

Delivered by Kitikmeot Inuit Association Vice President (Social and Cultural) Lawrence Otokiak to the 2026 Kitikmeot Trade Show on February 20, 2026, on the Emerging Issue of Arctic Sovereignty



I am Lawrence. I am Inuit. I live here in Cambridge Bay.

This land raised me. The same way is not a resource. It is a responsibility.

Responsibility is heavy.

Now I will speak plainly. Look at our hamlet. Look carefully. Who signs the papers? Who controls the money? Who makes the final decision?

Are Inuit fully leading this community? Or are we slowly becoming passengers in our own homeland?

This is not about attacking anyone. This is about readiness. If Inuit are not ready to lead, someone else will. That is how sovereignty weakens. Not with force but with vacancy. with hesitation, with silence.

People are moving North. From other provinces. From other countries. They come prepared, they come educated. They apply and they qualify. They get hired. Why? Because they are ready.

If we are not ready, we cannot complain. Gaps get filled. That is how systems work.

If Inuit are not the administrators, not the finance directors, not the planners, not the negotiators, not the mayors, then we are not steering. If you are not steering, you are drifting. Drift is dangerous. Drift takes you somewhere you did not choose.

There is a simple truth. If you are not at the table, you are probably on the menu.

We are not meant to be on the menu. We are meant to decide the menu. We are meant to set the table. We are meant to own the table - not rent it, not borrow it.

Own it.

When you own the table, you decide who is invited. You decide what is served. You decide what is protected. That is sovereignty.

Right now, too many important decisions are shaped by people who do not fully understand Inuit life. Policies may look good on paper. But they feel wrong in the community. Budgets may look correct in numbers. But they do not fit real life. That is what happens when culture and power are separated. Over time, that separation becomes erosion.

To the youth in this room: being born here is not enough. Sovereignty is not automatic. You must prepare. Education does not make you less Inuit. It makes you stronger. It gives you

tools. It gives you knowledge. It gives you confidence. It allows you to read agreements. It allows you to question policy. It allows you to challenge decisions.

If you want to own the table one day, you must learn how the table is built.

To the adults in this room: We must prepare our young people. We must mentor them. We must expect excellence. If we do not prepare them, someone else will step in. That is not theft. That is consequence.

And sovereignty weakens through consequence.

There is nothing wrong with people coming North. But there is something wrong if Inuit are not ready to lead in our own homeland. That is the truth. It may feel uncomfortable. But discomfort builds strength. Comfort does not.

Sovereignty is not protected by anger. It is protected by competence. By discipline. By preparation. By Inuit who understand tradition and governance. Who understand culture and contracts. Who can stand in any room and not feel small.

Because they own the table.

Now listen carefully. This is important. PAUSE Sovereignty is quiet. It shows up in who signs the paper. It shows up in who controls the budget. It shows up in who makes the final call.

If Inuit are not ready, someone else will decide. Not because they hate us. But because they are prepared. And we are not.

That must change. Slowly. Strongly. With discipline. With education. With courage.

We will not beg for a seat. We will build the table. We will set the table. We will decide the menu. And we will own the table.

This land is ours. But it will only stay ours if we are strong enough to lead it.

Prepare yourselves. Step forward. Take responsibility. Because the future of Inuit sovereignty will not be decided far away. It will be decided here. By you.

Because if you do not own the table, you do not decide the menu. And if you do not decide the menu, you do not decide the future.

And if you do not decide the future — someone else will.

I used plain language in what I said today. I will be sending the Premier a letter using the same tone and identifying the need to protect Inuit language for many of the reasons I spoke of today. I was asked by the Premier's office to identify what should be part of their mandate going forward. I speak and write directly and plainly. I hope the government hears what I say and listens to why I am saying it.

Koana

