

Commentary

## **Tour of Canadian North Highlights Richness, Diversity, and Challenges**

Bruce A. Heyman

When Prime Minister Trudeau and President Obama met at the White House on March 10 and in Ottawa on June 29, they emphasized our two countries' shared commitment to leadership in the Arctic. An important aspect of my role as U.S. Ambassador is to understand the realities and aspirations of people across Canada. I was honored to accept the invitation of Global Affairs Canada to take part in the department's 2016 Northern Tour. For nine days, across 12,000 kilometers, our group of 20 ambassadors gained a deeper understanding of this region, an experience that will in turn help us shape our governments' approaches to Arctic cooperation. For me, it was indeed the opportunity of a lifetime and a highlight of my time in Canada!

The theme of the 2015-2017 U.S. Chairmanship of the Arctic Council is "One Arctic: Shared Opportunities, Challenges, and Responsibilities." The Northern Tour broadened our knowledge of the social, economic, and governance issues that confront the people of the North: infrastructure, economy, climate change, education, social factors, and more. Community leaders spoke candidly about their greatest concerns. They told us that the suicide rate among Arctic communities is 110 per 100,000, almost eight times the national average. High school dropout rates top 84 percent in some communities. As the outside world encroaches, social structures are feeling the strain. In Kuujjuaq, Quebec, community leaders said just two generations ago, people traveled by dogsled and kayak, but now "kids are on snowmobiles and electronic devices." In essence, Inuit find themselves between two worlds.

We saw and heard clear evidence that the Arctic is on the front line of climate change. On Baffin Island, Inuit leaders shared first-hand local knowledge supporting scientific reports that populations of caribou, a staple of the local diet, have plummeted. Researchers cite multiple factors leading to the decline, such as rising temperatures that affect foraging and availability of food. Some communities, like Inuvik, report that temperatures have increased two degrees Celsius in the past 50 years, leading to flooding and the resultant displacement of families in coastal communities. The widespread and constant use of polluting diesel power generators highlighted the importance of Arctic Council partners' commitment to finding energy innovations that will meet residents' needs and protect health and ecosystems.

Despite the challenges, community members expressed hope for the future and a spirit of resilience. In Cambridge Bay, we learned that the local government provides a small business assistance program, helping with resume writing and interviewing skills. In Inuvik, residents transformed a defunct hockey rink into a community greenhouse where the community can grow vegetables. In Rankin Inlet, local business loans made three Tim Hortons franchises possible. As Yukon College in Whitehorse pursues its goal to become a university – the first in any Canadian territory – it will be a welcome partner in the circle of universities that offer access and insights to indigenous communities in North America.

President Obama and Prime Minister Trudeau said in their March 10, 2016, [joint statement](#) that “Canada and the U.S. will continue to respect and promote the rights of Indigenous peoples in all climate change decision making . . . We commit to defining new approaches and exchanging best practices to strengthen the resilience of Arctic communities and continuing to support the well-being of Arctic residents, in particular respecting the rights and territory of Indigenous peoples.” The statement adds: “With partners, we will develop and share a plan and timeline for deploying innovative renewable energy and efficiency alternatives to diesel and advance community climate change adaptation . . . We also commit to greater action to address the serious challenges of mental wellness, education, Indigenous language, and skill development, particularly among Indigenous youth.”

My travel in the North underscored the contribution the Arctic Council can make to bring together nations and peoples in a spirit of common purpose. We are working toward goals that will have real and positive impacts on life in the North and will support healthy, prosperous, and sustainable Arctic communities. The Arctic is full of promise and hope, and as an Arctic nation, the United States will continue to work with our neighbors and partners to support those aspirations.