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Indigenous Peoples Secretariat

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I'd like to take the short time allocated to me here to remind all of us that the partnership between Arctic governments and Indigenous Peoples is strong, unique, and fruitful. Because of the groundbreaking agreement that makes Indigenous Peoples' organizations Permanent Participants, the Arctic Council is increasingly being pointed to as a model of cooperation that bears replication the world over.

Twelve years ago the 8 Arctic States and 3 founding Arctic Indigenous Peoples organizations met in Ottawa to establish the Arctic Council. Through the Ottawa Declaration, Member States said yes to Indigenous Peoples sitting at the same table as Ministers and participating in Arctic Council Working Groups. Arctic Governments agreed with us that Indigenous Peoples should be permanent and be active participants.

Given the desire by states to encourage and assure meaningful participation of the Permanent Participants, they specifically mentioned the need – in the Ottawa Declaration – to have a strong and vibrant Indigenous Peoples’ Secretariat, or IPS. This validated the work IPS had undertaken in the former Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy. This sent a strong message to future ministers, officials, and Indigenous Leaders that it is a core element of the Arctic Council itself. That document speaks to us today.

The Arctic Council is strong today because the Permanent Participant are full partners, in part, as a result of our support from IPS.

Partnerships, as you know, are made up of more than one party. Because we work well together does not mean that both parties here at the Council have identical needs, or even identical goals. For example, it is not in anybody's best interest to have a single secretariat providing assistance to Member States and to the Arctic's Indigenous Peoples. Neither is it in anybody's interest to have both sides undertake identical tasks inside the Council's various mandates. While Member States may contribute marine biologists to a specific Arctic Council project, we may contribute a hunter's knowledge of his environment, for example.

Permanent Participants are sometimes best situated to plan, implement, and move forward recommendations emanating from an Arctic Council project. The recent Language Symposium was a first in that a Permanent Participant was asked to take the central lead of a major undertaking. Proceedings should be out soon. We need more of these kinds of Permanent Participant-led projects inside the Arctic Council.

I was mandated by the Permanent Participants last year to bring to the SAOs a proposal to improve the functioning of the IPS. I was asked to do this because of what I have just shared with you – the importance Ministers saw in the IPS when they signed the Ottawa Declaration. The importance of a strong partnership doesn't blur the boundaries between us. It supports each others' interests and goals. We have submitted a draft Memorandum of Understanding to generate discussion. I know we can all
agree that improvements can always be made. We will continue to work with you on restructuring of the IPS with a background paper that will be submitted to the SAO prior to the next meeting.

Up until now, I have been speaking as Chair of IPS. Let me now change hats and speak as Chair of ICC.

While the Languages Symposium was a success, there are numerous other examples, both within and outside the Arctic Council, where Indigenous Peoples take the lead and do well. For example, I have the privilege of chairing the steering committee that is planning the Indigenous Peoples' Global Summit on Climate Change. While this is not precisely an Arctic Council project, the summit outcomes, I'm sure, will contribute greatly to the work of the Council. More than 300 Indigenous Peoples from around the World, will come together in Anchorage, Alaska in April 2009 to share experiences regarding climate change and adaptation. Most importantly, we will discuss how strategies or solutions can be formulated that respond to the terrible impact that climate change is having on marginalized communities, especially indigenous, from around the World.

We look to the Arctic States for support of the Global Summit to assist Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic as Leaders in climate change, not only on local levels, but global as well. As you may be aware, we are already sitting at the table of several significant climate change bodies, including the UN Secretary Generals high level meeting on climate change, the UN PF11 as authors of climate change reports and the Aspen Institute Dialogue on climate change headed by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Indigenous Peoples have taken the position that we are not powerless victims in the climate change debate, but leaders in setting directions and finding solutions based on our centuries of experience having survived and thrived in the most extreme environment and challenging conditions. Our unique ability to adapt and the resilient nature of our communities are the strength we bring to the arctic and global tables.

To assist us in this effort, ICC has commissioned a paper on the “Ways for Indigenous Peoples to advance adaptation concerns and solutions through international fora”. This paper is being officially released today to the Senior Arctic Officials and will assist us in setting our strategy leading to COP 14 and 15.

I would like to encourage our government partners here at the table to continue to set the standard of active indigenous partnerships. While we have certain standing inside the Arctic Council, it seems that we must always be vigilant. For example, in May of this year, the Foreign Ministers of 5 Arctic Council countries met in Greenland to discuss sovereignty of Arctic Ocean waters. While there was some concern that this matter was not discussed here at the Arctic Council table, what concerned ICC the most was that the meeting did not provide an indigenous voice in the way our Permanent Participant status does here at the Council. While ICC Greenland was given a few minutes to address the ministers, the doors were then shut. This takes us back to the 1993 Ministerial meeting to the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy at which, for the first time, Arctic Indigenous Peoples opened the door to Ministerial Meetings. Partially in response to this closed door meeting, ICC invited Inuit leaders to Kuujjuaq, Canada earlier this month to participate in a pan-Inuit Leaders' Summit on Arctic Sovereignty. I will forward a statement that we developed there. In the Statement, the Inuit Leaders called for us to be partners, and not to be excluded. Inuit have rights over the lands and seas of the Arctic and Governments cannot simply ignore us. We are not just stakeholders in the Arctic; we are rights-holders as well. We are in the process now of developing a formal Declaration on Arctic Sovereignty for Arctic Indigenous Leaders.

To conclude my remarks I hope that the Senior Officials here at the table will recognize the importance and success of the partnership we have here at the Arctic Council. Let us build on that partnership and make it stronger.

Thank you