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ARCTIC ISSUES

INQUIRY—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Speech by:

The Honourable Patricia Bovey

Thursday, February 6, 2020

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INQUIRY—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Patricia Bovey: Honourable senators, it's late, and I'll be quick.

I'm looking to a productive 2020, a year of vision forward. I do so today by commencing an inquiry to renew and further the Senate's interest in Arctic issues.

I'm going to start by recalling where we left off in June 2019, specifically on June 12, when our Special Standing Committee on the Arctic released its year-long report, *Northern Lights: A Wake-up Call for the Future of Canada*. As a committee, we examined multiple issues facing the North and its peoples, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Our time was short, the project huge, the territory large and the witnesses passionate. I applaud the dedication of our committee chair, Senator Patterson, and all our members and the staff. The commitment was stellar.

The report's findings and recommendations echoed much of what we all feared when we first established the special committee. The issues facing the Arctic are wide, multi-dimensional, interconnected and the need is great. The committee's report has received very positive response, and I am pleased that the Prime Minister has already acted on one of our recommendations to appoint a Minister of Northern Affairs, that being the Honourable Dan Vandal, MP for St. Boniface, who took the role last November.

There was unanimity in the committee that we must continue our work and take time for deeper investigations and look to the North through one lens to better understand the interrelationships between the myriad issues. The concerns are regional, national and indeed international. The chamber rose just a few days after the launch of our report and time did not allow for its discussion in the Senate. So today I launch this inquiry to continue the discussion and to seek a way to continue our work formally.

I felt strongly last spring, as did the committee, that our recommendation for a permanent committee on the Arctic was the only path. But events, new information and time has softened my approach somewhat. My real concern is for the Senate to continue our work as soon as possible. So now I don't mind if we do that with another Special Committee on the Arctic, a permanent committee or perhaps even a joint committee with the other place. What I do mind is that we establish a committee expeditiously.

We need to develop a viable framework to seek strategic solutions for the critical issues that face the lives and cultures of Canada's northern peoples and to ensure the security of our foreign borders. Issues of sovereignty, food security, food prices, culture, natural resources, the environment and the North's fragile ecosystems, climate change with the devastating effects of melting sea ice and the impacts on living standards, the species of fish and whales moving North are paramount.

B.C.'s salmon, for instance, were in much shorter evidence on that coast this past summer when I was out fishing with grandchildren, but 20- and 25-pound salmon were in abundance in Tuktoyaktuk. That poses threats to their natural fish stocks, especially Arctic char. With the melting permafrost, the levels of mercury in the Arctic food sources have increased. Caribou herds are smaller, birthing grounds and migration paths are compromised. All this is changing and compromising food sources, particularly fish, marking a truly disturbing safety issue. We need solutions to ensure a healthy and livable future.

The economy of the North has shifted exponentially over the decades, with oil, diamond mines and mineral extraction attracting international interests and investments, endeavours that are providing much-needed jobs. Yet, with traditional lifestyles compromised these shifts have in some parts been cataclysmic.

[*Translation*]

We have to find a way to increase educational opportunities with standards equal to those in the South and with internships to increase the number of higher-scale jobs. We must create a balance between empirical scientific evidence and traditional knowledge.

We all feel great consternation over the alarming youth suicide rate. Living conditions well below Canadian standards, the serious lack of running water and small, uninsulated homes that house multiple generations represent serious problems. The North also lacks opportunities for students to conduct research and further their education. It also lacks recreational resources and reliable internet connections. Of course, health is also a major concern.

[*English*]

Every day newspaper headlines around the world warn us about the increasing potential impacts of global warming on our environment and livelihoods. Canada's polar regions are widely predicted to be the first and most seriously affected.

I had the opportunity to represent our Arctic committee work at a recent conference on Antarctica in London and was only too pleased to share our findings as we work together globally to undertake the much-needed ongoing scientific research, in our Arctic, in Antarctica and in fact all regions of the globe, to improve our knowledge and understanding of the challenges of global warming and to seek viable means of mitigation.

With decreasing levels of sea ice and, in turn, the opening of the Northwest Passage, and access to oil and shipping creating international claims to the North, coupled with the lengthening shipping season, and opening the North to large cruise vessels, the Arctic waters are shifting. We need to address these impacts — the good and the troubling.

Circumpolar links are critically important for many reasons, too — international security, trade and business, education and culture, as evidenced by the relationships between Canada's Inuit peoples and the Sami of the Scandinavian countries. I am encouraged by the relationships between universities around the circumpolar region and the collaborative work being done on

circumpolar studies. Canada is very much part of these issues and initiatives. But there is more to do — from our perspective at home and on the international stage.

These are only some of the concerns I have. I think it behooves us to dig deeper in a multi-pronged way in order to get a greater understanding of the concerns, not only of the North but for the North.

The conclusions our report put forward are urgent, born out of a crisis resulting from years of neglect and/or lack of regard and comprehension for the needs of northern peoples. The report's title reflects that urgency, as it does the deep connection of northerners to the land and environment, its references to the aurora borealis and its link to the northern people's ancestors.

It is clear to the committee that the North is the future of Canada.

Colleagues, some of us, along with hundreds of others, attended the stunning and truly inspiring Arctic Inspiration Prize last evening, celebrating youth. We saw into that future of the North, and through them to the future of Canada. Their accomplishments and vision is great, but they cannot realize it alone. We must act through understanding. I cannot say often enough that the need is urgent.

I'm not going to repeat the recommendations. You have them, and they have been getting great currency across the country, in the South as well as the North. I met with Minister Vandal a few short weeks after his taking office. He had read our report and was versed in the issues and by now has gone north and seen the urgency of the situations first-hand.

Food, the economy, housing, security, education, culture, language, communications, climate change, shipping and conservation, mineral extraction and more all affect the daily lives of northerners and Canada's national security and international relations. All are critical.

Our committee concluded that government policies must align with the priorities of northerners, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and empower northerners to create their own programs and initiatives through eventual devolution of decision-making powers about northern issues to northern institutions. It was very clear that the decisions for the North should be made in the North and by the North.

[*Translation*]

Decisions about the North should be made in the North, for the North and by the North. These are urgent issues. Our 30 recommendations require immediate action.

I also want to point out that I agree with the title of the article published in the June 7, 2019, edition of the *National Post* called "Inuit plan says climate change can't be separated from social issues".

I believe our recommendations are a platform and represent a path for the people of the North, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, as well as for all Canadians, to follow, while also identifying the challenges related to Canada's security and sovereignty, and determining our place in the world, in the Arctic and beyond. That is why I believe it is important for the Senate to create a committee to continue this work. The North makes up 40 per cent of the surface area of our country and is key to Canada's future.

[*English*]

In conclusion, I had a chat with two very bright young women, the first to graduate from Grade 12 in their community, and they both earned an A-plus in English and math. They came South for post-secondary programs, proud as they should be. But within two weeks they were lost academically. They asked to be tested and found that their Grade 12 A-plus in English was equivalent to Grade 7 in the South, and their A-plus in math equated to Grade 5. I don't need to tell you their resulting feelings. They went home. If we are to move forward as a nation, we need to ensure all our young people, North, South, East and West, have access to equal educational opportunities at every level.

May we as senators not close this pressing Arctic file, but keep it open, and not have its work situated within one of our existing standing committees alone. The issues don't fit within any one of them. Northern peoples are diverse, Aboriginal, Metis, Inuit and non-Aboriginals, lifelong Canadians of all backgrounds, immigrants and refugees. The interrelationships are complex. May we continue to address those interrelationships and develop meaningful and relevant strategies as we support the Arctic, and in so doing the rest of the country. A one-year study is clearly not enough. I look forward to your thoughts and to your support in establishing an ongoing committee. As I said, from my perspective, while a permanent committee would be my preference, I am equally happy at the moment with another special committee on the Arctic or a joint committee. I only hope we can move on this very quickly and build on the findings of our prior work.
