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I began by explaining my interest in the history of the creation of Nunavut as well as in Indigenous cooperation internationally.

Prior to the formation of the Nunavut territory, you had various Aboriginal groups working together. The Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC) involved not only the Inuit people from the Northwest Territories (NWT) but Northern Quebec and Labrador. The First Nations also included the Métis at the beginning. And we had our own organization called the 'North of Sixty.'

Federation of Natives North of Sixty?

Yes, and at the beginning of that, Tagak Curley was president of ITC, and I was president of the Indian Brotherhood, looking after the First Nations in the NWT, that included Nunavut. We were one territory and we had the Métis present. I was president of the Natives North of Sixty and Tagak was vice-president. The secretary-treasurer was the Métis rep. Our interest was basically to work on pan-territorial northern agenda that pertains to all Aboriginal people in the existing NWT. We had to deal with gas and oil, the proposed Mackenzie Valley pipeline, and the whole issue of Aboriginal rights. From there I think what happened is that the Inuit people got involved with Greenland and Alaska and Denmark, and in the end formed their own Inuit Circumpolar group. Later on, there was the Arctic Council of Athabaskan groups, which was a sub-arctic First Nations group. That was an offshoot of the whole initiative at that time. After that, the Nunavut territory was formed and that came under the ITC negotiations. They negotiated their Aboriginal claims along with the creation of the new territory. The two went hand in hand. The rest of us in the NWT were more interested in negotiating our own regional land claims and self-government. In the present NWT, we have a population of about 42,000. The Inuvialuit are part of the NWT. We have First Nations and Métis. Of the 42,000, 50 per cent of the population is Aboriginal and the other 50 per cent is non-Aboriginal. In that respect, it gives us a good opportunity to work with the NWT and the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). We have the Aboriginal Summit of the NWT. We just had a meeting in Hay River, and it was a meeting of the Aboriginal Summit – the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT), the territorial cabinet, the MLAs, and the association of municipalities. It was a meeting where we were exploring how we could work together on developing a Northern agenda. The outcome of that meeting was that we all agreed to establish a permanent intergovernmental assembly. It's a permanent forum that would have representatives of the summit, the GNWT, MLAs, and it could meet once or twice a year depending on the need. It is basically to develop a Northern agenda, but also to meet at the beginning of each territorial election. It's no use working together if they are at the end of their term, it's a waste of time, so at the beginning of each territorial election we're all going to get together and say this is what we want to do for the next four years.

It is not unlike the idea behind the Federation North of Sixty, only then it was to solicit the federal government, yes?

Well, it's also to get our own house in order, because it's no use in dealing with external forces if internally you haven't worked the whole concept of working together in the first place. We have been working in isolation for a long time, and we've never really formally got together. The GNWT is a government for Aboriginal people as well, and the MLAs are compelled to represent the interests of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. It's an opportunity to create a better working environment so that we all have common interests. Look at the interests of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. We all live in the same communities. There is no exclusive community in the NWT that exists exclusively for Aboriginal people. There is no such community. Everybody is integrated, living together. So we've got to find a means where we can work together and start building trust and sit down and understanding where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are coming from. They have elected leaders and we want to work together. It's a good concept that has taken years and year to come together. It's a leap of faith on both parties.

But how have you managed to stay together so long. I mean, you helped to get the Indian Eskimo Brotherhood started, right?

Yeah.

How did that work?

Well we started in 1970. The NWT at that time did not have an organization representing First Nations. Inuit had an organization going long before the First Nations had their own organization in the NWT. You had those organizations operating in the provinces, not up here. We were the last ones across Canada to form our own organization to represent the treaty Indians, which are your First Nations. Shortly after that, the Metis formed their own organization. At that time, the federal government pretty much ran the show in the NWT. The GNWT did not really exist at that time. We were under the administration of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND). They dictated everything. They dealt with resource development, they dealt with community affairs, and generally the administration of the NWT. It was only in 1967 that the council of the NWT that had been operating in Ottawa all this time, run by bureaucrats, and appointees, finally moved here. Then there was a mixture of appointed and elected until it evolved into fully elected. Then the commissioner, who had all kinds of dictatorial authority, was finally whittled down until it is now mostly a figurehead. But, things evolved.

Who started it? I actually thought you guys were earlier, ahead of Committee for Original Peoples' Entitlement (COPE).

COPE formed at about the same time as the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories, but COPE was ahead of everybody in terms of negotiating their land and resources plan. At that time, there was no policy pertaining to self-government, period. COPE was the first one in the NWT.

And it was pan-Indigenous, wasn't it?

COPE? No, it was exclusively Inuvialuit.

But I thought Richard Nerysoo was also involved with COPE a little bit.

No, the Gwich'in negotiated their own separate claim, because the Gwich'in are under Treaty 11. The Inuvialuit aren't under any treaty. Most of these regional claims have been negotiated and settled independently under regional organizations. It's never been done under the Indian Brotherhood or the Dene Nation.

Tell me a little bit about the Brotherhood. When you got it started in 1970, what did you want it to do? Had you been working with Manuel in the National Brotherhood?

In the Brotherhood of the NWT, we worked very closely with the National Indian Brotherhood but the National Indian Brotherhood had their own particular problem trying to get their own national mandate because you can't treat the First Nations across Canada as being all a photocopy of each other. They're all individual nations and different language traditions and when they look at the whole area of land claims and self-government, they look at it differently. You have to respect that. At the beginning, we looked at the whole land claim and land resources negotiations in the NWT, and in a way I think we were idealistic. We thought we could settle one huge claim. But to our good fortune, the whole process broke down. And now what we are negotiating are regional land claims, and that is probably better in the end anyway because if you've got the reason to claim land, where is that going to go, it's got to go in your traditional territory. But if you try to do it in one huge land claim on behalf of the Dene, Metis, then I think the whole thing was unworkable anyway.

When did it dissolve?

The Brotherhood didn't dissolve, it was the land claim, the Dene-Métis claim that fell apart in 1990. One of the reasons that it fell apart is that there was a clause in there, once you had settled your claim they wanted to extinguish your Aboriginal treaty rights and inherent rights. The First Nations said, 'No, we can't live with that.' From there, the Tlicho First Nation commenced negotiation in 1992 and we only concluded negotiations last June.

So you had to regroup.

Yep, everybody had to regroup. Plus they had to do their own regional research, get the Elders involved and spell out geographically where their traditional territory was. But again, you can't negotiate and settle your own claim in isolation. You've still got to work out an overlapping agreement with all your neighbors. In our case, it included the Nunavut territory, because we have a Nunavut Tlicho boundary, and we still have to work it out.

But you guys still supported Nunavut back then, because a lot of people have said that without that support it wouldn't get it.

We had to leave each other as it were, to a new separate territory based on good will and a sense of cooperation, because we can't just go in separate directions without a sense of commitment and cooperation to work together. It doesn't matter if they create a new territory.

Who all was with you in the beginning? I know that Richard Nerysoo was your vice-president.

Richard Nerysoo was there, and Paul Andrew, CBC, who was chief of Fort Norman at the time, he had a background in the Indian Brotherhood, too.

Was Alex Stevenson supportive or a hindrance, the last administrator of the Arctic? Do you remember anything about him?

No, if he was Eastern Arctic I wouldn't have much to do with him. I had to deal with DIAND, and get funding.

How hard was that, getting funding to create it?

We were a status organization, so we pretty well had to deal with DIAND, and we had to deal with the officials in Ottawa.

Tagak said that he had learned a lot of things from you that he used in the organization of Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC). Was he working with you?

We were working together on the Natives North of Sixty, he was my vice-president.

When was that created?

That was 1972. I learned from Tagak, too. We were working together and we had meetings and we were always bouncing ideas, so anything is workable in terms of concepts of where we are at and where we have to go. There were various people in Ottawa that we had to deal with, not just the ministers but you have to deal with those bureaucrats, because those bureaucrats, if you didn't get their support, they could kill whatever proposition you have in mind, you know.

Did you have offices in Ottawa too, because I know when ITC had offices in Ottawa, they were right next to the National Indian Brotherhood.

No, our offices were here in Yellowknife. I was on the national executive, representing the NWT in the National brotherhood. When I was in Ottawa, the National Indian Brotherhood let me use their offices for whatever I had to do, and they lent me their staff to help me so it was good.

Ultimately, the ITC moved right next door?

More or less. Yes.

That must have been interesting.

We had common interests because ITC wanted to negotiate and settle their claim and wanted to have their own separate territory.

But then later, you wound up working on the opposite side of the table. You had to do your overlapping agreements. What were the guys like on the opposite side of the table?

I don't think there was a need right at the beginning to settle everything, just to get an agreement that we would work everything out. The Tlicho were interested in working, negotiating their land claim for self-government. But we wanted to convey to the Nunavut Inuit organization and their government, look, the Tlicho view is that the boundary is mainly a political boundary and is not associated with Aboriginal rights. We have an overlap and we want to do that in good faith at some time. We weren't compelled to come to a hasty arrangement. That would have screwed everything up anyway. It's not worth our while to deal with it any other way.

Abe Okpik, in an interview before he died, also spoke of you. What do you remember, because I also have to reconstruct the stories of people who are no longer here?

Abe Okpik was a very respected individual. He was with the media at the beginning, I believe, working for CBC. I believe he was involved with this whole project where the Inuit people for some reason were given numbers instead of traditional Inuit names. I found that whole thing appalling because I could never figure out why the federal government did that to the Inuit people. One of the projects that Abe was involved in was to get the traditional names recorded and have their own birth certificate, because these were traditional names. He was with ITC, I remember, and he was also with the legislative assembly. On a number of occasions, I had an opportunity to meet with Abe. As far as I was concerned, he was a very respected individual, and a respected Elder in the end. He had a lot of knowledge, traditional knowledge. I learned a lot from Abe.

What was his personality like?

He had a very good sense of humor. He was the type that was willing to work with all groups. He was not shy with working with GNWT or the federal government. He did a lot of good for his people, the Inuit people. At the same time, from the First Nations point of view, we learned from him as well. Abe Okpik also met a number of our chiefs in our community who were about his age or older. He was never shy. He would go right in and shake hands with all the Dene chiefs. He was good.

That was another story I heard about Tagak. As soon as he got off the plane, he was there for an official purpose to do adult education, but he would be off to visit the Dene offices.

Yep. One thing about Tagak, he is not shy. He wanted to get to know Dene people and their leaders. He was always very respectful of our Elders, just like he is with the Inuit people. And you have to respect him for that.

Insatiable curiosity...

Yes. Curiosity is a good thing. In order to be a good leader, you've got to have that. If you are not curious, then you get stale. To be a good leader you have got to have a sense of evolution of your own attitude, and every once in a while you've got to review that. Because times are changing and you got to keep up with it.

Who else do you remember from those days?

Nellie Cournoyea was an important part of the whole thing, and a number of old chiefs and elders. There were three main players: the Inuit, the Metis and the First Nations. Over the years, things have changed. I think the concept of coming together under a forum to exchange ideas, to review where things are at and how should we collectively work together to go into the future, that's another challenge. It doesn't matter if you got your own regional claim, you still need to get together to look after your common interest. Look at the multi-national corporations who are involved in diamond mines up here. They're impatient. They are willing to negotiate an impact and benefit agreement, but at the same time they want the regulatory boards to go ahead and approve their environmental proposal and get their permits, water permits, environmental permits. When you are dealing with that kind of pressure, you pretty well have to have an idea of what you want from those companies. We don't want to end up with an agreement where the companies make millions and billions of dollars and then put a pittance toward reclamation. At the end of their project, they have to clean up and if they don't do that, then it falls on your shoulders and the federal government. We don't want the same scenario that occurred here in Yellowknife with the Giant Mine. It's a mess. They got arsenic all over the damn place.

Where my people live, it's uranium.

We had uranium too, in the Tlicho area in the Rayrock Mine, and now its fenced off. The whole area is a doughnut in our land claims because we don't want it.

There is a good book called 'Tainted Desert' that equates the whole nuclear industry with the systematic marginalization of Indigenous Peoples.

Yeah.

Have folks contacted you internationally about what you do here?

There was a woman here from Copenhagen. She was with the Indigenous working group.

IWGIA?

Yeah.

Katherine Westendorf?

She contacted me and then she mailed me some of her publications. She contacted a friend of mine, his name is Jim Emmerson, who was doing some work for the Aboriginal Summit, some writing for the sub-arctic Aboriginal claims. I got to meet her, but we were still doing some work on the Tlicho land claims so we were more focused on completing our claim. We had no time to go and do other things.

I can imagine the number of people looking to you to learn how to do things, but who did you look to?

Well, in the beginning when we were organizing the Indian Brotherhood of the NWT, we were looking at the Southern organizations, the way that they were structured, what their objective was, and the kinds of provincial problems they were working out. The situation on the reserve is so different than off reserve. In a lot of ways the situation in the NWT was very unique because at the time, we had no reserves, no claims that were negotiated. There was just this outstanding treaty that had been negotiated between our people and the federal government in various regions, Treaty 8 and Treaty 11. The federal government came up with this version of Treaty 8 and Treaty 11 and said we ceded all our land and all our rights and they were giving us a payment of \$5 a year and that was it! They in turn, agreed to provide teachers and look after our health so when the Indian Brotherhood was formed, we took the government to task on that and we said no. We agreed as a friendship treaty so that the federal government can allow the prospectors to come around and look for minerals and have their own public service. The interpretation of the treaty became a crucial issue for us, and we eventually told the federal government they have no jurisdiction over land and resources, period. We wanted to negotiate for land and self-government. The Métis and the Indian Brotherhood decided, let's see if we can have a joint claim, but that fell apart in 1990. Since then, I think the government has come to understand that their written version is totally untrue. They even have signatories of the various chiefs that took treaty, but the version differed from the written version to the oral version that we heard time and time again. We said, 'No – it was never over land and resources.' Currently, the federal government is negotiating with all the regional groups over land, resources and self-government.

It just occurred to me that I am confusing two different organizations. Was there a separate Indian and Eskimo Association?

There was, there was. It was the forerunner of ITC. That was an organization that was formed under the Anglican Church of Canada. They helped form this organization to start working on issues, and that was a forerunner to the ITC.

So that was already in existence when you guys created the Brotherhood?

Yeah.

Did you ever read Vine Deloria's book, 'Custer Died for our Sins?'

Yeah.

Probably in the 1960s when he wrote it?

Yeah.

I wondered how far north it had gotten.

At that time, the National Indian Brotherhood provincial and territorial leaders were working together, were coming to the point where they no longer wanted to live under the thumbs of DIAND bureaucrats that were very powerful. The various ministers that were elected did not have a clue in regards to where the First Nations were coming from. They dealt with First Nations with their paternalistic attitude that we were somehow subservient to their department and were not capable of running our own affairs. The rest of us who were just coming on were questioning everything. I think when the book came out 'Custer Died for your Sins,' made a lot of sense to a lot of people of Canada because the mood was that we wanted fundamental changes in our relationship to the Government of Canada and that things would have to change. There was no question about it.

I was always under the impression that the Canadian Indian Brotherhood got themselves organized a little bit before our American Indian Movement.

In the United States, you have the National Congress of Indians, which is the equivalent to the National Indian Brotherhood. As I recall, in 1972 they had a joint working relationship between. They had an exchange of people, and I think they were working in common interest as to how to get their issues dealt with by the US government. As a matter of fact, I think it was a couple of years ago, I was in Vancouver on holiday when they had a joint assembly of the Assembly of First Nations of Canada and the National Congress of Indians. I was there with my two children and I knew all the players, from Canada anyway. The US, they agreed to cooperate in a number of areas and they were going to have regular meetings, which is about time. I think it is still ongoing. I think it is about time because it is no use having the Canadians working in isolation. Now it is about time that we work with the US, Alaska. There are Aboriginal people in Mexico, for example, that want to deal with the same issues. There is international trade that has impact on Aboriginal communities.

Your agreement, does it have a North American Free trade Agreement (NAFTA) exemption in it?

It does impact. The benefits should flow to Aboriginal communities and why have an international trade agreement between Canada and the US if Aboriginal people are not

benefiting and getting involved. It is useless. We can no longer live in isolation, we are part of the global community, period.

Weren't you involved in the first international meeting of Indigenous Peoples in the seventies?

Yes, that was under this Federation of Natives North of Sixty that Tagak and I were involved in. What triggered the whole thing was that international countries were coming together in Le Havre, France, to sponsor an international gas and oil conference. DIAND was going to speak on behalf of Aboriginal people and we weren't invited, as North of Sixty, so I went to Ottawa and while they were having this preparatory conference between the oil companies and the feds, and I said that if there is going to be any discussion on the international forum in France regarding gas and oil, then Aboriginal people have to be involved because you are talking about our land and our resources. It doesn't belong to the oil companies nor does it belong to the federal government because they haven't settled our outstanding land claim for self-government. So they said, 'Oh yes,' we can go. So they financed it. The Federation North of Sixty had our own rep. We ran into some Saami people from Finland and Norway and then we met the Greenlandic Inuit people. They suggested we have an international forum in Copenhagen, Denmark. It was suggested to me and Tagak Curley and we said, 'Yeah, we can do that.' They said they had limited funds, so Tagak and I agreed that we would make a submission to the federal government that would allow us to contribute financially so that the Greenlandic Inuit can come, and the Saami people. That's how the first Circumpolar Conference took place in 1973, I believe. From there, the Inuit created their own. It was an eye opener.

To your recollection, was that the first time that Indigenous Peoples had come together in a conference like that internationally anywhere?

As far as I know, yeah, it's the first time. The Danish government was very supportive, very helpful. They had shut down the House of Lords chamber, so it was empty and they let us use the facility. We set up the interpreting booth. The prime minister at that time was going for election so he came in to welcome us, but he said he had to go out and campaign. He said, 'I hope you have a good conference.'

What did you discuss? This was the birthplace of something amazing.

Well it was basically to exchange ideas on circumpolar issues like environment, land claims, economic development and try to exchange ideas because everybody was developing at a different pace, but we had common areas. It was at that beginning I guess where we all got to know each other. I'd never been to Finland, Norway or Sweden in my life and I didn't really know there were Aboriginal people there. Greenland, I'd heard about them a long time ago, but that was the first time that I had met them.

What about more southern Indigenous Peoples internationally, like Australian Aboriginals or New Zealand's Maori? Did you ever have a chance to interact with them?

Later on when I was minister of Aboriginal affairs and constitutional development under the GNWT, I was invited to go to Australia. The Australian government of Indigenous affairs and the government of the northern territory came and brought with them an Indigenous Council (which is the equivalent of the Indian Brotherhood of the NWT) rep. They came and met with me so I hosted them here for about a week, and I told them they could go from here and there to meet people. When they came back, they extended an invitation to me to go to Australia and the Northern Territory and be their guest. At that time, the World Aboriginal Conference was taking place in Canberra. That's the time that I went. I met the Maoris from New Zealand, and the United States and Alaska, I met the Navajo and the Seminole and a whole variety.

When was that?

This was around 1980, 1981.

How did the World Conference get started, do you know?

It was an initiative of the National Indian Brotherhood of Canada, the Assembly of First Nations now, and the American Congress of Indians from the United States and other Aboriginal groups from the Caribbean and the Maori from New Zealand. The World Indigenous Conference is where it came from. I am not sure what they are up to these days, but it happens every so often. The last one I went to was in Australia.

What advice would you give to other Indigenous Peoples trying to go down the same road toward self-determination, trying to open up negotiations with even more difficult governments than Canada?

You have to identify your traditional territory, which is crucial. You get that from your Elders. You have to look at the conditions of your communities, infrastructure, or the lack of it. The other thing is the education of your children. Look at the economic potential within your area, and you got to have good lawyers working with you because you need to make your political case and your legal case. You have to convince your government, whoever they are. And if you've got Aboriginal neighbors, then you have to realize that you have to be prepared to make a deal with them. As a matter of fact, it is better to be united with your Aboriginal neighbors than to go it on your own. All of this takes time, but you've got to have the will to fight for your rights. When I say fight, I mean legally, politically. Aboriginal Peoples' rights have to be recognized by every country and courts. It is not a case where Aboriginal people are sub-human. They have the same rights as European people. In most cases, Aboriginal People are forced to deal with Europeans anyways, whether it is a colonial regime from a past territory or whatever. You have also got to deal with resource development. The reason they are on your land is to make money, it's not to deal with Aboriginal values so this is what is on their minds. What they want is they want to make money developing resources, and in most cases, the government of day will side with multi-national corporations to develop your land at your expense. One has to be organized, no matter what the challenge is. It might look at the beginning that it is too much, but nothing is too much. Once you are

organized you can take on the governments of the day and elected leaders in your area and these big companies. But you need good people and you have to fight for education of your people because the more your people are educated, the better it is.

Both ways, traditionally and Western.

It goes both ways, traditional education and contemporary education. When I say education, I mean a whole list of ways where your children don't lose your language, tradition and values to Western education. It's to give you the necessary tools to play the big game of the future, as it gets more complex all the time. Nothing is simple anymore.

Where did you gain your leadership skills?

Well, my experience is that I went to residential school when I was eight and I didn't get out of there until I was 17. But the thing was that when they were forming this Indian Brotherhood of the NWT, the old chief and counselors in my home community of Rae, that's where I was born, they approached my father and my mother. I had just finished Grade 12 and I was making application to go to university, so they approached my parents and said, 'We want your son to work for us.' At that time, I was only about 20. I said, 'What do they want?' 'Well, they want you to run for president of the Indian Brotherhood that's representing the 26 communities of the NWT.' I said, 'I don't know anything about it.' He said, 'They'll teach you.' Most of the chiefs and counselors at that time in 1970 were all over 65 and a lot of them were in their 70s and 80s. I took a lot of direction from the Elders, and I would tell them where I thought we could go. I was learning a lot more than I was giving back to the Elders at that time. It was an eye opener for me and a challenge. From there I learned and learned. So there you go. And I am still learning today.

Why did they approach your dad?

It's traditional.

No, I don't mean that, but was your family highly regarded?

My father was a Shaman. And it was traditional. You approach the parents, you don't approach the young person. And if they got the ok from your parents then they would call the young man in.

That must have been interesting working with Tagak, both of you coming from Shamanic traditions.

We hit it off pretty good, right from the very beginning. Because he had a challenge and I had a challenge. In a lot of ways we had common interests because let's face it, the Inuit aspirations and the Dene aspirations are common in a lot of ways. Tagak was interested in getting his people organized, and so was I. Looking back, it was a real privilege working with Tagak.