

NEWS

‘This is our home, so we need to be part of the solution’: Inuit-led university to strengthen Canada’s Arctic, say Senators

Education in the North not only keeps people in their communities and takes advantage of local and traditional knowledge, but also drives investment in infrastructure.

BY JUSTIN S. CAMPBELL

The country’s first Inuit-led university is key step towards to ensuring Canadian and Arctic sovereignty amid threats from the United States and other global actors by keeping people in the North and growing a strong presence of healthy communities, say parliamentarians.

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) announced on Feb. 11 that the main campus of Inuit Nunangat University will be built in the hamlet of Arviat, Nunavut, with the federal government announcing a \$50-million contribution on Feb. 19.

Since U.S. President Donald Trump re-entered office in January 2025, he has threatened annexation of both Canada—repeatedly referring to it as the “51st state”—and has argued for U.S. ownership of Greenland, which lies adjacent to Nunavut in the Arctic. And on the other side of the Arctic, Russia has territorial designs in its war in Ukraine.

These geopolitical events, and Canada’s geographic proximity to them, have prompted federal attention and investment into shoring up Arctic sovereignty. The 2025 budget included \$1-billion for an Arctic Infrastructure Fund, and also promised to help the territories with economic development, including critical minerals projects, and defence capabilities.

Independent Senator Nancy Karetak-Lindell (Nunavut), who was born and raised in the university’s future home of Arviat, said northern communities lack the infrastructure and resources to support healthy communities that can contribute to the security of Canada’s northern territories.

“I would really encourage people to look at maps of the Arctic and see how close Nunavut is to Greenland. It’s closer than some of the distance between me [in Arviat] and Iqaluit,” said Karetak-Lindell, who is a member of



Jennifer Brennan, left, Mastercard Foundation’s senior director of Canada programs, and Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami president Natan Obed on Nov. 27, 2024. Inuit Nunangat University is slated to open in Arviat, Nvt., in 2030. *The Hill Times* photograph by Stuart Benson

the Senate’s Indigenous Peoples Committee.

“We have the largest coastline in all of Canada, unmanned. It’s a very large stretch of coast to protect, and we don’t have the infrastructure ... there’s a lot of land, water, and air that has no people.”

Nunavut has 1.8 million square kilometres of land, with roughly 37,000 people. Karetak-Lindell pointed to the need for Inuit knowledge of the land and sea to realistically secure Canada’s North.

“An Inuit-led university in Nunavut strengthens our presence here and empowers youth to develop expertise in our ... governance models ... Inuit leading in our homeland is the foundation of Canada’s Arctic sovereignty,” Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) president Paul Irngaut said in an email to *The Hill Times*.

“Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic is based on Inuit historical use and continuous occupation of Nunavut.”

The question of asserting jurisdiction was echoed by ITK president Natan Obed, who told the CBC that the education the university provides will assert Inuit presence in the Arctic.

“Inuit underpin Canada’s sovereignty,” he said.

Inuit Nunangat University is set to open in 2030, and will serve the Inuit of Nunangat, the homeland of Inuit that comprises 51 communities from Labrador to Yukon Territory, and includes all the Arctic islands.

Non-affiliated Senator Marilou McPhedran (Manitoba), who is



Independent Senator Nancy Karetak-Lindell says the North needs to see investments in the equivalent to some of the other Nordic countries. *Handout photograph*

also a member of the Indigenous Peoples Committee, said that a lack of investment in culturally appropriate education in the North has facilitated a drain of Inuit talent to the South, further weakening northern communities.

“[Elders] talk about their concern of their young people having to leave their communities [for their education] and often never coming back,” McPhedran explained.

“They pursue their opportunities in the South, or they don’t do well in the educational institutions that they’ve ended up with ... and they [are] sucked into the vortex of poverty, racism, and inadequate resources; they don’t come back because they’re not capable of coming back.”

Karetak-Lindell said she hopes the university will give the

community an opportunity to invest in infrastructure, such as reliable sources of electricity and transportation.

“This is our home, so we need to be part of the solution. But we also need to see investments in the North equivalent to some of the other Nordic countries that have highways and ports and airports,” Karetak-Lindell said, referring to her experience visiting northern Russia.

She described Arviat as having an unreliable electricity grid running on diesel generators and no direct flights south, which is common for communities in the North. This makes many of these communities dependent on the southern provinces for food and services, which affects their contributions to pull their weight when it comes to leadership,

expertise, and overall security in the Arctic.

“Any [military] manoeuvres that are going to be done in the North for security has to rely on the people that know the land and the sea,” she explained. “The only way we can do that is to provide proper infrastructure so people can have proper housing, health care, and all the services that the rest of the country takes for granted.”

“It is not easy travelling in the Arctic,” she added. “The realities of how you would defend the North in that space is a nightmare for people who handle security for our country.”

McPhedran noted two issues at play: the time it takes for northerners to get an education in the South, and the environmental impact of melting ice changing the shoreline.

“It’s much better to add to local expertise, centuries of expertise in many cases, with the additional education that is needed, and that is impossible at this point,” she said. “I think that the sovereignty of this country is very much affected by the degree of success that we have with this [university] project.”

McPhedran stressed that education in the North keeps people in their communities and builds local leadership. In her past experiences as a professor at the University of Winnipeg, she said she’s seen many Indigenous students from the North.

“[A university] really allows for not only the realization of the capacity and potential that’s already there in young people, but also an investment into what will become generations of leadership at the local level,” she said.

“This [university] will hopefully give more opportunity for us to be able to take care of our communities and be part of a healthy society,” Karetak-Lindell said. “I know we can do that. We have the capability, we have the knowledge.”

“The fact that we are at this stage is largely due to the leadership of the people of the North, and governments are finally catching up on that,” McPhedran said.

In addition to the \$50-million committed to the university through the government’s Build Communities Strong Fund, Indigenous Services Minister Mandy Gull-Masty (Abitibi-Baie-James-Nunavik-Eeyou, Que.) also pledged funds to the Nutrition North Canada subsidy, the Inuit Child First initiative, and the Northern Isolated Communities Fund, which collectively address social services, food security and small businesses. Funding was also contributed to the fight against tuberculosis, which disproportionately affects Inuit communities.

Additional funding for the school, which has been actively in the works for nearly a decade, includes a \$50-million donation from the Mastercard Foundation, and \$137-million from NTI, which represents Inuit interests under the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement.

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