Book details making of territory

'Nunavut is still a place where one person can make a big difference'

by Michele LeTourneau
Northern News Services
Nunavut

Just how the territory of Nunavut and its government came to be is an impressive bit of history.

With stories and details gathered together for the first time, Made in Nunavut: An Experiment in Decentralized Government by Jack Hicks and Graham White provides a behind-the-scenes view, a critical evaluation and a solid historical account.

Hicks describes influential events in the book that may otherwise be forgotten, such as the May 1997 gender parity plebiscite. Had Nunavummiut voted in favour, the GN would have been the first legislated gender-equal government in the world, with voters casting ballots for one male and one female for each constituency.

However, the concept failed with a 57 per cent "no" vote.

"On the one hand that thing is completely history. It's not officially mentioned anymore. Didn't happen. It's over. But at the same time the history of it needs to be recorded because in the future it will pop up," said Hicks. "There's just a lot of fundamental history in the book that we thought needed to be captured."

Federal negotiators laughed

Another example, among many, is how Inuit negotiators actually managed to get their own territory and government, when the federal negotiators had laughed that idea off from the outset. When it came time to sign the land claim, the Inuit side refused unless they got a Government of Nunavut. Tom Siddon, minister for the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) for then-prime minister Brian Mulroney, agreed without his leader's knowledge, according to the authors.

"Not only is that story interesting but it helps us explain why the administrative tableau in Nunavut is so complicated. The goal was to have as little under government as possible because it was supposed to be the Government of the Northwest Territories. It would have been just one of many land claims in the Northwest Territories," said Hicks.

Had Inuit negotiators known a government was on the table, a possibility, they might have streamlined the land claim and, "they might have organized things differently."

From 1994 to early 1997, Hicks, a social research consultant, served as the director of research for the Nunavut Implementation Commission, which developed the basic design of the Government of Nunavut. He attended many of the meetings described in the book.

photo courtesy of Jack Hicks

***Jack Hicks,** along with Graham White, authored Made in Nunavut, a behind-the-scenes look at the creation of the Government of Nunavut.*

White is a retired University of Toronto Mississauga professor who closely followed "political and administrative issues surrounding the emergence of the Nunavut government" throughout the 1990s and 2000s. He calls himself a "structure and process of government guy."

The two got to know each other in 1994, said White. Ostensibly, they've been working on the book in one way or another from various locations ever since.

"A lot of back-and-forthing," said Hicks.

Successes and failures

After consolidating their assessment of the successes and failures of decentralization, the authors, in the concluding chapter, provide a critical assessment of the GN as it is now. Hicks and White are clear in their opinion that the main flaws in the government – and they outline several – cannot be laid at the feet decentralization.

"A brief review of a few of the GN's more egregious policy and administrative failures, in programs and services for children, youth and family; construction of social housing; and suicide and family violence prevention strategies demonstrates that decentralization bears little responsibility for them," write Hicks and White.

Inaction and failure to implement appear as the culprits.

"I think the big failure of the government after 15 years is the lack of capacity to address the fundamental social realities and the anger from the past," said Hicks. "But, on the other hand, maybe we just saw the first step."

Hicks is referring to the inquest into the high rate of suicide in the territory held in September and the recent appointment of an associate deputy minister on quality of life who is taking the lead in co-ordinating suicide prevention efforts.

Made in Nunavut is dedicated to Laura Ulluriak Gauthier and in the minds of both authors, Gauthier, who died unexpectedly of a brain aneurysm in her sleep at the age of 30, is an example of a "confident, competent and diplomatic" young Inuk.

"She, very quickly before the creation of Nunavut, she very quickly became, when there was all that interagency work between (the implementation commission), the GNWT, NTI and Canada, there was something about her personality that made her an absolutely key, pivotal person in all those relationships," said Hicks.

The authors quote Judy Tanguay who headed the Nunavut Secretariat for DIAND: "Few people involved in the project realized just how critical she was in making it (Nunavut) a success."

As for the future, as White says, "Nunavut is still a place where one person can make a big difference."

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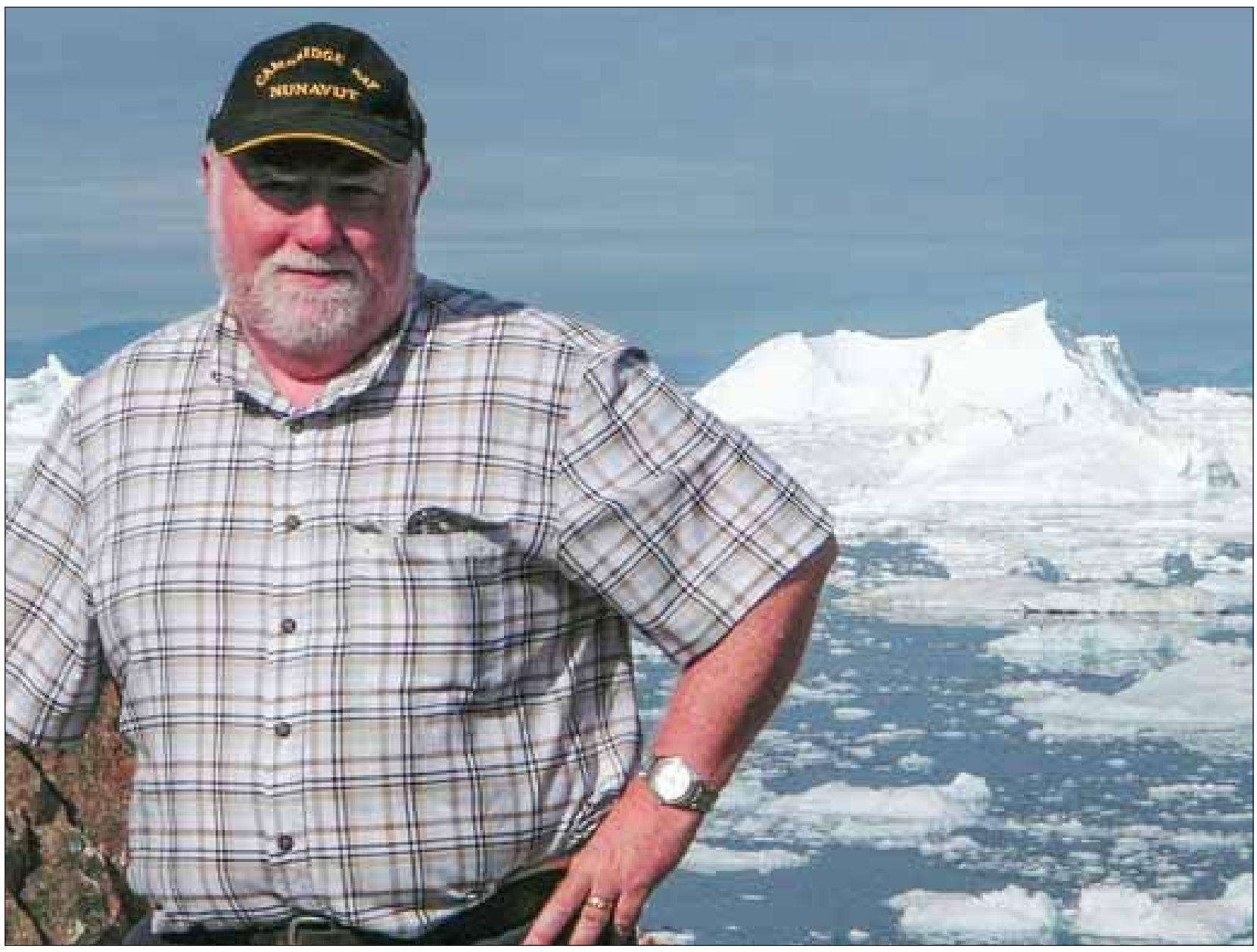

photo courtesy of Graham White

***Graham White is the co-author of Made in Nunavut,** whoch offers an in-depth look at the creation of the Government of Nunavut.*

Conquering the divide

Northern News Services

Made in Nunavut is based on meetings that took place while the implementation commission did its work, dozens of interviews of key players, named and unnamed, and archived documents.

One anecdote early in the book perfectly illustrates the divide – described as "the tension between opportunity and constraint" – which existed in creating a new government from scratch.

"Early in the design process, following a long day spent briefing Government of the Northwest Territories politicians and bureaucrats, several senior staff of the Nunavut Implementation Commission (NIC), the body charged with developing a design for the Nunavut government, were unwinding over beers at the Gold Range, a popular (if decidedly down-market) Yellowknife bar.

"In short order, a veteran GNWT politician accosted them, roundly denunciating the plans they had outlined for the new government. 'What a waste of a fabulous opportunity,' he thundered, 'you could have done things so differently; what you want could have been done in the 1960s.'

"Barely had this politician left when another came by to berate the NIC staffers, but from a different perspective: 'Who the hell are you,' he demanded, 'to recommend such massive changes?'"

While years of discussion took place regarding wildlife management and land-use planning and other such matters during negotiations, Hicks said there was no similar process about what a Nunavut government should look like since nobody had known there would be one. The Nunavut Implementation Commission had a big job to do in a short time.

"They really only had three and half, four years max to put together a design for a new government. That was a pretty serious constraint," said White. "Another constraint was that no-one had ever done anything remotely like this before. It really had never been done. They were really kind of on their own."

The commission toured the communities.

"The only message we got was a) (the government) has to speak Inuktitut and b) don't put everything in the capital," said Hicks, adding the latter was about spreading jobs around.