

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NUNATUKAVUT COMMUNITY COUNCIL REJECTS MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY'S SELF-PROCLAIMED AUTHORITY ON DETERMINING INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

HAPPY VALLEY-GOOSE BAY, LABRADOR, March 13, 2024 – NunatuKavut Community Council (NCC) President Todd Russell issued the following statement following participation in Memorial University's "Indigenous Verification" process:

"I, along with my fellow Governing Councillors and NCC leadership, participated in a consultation session under Memorial's 'Indigenous Verification' process this week with First People's Group, the Ottawa-based company retained to lead the process. While the consultation session with First People's Group was mutually respectful, NCC expressed serious concerns about the approach Memorial is taking in which they grant themselves the authority to make decisions on Indigenous identity and that we are, therefore, participating in the process under protest.

Academic institutions across the country have begun to react and respond to issues of false claims to Indigeneity and are scrambling to develop policies or protocols to provide safeguards against resulting harms. While NCC is also concerned about the impacts of false claims to identity, the current process by Memorial is not doing anything to address this issue. Rather, approaches that aspire to create policies on who is or is not Indigenous is already causing great harm. These potential policies or protocols are moving beyond verifying one's individual or community connections, and entering into the space of policing Indigenous Identity – something which academic institutions have zero authority to do. In fact, it is prejudicial, discriminatory and sets academic – Indigenous community relations back decades.

To add to our serious concerns, our participation in Memorial's process is already mired by an inherent bias clearly illustrated by their Office of the Vice President – Indigenous (VPI). In April of 2023, the VPI office communicated to NCC that it would unilaterally exclude us from a provincial Indigenous roundtable discussion on Indigenous identity. As a result, NCC would be the only Indigenous group in Newfoundland and Labrador left out of the roundtable discussion with Indigenous leaders.

Ironically, this approach seemingly ignores the fact that NCC has already been recognized and received as Indigenous by the courts, the federal government, and the government of Newfoundland and Labrador, and has entered into negotiations under Canada's current rights recognition policy. Memorial's approach was later paused by its President and, soon thereafter, they announced this current "Indigenous verification" process.

Our concerns with Memorial's approach to "verification" of Indigeneity cannot be overstated. NCC has a multi-decade long relationship with Memorial, one that has sought to build trust and respect between the university and our communities. We also have students and faculty studying and working at the university. Furthermore, NCC supported and worked collaboratively with all Indigenous groups in Labrador and Memorial on the establishment of the Labrador Campus. We are also represented on the Labrador Campus' governing constitution as one of three Indigenous groups in Labrador.

Simply put, the university has no role in arbitrating identity nor in creating categories of 'authentic' identity.

Memorial is damaging decades of relationships with Indigenous peoples and it will have to answer for instigating processes that undermine Indigenous rights to self-government and self-determination. Such rights come from our own legal traditions and are further upheld by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

NunatuKavut Inuit have a well-documented connection to our lands, ice, and waters, and are the beneficiaries of the British – Inuit Treaty of 1765. Our experiences of colonialism is similar to that of other Indigenous peoples in this country, impacting areas like language, education, health, among others. Our resilience, our strength and commitment to self-determination is unwavering. NCC has the capacity, representing NunatuKavut Inuit, to provide confirmation of community acceptance. Only we have the authority to determine who is a member of our family and who is a citizen of our ancestral lands.

Our engagement with First Peoples Group strongly reflected and upheld the rights of Indigenous governance. This includes our right to determine who is a member of our community and culture. At an NCC Annual General Assembly held in February 2024, our citizens spoke powerfully to our people’s experiences of exclusion and discrimination as a result of “Indigenous verification” processes and policies at certain academic institutions. Further to our experiences, a resolution regarding a mandate to secure NunatuKavut Inuit rights and recognition at academic institutions was passed by our citizens.

In the resolution, NunatuKavut Inuit resolved to take any steps, inclusive of legal, political, and on the ground actions, to secure our rights and recognition at academic institutions. Our people were very clear that they reject the authority of any academic institution to adjudicate, decide upon, or dictate the Indigeneity of a collective of people and reject the validity of any policy or process that purports to support any such authority.”

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About: The NunatuKavut Community Council (NCC) is a governing organization that represents Inuit who come from south and central Labrador. NCC is committed to advocating for section 35 rights, interests, and priorities of NunatuKavut Inuit. Rooted in the rich traditions and culture of NunatuKavut Inuit, NCC works diligently towards self-government and self-determination, while fostering community growth and sustainability.

To learn more about NCC and NunatuKavut Inuit, please visit our website at www.nunatukavut.ca and we invite you to check out our new Story Map page which helps tell our story. Please also join in the conversation at facebook.com/nunatukavut, X/Twitter [@nunatukavut](https://twitter.com/nunatukavut) and Instagram [@nunatukavutinuit](https://instagram.com/nunatukavutinuit).

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