



## TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

*Why Canada's first Truth and Reconciliation process is about the future, not the past*

By Dr. Zacharias Kunuk O.C.

When Prime Minister Harper apologized to Inuit and Aboriginal Canadians in the House of Commons June 11 on behalf of his and former governments, abuse in Canada's Residential Schools was just the tip of an iceberg, one awful example of a comprehensive national strategy to assimilate Inuit and Aboriginals into 'white' Canada.

We misunderstand the Prime Minister's words if we focus narrowly on a dissolved, discredited school system. This limits Canada's Truth and Reconciliation process, the first in a Western democracy, to looking back at a past we can't change, instead of at the present where we live now, building a future together whether we like it or not.

I was born in a sod house on the land in 1957. My parents dropped me off to go to school in Igloolik in 1966 when I was 9. My older brother and sister went away to residential schools, where they were educated to become government employees. I stayed behind, started carving soapstone to earn the 25 cents I needed every Saturday night to see movies in our community hall, and I became a filmmaker.

I learned my craft from John Wayne. Remember that movie where the cavalry scouts don't come back to the fort and John Wayne leads his troops to find them, all dead, arrows sticking out everywhere? John says, 'What kind of savages could do this?' I thought I was John Wayne, one of the cavalry. Only many years later I realized I was one of the savages and there are two sides to every story.

I don't have first-hand experience in the residential schools but I have 25 years experience with Canada's assimilation policies in our media systems. No one should be surprised that a government strategy to wipe out Inuit and Aboriginal languages and cultures through forced re-education would be accompanied by a powerful media strategy to reinforce it. Any honest Reconciliation process must engage these same media, especially *new* media, for *all* Canadians, or a hundred years from now another Prime Minister will apologize for us again.

In Igloolik, we voted twice to refuse TV back in the 1970's fearing our culture and language would be overwhelmed and destroyed. We only voted yes in 1982 when Inuit Broadcasting Corporation was created to embed a few Inuktitut hours a week inside 24 hours a day of CBC. Now 25 years later we have 47 cable channels in remote Inuit communities, with hundreds available in Ottawa, Montréal or Toronto, but there's still only one, Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, with the same few hours a week of Inuit and Aboriginal-language programming.

APTN broadcasts mostly in English and French now, and even requires its Aboriginal-language programs delivered with English and French-dubbed versions to meet its CRTC quota of 'official' language hours. Our Cannes Festival-winning film, *Atanarjuat The Fast Runner*, was shown in Germany, China, Japan, Slovakia, Denmark and twenty other countries around the world in its original Inuktitut language, with subtitles. APTN in Canada is the only broadcaster so far to ask us for a version where Atanarjuat opens his mouth and English or French pops out.

The past is a bucket of ashes, filled with excuses, but no one can argue with the results. In twenty-five years of Inuit filmmaking, CBC North never bought one of my programs. CBC network did agree to broadcast *Atanarjuat* (at 10 pm on a Saturday night during the 2005 CBC strike) but Canada's only *Camera d'or* winner is the exception to the rule. As of the PM's Apology June 11, 2008, Canada's public network still hasn't shown any of my other thirty films or anyone else's in any native language.

Telefilm Canada's Feature Film Fund has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in hundreds of Canadian feature films to show Canadian stories and culture to Canadians and the world. How many of these features do you think are in Inuktitut, Cree or any Aboriginal language? Ask yourself how many you've seen, besides maybe one of mine, and that's your answer for the last hundred years.

Telefilm's New Media Fund now invests more millions in digital media, games and websites for the internet. How many so far from an Inuit or Aboriginal point of view? In Toronto, Ottawa or Montréal basic DSL internet service costs under \$30 a month. The same service in my town of Igloolik costs \$400 a month. The digital divide isn't between Canada and Bangladesh or Africa; it's right here at home, between you and me.

I am an Officer of the Order of Canada and a proud Canadian. This is my country too. It's time to fix the future, not complain about the past. The most inspiring theme of the PM's Apology is Truth and Reconciliation as a *forward* moving process; start change *now*. In this 2007-08 International Polar Year, what better future can we imagine for all Canadians if Inuit and Aboriginal languages, traditional knowledge and points of view suddenly became *visible* in the media all around us?

On May 28 I received a form letter from the International Polar Year Federal Program Office rejecting my internet project, *From an Inuit Point of View: Arctic Climate Change from the Inuit Side*. We proposed a national platform on our new website IsumaTV for views about the changing Arctic's impact on Inuit by young Inuit filmmakers and prominent leaders like Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Mary Simon, Peter Irniq and others. When IPY Canada announced \$5.2 million for seventeen communications and training projects IsumaTV was shut out. They funded other films instead: an IMAX self-congratulation of Canadian IPY research; another documentary about IPY research on seabirds; and a third about the arctic travels of a National Museum biologist in the early 1800's. After 25 years in the film business I'm used to seeing Canadian cultural agencies funding mostly Canadian cultural propaganda. It's the government, after all. But the urgency, *to Inuit*, of International Polar Year Canada, and the indifference of its host Department of *Indian Affairs* and Northern Canada, seems to go too far.

Maybe the next International Polar Year will welcome our Inuit Point of View. Meanwhile, on [www.isuma.tv](http://www.isuma.tv) Canadians can see first-person testimonies of residential school survivors, and Aboriginal hip-hop from Sioux Lookout; films from Greenland, Mexico and Australia and the complete collection of films by the Arnait Inuit women's collective. Canadians can follow the Truth and Reconciliation process and participate in it, taking concrete positive actions to help build a better, stronger country for all. Please come join us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'Z' followed by a horizontal line and a small flourish.

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