



Above, the Coat of Arms of the new Territory of Nunavut;  
and below, the Territorial Flag of Nunavut

## THE FLAG OF NUNAVUT: PUBLIC PROCESS AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Robert Watt, Chief Herald of Canada

*Madame/Mr. Chairman, fellow vexillologists, Ladies and Gentlemen.*

The creation and unveiling of a new flag is always exciting, more so when the entity being identified is a country or part of a country.

As many of you know, Canadians had our share of this excitement a few months ago when we celebrated the establishment of our third territory, Nunavut, in the high Arctic. I was privileged to work with some of the leaders and artists of the new territory on the development of the territorial coat of arms and flag. Both the process and the final content of these new symbols are noteworthy, and I felt you might enjoy hearing some of the story. It highlights interesting aspects of several questions: Are flags the product of one mind or several? Where are new symbols found? How much involvement can or should the public have in the development of flags?

To begin, what and where is the new territory? Nunavut stretches 2/3 of the way across the top of Canada, from east to west and north to the Pole. An immense land, over 1.8 million square hectares with a very small, 28,000, population in widely scattered villages. The largest community, the new capital, Iqaluit has 4000+ people. A dramatically beautiful land with a harsh climate, very long winters, very short summers. The majority of the residents are Inuit, the aboriginal people who have lived in the area for thousands of years [show slide of map].

It took nearly four years, from June 1995 to 1 April 1999 to design and launch the new flag and coat of arms. The whole process was guided and shaped at every stage by elders and leaders from the Territory-to-be and involved extensive public input. Ongoing technical expertise was provided by the Chief Herald of Canada. These two realities reflected the leaders principal objectives:

- To ensure that the symbols drew on the talents of artists and elders of Nunavut as much as possible;
- To ensure that the public had a clear and substantial opportunity to contribute suggestions for colours and elements in the symbols;
- To ensure that the symbols had the same official character as the other national, provincial and territorial symbols in Canada and that they were of an international standard of technical excellence.

The main stages in the development can be quickly sketched.

- June 29, 1995. Nunavut Implementation Commission (N.I.C.), charged by Parliament with responsibility of designing the government of the new territory, establishes a Symbols Committee: Chair, Meeka Kilabuk, Iqaluit Members: Bill Lyall, Cambridge Bay, George Qulaut, Igoolik, and Peter Ernerk, Rankin Inlet.
- July 1996, Ottawa. Chief Herald meets with the Chair of the Symbols Committee on options for proceeding.
- November 23, 1996, Iqaluit. Chief Herald meets with the Commission. Commissioners confirm their wish to receive a coat of arms and flag by official grant and decide on a very public process.
- 23 April-2 May 1997, Rankin Inlet, Baker Lake, Cape Dorset, Iqaluit, Pangnirtung. Meeka Kilabuk leads the Chief Herald and Gilles Binda, Department of Indian and Northern Affairs liaison in a landscape, language and art orientation tour of Nunavut communities. A public contest for designs is announced.
- 15 May 1997-15 February 1998. Canada-wide contest for design suggestions open to public for coat of arms and flag.
- 6-10 April 1998, Iqaluit. NIC appointed Selection Committee: Meeka Kilabuk (Chair), John Amagaolik (NIC Chair), Jose Kusugak (Nunavut Tuungravik Inc.), Kanaginak Pootoogook (Cape Dorset), Thomas Iksiraq (Baker Lake), Nick Sikkuarq (Pelly Bay) review 800 public submissions and

select ten finalists. They become a design team and refine leading concepts into five, each category.

- May 1998, Ottawa. 5 designs are rendered by Debbie MacGarvie (flags) of the Canadian Heraldic Authority and by Cathy Sabourin (CHA) and Andrew Qappik of Pangnirtung (arms) to ensure that Inuit art and styling was present in the versions.
- 25 June 1998, Rankin Inlet. Commissioners of NIC make the final decision on the content at a special meeting and adjust the colours of the flag and the supporters of the coat of arms.
- July 1998, Ottawa. Andrew Qappik and Meeka Kilabuk return to Ottawa and join Cathy Sabourin in styling of the official version of the coat of arms and flag.
- August 1998, Iqaluit. Versions approved by NIC.
- October 1998, Ottawa; London, England. Versions accepted by the Governor General and Her Majesty the Queen.
- November 1998-February 1999, Ottawa. Vice-Regal Warrant is prepared, translated and painted.
- 1 April 1999, Iqaluit. The Governor General signs the Vice-Regal Warrant; coat of arms unveiled, the flag is flown for the first time.
- April-May 1999. First distribution of flags.

This abbreviated chronology of course shelters some fascinating and historic discussions and activities.

The following comments relate particularly to the development of the flag, but many apply equally to the creation of the coat of arms.

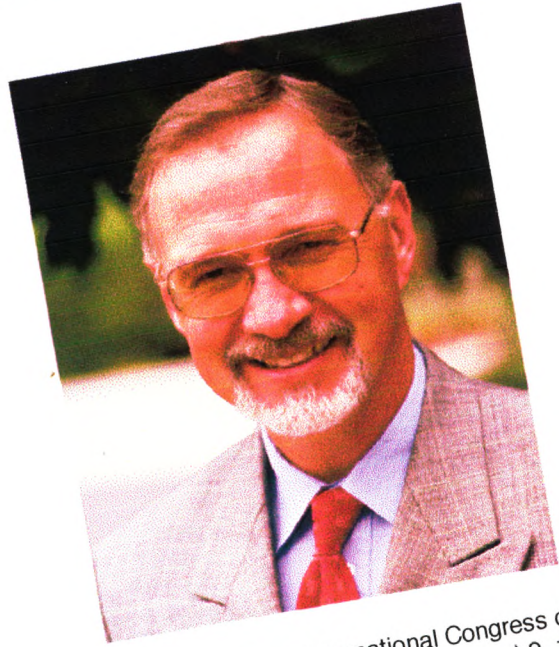
Firstly, it can be stated categorically that the flag was not designed by one person, it was a group effort. Considering the importance of consensus decision making among the Inuit, this makes the development process especially appropriate.

Secondly, while the final flag design did not arise directly from the public contest, the submissions had a strong impact on the selection committee and were carefully used by them. There were over 500 submissions for flag designs, most of them from people resident in what has become Nunavut. Many of these submissions featured the inuksuk and the North Star and the pride of place given by members of the public for these elements was confirmed and accepted by the artists and elders on the Selection Committee. Initially, the members of the Committee were surprised that there was no clear winner submitted. Rapidly however, they accepted their role as "refiners" of the ideas submitted and worked to develop the five finalists from the 10 front-runners [show slides of 10 finalists and examples of magic marker work]. One of my most vivid project memories was the work with magic markers exploring colour and structure variations in April 1998 which led to the door having to be opened when it was -15°C outside, just to disperse the fumes. The public submissions had some influence on structure, notably a vertical design in white and gold submitted by a seven year old [show slide].

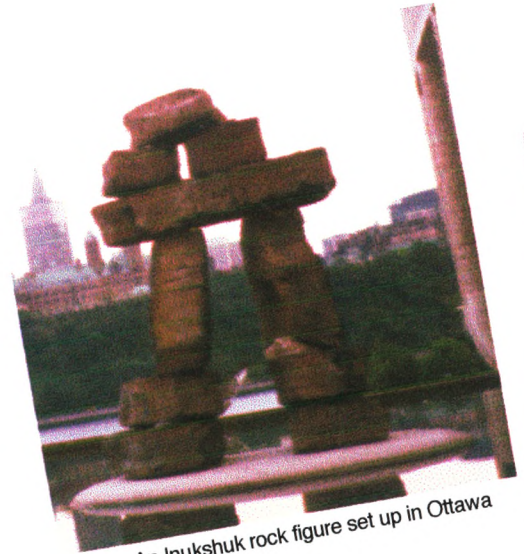
At every stage of the discussion of options, the opinions of each artist and elder were considered in detail, so that when the Commissioners made the final decision in late June 98, the proposals had been thoroughly explored and the main regions of Nunavut were actively present in the options, via the Selection Committee representation. Interestingly, even at the last moment, the position of the main colour blocks in the flag were reversed by the Commissioners. I felt at the time that his final refinement was entirely characteristic of a process that was open, public and balanced with the wisdom of elders.

As technical consultant, I was offered a vote in committee but never exercised it, believing that it was essential to be able to say, at the end of the day, this is a flag made in Nunavut by the people of Nunavut with their own vision. An important element of that claim was also realized through the cultural input of Meeka Kilabuk and the artistry of Andrew Qappik, who drew upwards of 40 inuksuks until the one you see before you emerged. As the new flag comes on screen, I would like to look again at the questions posed at the outset. Firstly, the flag of Nunavut is a group effort and in that, strongly reflects, the dominant culture of the new territory. Secondly, this new symbol blends public

suggestions, with specific knowledge of elders and artists and technical attestation by the person who is in effect, Canada's official vexillologist, the Chief Herald. Thirdly, I believe that the positive reception the people of Nunavut and others have given the new flag confirms the important and positive dividends public involvement can pay. The challenge in this area is not to anticipate that the final design will surface from the public but rather to encourage public participation so that important symbolic references are brought to the fore. With the flag of Nunavut, I think the marriage of group effort, public participation and detailed technical knowledge has produced a good result.



Keynote Speaker at the XVIII International Congress of Vexillology at Victoria, B.C., Canada, July 28-August 2, 1999  
Chief Herald of Canada Robert Watt

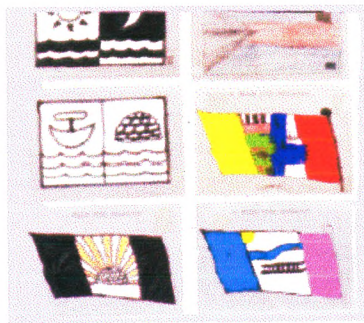


An Inukshuk rock figure set up in Ottawa



Some designs submitted for Nunavut's flag and arms

Robert Watt, The Flag of Nunavut..., Col. Plate II



Nunavut elders, artists, community leaders in the process of consultation, discussion, and decision-making. Below: More Flag Design Submissions