the claim is made that, and partly in response to that, the RCMP did decide to reopen its posts on Ellesmere. They were very very concerned, particularly about the Greenlanders hunting muskox was a major issue in those days. We had in 1919, a Royal Commission dealing with the preservation of muskox in that area. There was also a real concern because the Danes were going to set up a trading post at Etah which was just 13 miles across the straight from Ellesmere Island and the fear was that many more hunters were going to become Greenlanders and would do illegal hunting and perhaps even stay on.

Now the suggestions had been made that this could be a possible de facto loss of sovereignty in Ellesmere. Well, that suggestions to me it just doesn't make sense. There were a lot of other activities going on at Ellesmere first of all. There were two joint weather stations; every summer groups of scientists would visit; there were agricultural insect experiments, etc., etc., etc., and certainly, the two RCMP posts that were set up could have dealt with 12 people.

Canada's co-operation with Denmark was superb without any problems, in fact, the governor of north Greenland made every effort to ensure that Greenlanders going to Ellesmere Island would not stay there etc. So, the suggestion that there was any kind of threat on Ellesmere Island, it seems to me is really stretching credulity to the nth degree.

Resolute is a little different because, there the American presence was alledgely going to be a problem. Now I don't want to go into all the details of, you know, all of the 50-80 pages that I spent on that in the report. I want to just indicate one thing. There was indeed a concern with the American presence in the North. There was, indeed, a concern to make sure that American military were not in the North and that the Canadian civilian government presence in the North was expanded. There were a series of significant meetings held in 1953. In the key government committee, the Advisory Committee on Northern Development which considered matters of sovereignty, they met first in March 1953 and had a whole series of meetings throughout the year 1953. At a number of points, departments were asked "what are you doing about sovereignty in the North?" at that meeting. There is one particular crucial meeting, I think, and this is not the only bit of evidence, but I think it is important. There is one crucial meeting where the RCAF says "well, we are not doing that much, we don't think its all that important", because not every department thought it was important. It was mostly External Affairs and the Privy Council Office. Department of Transportation thought they didn't have the resources to deal with something like that, the RCAF thought it was relatively unimportant, the military thought it wasn't a threat at all, the Defence Board didn't think the American, didn't think it was a threat at all. So it was a very divided government on this issue.

But in any case, the question was raised, and the department was asked to indicate what they were doing. The Department of Resources and Development as it was then, was in the preparation at this point of sending Inuit to Resolute and this would have been the perfect spot where they would have said "oh what we are doing on sovereignty is we are sending three families of Inuit North to help", and they just don't say it. They say nothing. They say nothing about using colonies to counter an American threat. One might say, well because that is the cause they were covering up sovereignty with a dicy issue. But it wasn't. No one thought that doing things on behalf of sovereignty was something to be ashamed of in those days, and if people were going to be sent up to counter an alledged sovereignty threat, this would have been the point where they would have said that. They were in a whole series of meetings in 1953 by the ACND where they talked sovereignty, sovereignty, sovereignty and

at no point is there any mention of using colonization at Resolute.

CBC You are a person with a great deal of experience in academic research, I guess you have done all kinds of work on all kinds of different issues, in your work on this issue, were there any points in your findings, your study was commissioned by the Department of Indian Affairs, were there any points that you found that you were in disagreement with the department's position?

MG Yes! I don't know about the department position, but I certainly was quite critical on a number of points, about the 1953 relocations. For one thing, I think I've managed to show fairly conclusively that the decision to separate the seven families that were going north between Ellesmere Island and Resolute was not discussed with them. I do believe that the advantages of going north to Ellesmere were discussed and I also believe the seven families were told they would stay together on Ellesmere Island, perhaps separated between two posts but nevertheless, one place, Ellesmere Island. That was one of four reasons why the Inuit accepted to go North. But my finding is that when they were told on the boat going North, because plans had changed in June, when a Fort Chimo group which was supposed to go to Resolute did not go and they arbitrarily decided to split the Inukjuak group between one that was sent to Resolute and one that was sent to Ellesmere Island, I don't think they were consulted on that. I think it was high-handed. I think it was at a minimum insensitive and the best that one might say about it, and I doubt this, was that it was a misunderstanding. But I don't think it was that. I think it was high-handed.

CBC Are you satisfied. I mean, your study formed a basis of a Minister Siddon's statement in the House of Commons on this issue last year, I didn't comprise his entire statement, but it was the basis for the department's current position on it. Are you satisfied with the use the department is making of your study, in fact?

MG I am sorry, I was away for six months out of Canada last year. My report, I think came out in November, so I am not aware, I must say I'm sorry I am not aware of what the Minister Siddon actually said. I can't answer that.

CBC But you are aware that your study, is in a sense, being used as a battering ram against the studies that have been put forth by other researchers which essentially support the Inuit side and that it's the federal government that is most interested in using it for that purpose. Are you satisfied with that use that its being put to?

**MG** As near as I can tell, I can't really say that I watch everything that the government has said on this, I had addressed it more to, you know, my criticism of the other studies as being that they are right on some things but that they have carried out some serious acts of omission in not referring to certain kinds of documents and that on other sorts of criticisms that they made of the government that there were misunderstandings or over-emphasis of something that needed to be a little more balanced and so on. That has essentially been my criticism. So I haven't looked at it so much from the point of view what government has said. I looked at it very very much from the point of view of what the documents said. Could those documents stand scrutiny of other documents, were there other points of view, a somewhat more balanced perspective? Very often I found in the studies that I looked at that they didn't provide enough context very often to what was going on. In a couple of cases, I mean the most extraordinary misunderstandings of documents. In one case, someone says that the department didn't want to have housing set up in 1959 at Grise Fiord. Then when I looked at the letter that was claimed to be the basis for this, the letter said exactly the opposite, that they want to give free cheap housing to the people at Grise Fiord under a particular kind of experimental kind of housing program. So there's the odd thing like that as well that I was looking at.

**CBC** Last point here! I believe this is the first piece of research that you published regarding the Canadian Arctic, is that correct?

**MG** These of course, documents and xeroxed publications. There are two others that have been made public that I have done on this. I don't know if you know that there was a long term dispute between the Dene-Metis and the Inuit on the question of establishing a boundary in the Northwest Territories that was then to be useful for the setting up of Nunavut and the creating a comprehensive framework for the development of Nunavut. There was a long conflict on that for six years, and I was the "fact finder" who went in and reported on all the disagreements between the two parties and also produced the maps that the different parties were using to establish their claims. I thought actually, I had really quite contributed, if I might blow my own horn for a moment, I shouldn't do this, but that I contributed a little bit in that sense to the establishment of Nunavut because that fact finder's report was then used by the arbitrator who settled the boundary, which was essential, and then I did another historical piece evaluating the arguments that the arbitrator had made when he made his determination of where to set the boundary on certain puts of dispute. I looked at certain historical

documentation to see whether their criticisms could be made of that.

**CBC** So please tell me why you were chosen by the Department of Indian Affairs to research and produce this particular report on the High Arctic Relocation.

**MG** I suppose because I'd done earlier work for the department and was known, I think, as somebody who, I hoped does careful work, I'm not by any manner of means error-free clearly, I mean a 420 page document where, you know 1200 or 1400 footnotes and lots and lots of claims. But I pride myself on trying to be careful and balanced and fair.

**CBC** Yet this is odd coincidence that in a sense, your Nemesis on this particular issue, your academic Nemesis is also someone who teaches at Trent University and there is at least the appearance of an academic conflict on this issue. Could you care to comment on that?

**MG** I can't really say anything on that, I mean yes we are at the same university and yes we've certainly met three, four times, I suppose over the last number of years. We don't really know one another, we don't teach in the same departments, we really go our own way as I would guess from one to another I don't really see the colleague that you have mentioned although I have had a couple of pieces of correspondence from her, but otherwise there is no contact, we don't really know one another.

**CBC** So in fact, there is no academic acrimony between the two of you on this issue as far as you know, is there.

**MG** Academe is always filled with a certain degree of acrimony and there is, there clearly is, but I don't know whether a radio program is where I want to go to all the academic guerilla fighting that's going on and there is a fair degree of vituperation and personal bashing that's going on, but I think that's irrelevant to the content of my report anyway.

**CBC** But there is no sense on your part that this may have been one of the reasons why you were chosen to author this report?

**MG** I can't see why. I don't think government operates that way, but who knows, things work in mysterious ways in this world. I doubt it very much.

**CBC** Thank you very much Professor Gunther.

**MG** Okay. Thanks.