

Q&A & Big Ideas

Natan Obed weighs in on the Major Projects law, Carney's election, and what the North needs

At a recent meeting, the prime minister put a lot of 'issues to rest' related to the government's fast-track legislation for major projects, says the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami president.

BY PETER MAZEREUW

As sovereignty worries push the government to "reimagine the space" in Canada's Arctic, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami president Natan Obed sees an opportunity to close the infrastructure gap facing Inuit communities.

"Our infrastructure needs are just categorically different than the rest of this country," said Obed, who said he presented a list of 79 proposed projects worth about \$31-billion over the next decade at a recent meeting with ministers.

It's part of the reason why Obed is opting to seek a fourth term leading the ITK after initially saying he wouldn't re-offer. He said Prime Minister Mark Carney's election played a role in his reconsideration.

"The ability to work with this prime minister and to know that there are huge opportunities on the table, and that reconciliation is still a key contributor to the thinking around the relationship motivates me," he said in a recent interview with *The Hot Room* podcast.

The following interview has been edited for length, style, and clarity. Listen to that episode for the full interview.

You were part of a meeting with Inuit leaders, Prime Minister Mark Carney and a number of his cabinet ministers on July 24. How did the meeting go?

"I think the meeting went quite well. There was a lot of concern that Bill-C 5 and its implementation may be in conflict with our modern treaties or some of our existing regulatory processes that we've fought quite hard for over the course of the last 50 years. The prime minister put a lot of those issues to rest, and has



Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami president Natan Obed will seek a fourth term leading the Inuit advocacy organization. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade



Obed, centre, attends the cabinet swearing-in ceremony at Rideau Hall on May 13. *The Hill Times* photograph by Sam Garcia

promised to abide by our modern treaties and the way in which C-5 is implemented in the list of projects. We also got to work on a number of different areas as well, beyond just Building One Economy [Act].

"We talked quite a bit about the Arctic foreign policy and the implementation of that foreign policy, the Inuit child first initiative and other social initiatives, and really just a reset with this new government. And at the table there were no people who were at the last ICPC [Inuit-Crown Partnership Committee] meeting in November who were present at this meeting from the government side.

"All in all, I think it was great to have it in Inuvik. It got the ministers out of Ottawa, and it allowed for them to understand

the challenges that we face every day in Inuit Nunangat but also from a social perspective. It's always good for ministers and the prime minister to meet community members and to get a sense of what it's like on the ground."

When you say the prime minister promised to live up to his treaty obligations in regards to C-5, the law itself gives the government a tremendous amount of leeway to do as it wishes. What do we mean when we talk about the government has to live up to these obligations? What do you need to see from the government as it proceeds?

"Just on the interpretation of the legislation. We did a lot of work in the previous government to amend the interpretation act to create a universal non-deroga-

tion clause, and it lives within the interpretation act, basically stating that no legislation can derogate from the Government of Canada's constitutionally recognized obligations to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. So our modern treaties fall under that. We are quite confident that when it comes to the priority or the precedent that this bill has limitations on its enforcement when it contradicts with our constitutionally-protected agreements.

"Now, practically, how the government implements its agenda and the tools that it uses to implement it, such as Bill C-5 or even the regulatory processes under our treaties, we are still trying to understand exactly how this will all unfold, what projects across Inuit Nunangat will be a part of the listed projects, and also we

have larger infrastructure asks other than perhaps listed projects under this legislation. So a lot of time was also spent on discussing how to resolve the infrastructure deficit across Inuit Nunangat. That's why it was really important for, say, the defence minister, to be there, as well, and to give a bit of perspective on what's possible with dual use infrastructure that might be characterized as a military spend, but also will support infrastructure within our communities, as well."

What kind of infrastructure do Canada's Inuit need?

"We put a list forward of 79 projects over the next 10 years. Its total is about \$31-billion. That's a large number, and there's a large number of projects. We have 51 communities. Only two of them are accessible by all weather road: Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk in the Northwest Territories. The rest of the 49 depend upon air travel to get to southern Canada from our homeland, or even to travel between communities. There are no inter-community roads, either. There's only one deep water port in all of our 51 communities, and that's in an area that spans 40 per cent of Canada, and all of our communities are either directly in a marine environment, or adjacent through a waterway. So our infrastructure needs are just categorically different than the rest of this country."

"What I've said a number of times is we really need to bring Inuit Nunangat into Canada, and imagine this country and its infrastructure and equity in a different way than we have ever have before. I think the sovereignty defence and militarization pieces are all pushing the government of Canada to reimagine the space too, and so we, as ITK, are always fighting for the people to not be lost within the larger conversation."

Dating back to at least the Harper government, references in the South to the North are often about sovereignty, about the idea of a military threat from Russia, or from China, maybe from the United States—that ships are threatening to elbow their way into Canada's Arctic. Do the Inuit people who actually live in the high Arctic spend a lot of time thinking about that?

"I would say yes and no. There are many instances of foreign vessels being seen within our waters. In the research space, there is a greater interest from non-Arctic states to conduct and do research in Canada's Arctic. From a resource-extraction perspective, there are a lot of other countries that hold mineral interests across our homeland—specifically China—in a number of scenarios. We know that these are a part of a larger political footprint and also the staging ground for what could be a pretty bitter dispute in the coming years around the Northwest Passage, and also the sovereignty of the Arctic. So we feel it and see it in different ways."

"We also know that we're at risk because, say, at this very

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U.S. trade approach 'changes the rules of the game,' with canola sector leading economic lobbying in first six months of 2025

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Canadian workers and by using Canadian resources to benefit all Canadians."

Another major concern for the canola sector in recent months has been a staggering 100-per-cent tariff on this country's canola oil and meal—as well as a 25-per-cent levy on goods such as pork and seafood—imposed by China on March 20, 2025. These tariffs were implemented following Canada's imposition of tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles at 100 per cent, and on aluminum and steel at 25 per cent. China is also currently conducting an anti-dumping investigation into imports of Canadian canola seed, which was launched in September 2024.

China is typically Canada's second-largest market for canola, and imported approximately \$4-billion of Canadian canola seed, and

another \$920.9-million of canola meal and \$21-million of canola oil in 2024, according to the CCC.

Gayle McLaughlin, senior manager of government and industry relations for the CCGA, told *The Hill Times* that her organization's focus in federal advocacy so far in 2025 was on the importance of normalizing trade with the U.S. and China as key canola markets.

"I don't think we've seen this level of unpredictability in our two most important markets: China and the United States. I think on that front, it can be unprecedented," said McLaughlin. "On the U.S. front, it has been very concerning for canola farmers as well, just because that is our number one market for canola oil and meal ... Luckily, right now, our canola oil, meal and seed are CUSMA-compliant, so they're tariff-free right now, but that needs to stay that way."

On June 5, Carney and China Premier Li Qiang discussed bilateral relations and trade between the two countries, according to a statement from the Prime Minister's Office.

Carney "took the opportunity to raise trade irritants affecting agriculture and agri-food products, including canola and seafood, as well as other issues, with Premier Li," reads the statement.

"I think we're just focused on ensuring that our market access gets reinstated, and we hope that the government prioritizes that, because canola farmers, they are still export-oriented," said McLaughlin.

"No matter what happens in the geopolitical world, that's going to be important to our farmers to have market access for their livelihoods and also for their ability to contribute to the Canadian economy and their rural communities."

The CCGA communicated with MacDonald on May 28, on June 4 and June 14.

The Hill Times reached out to the AIAC to discuss its advocacy priorities during the first six months of 2025, but an interview could not be arranged by deadline. AIAC's president and CEO Mike Mueller previously told *The Hill Times* that economic development formed a key pillar of the organization's advocacy with the new Liberal government, as previously reported on June 23.

In an emailed statement on June 18, Mueller said that Canada lacks a "cohesive industrial strategy to fully harness our aerospace potential," and that the AIAC has been engaging the federal government to ensure aerospace is recognized as a strategic priority and "a key focus of Aerospace and Defence Industrial Strategies."

The AIAC's advocacy in 2025 have included communications

with Sidhu on May 29, with Industry Minister Mélanie Joly (Ahuntsic-Cartierville, Que.) on June 4 and June 16, and with Minister of National Defence David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Ont.) on June 10.

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Top Economic Development Lobbying Organizations (January to June 2025)

Organization	Communication reports
Canola Council of Canada	94
Aerospace Industries Association of Canada	55
Council of Canadian Innovators	50
Canadian Canola Growers Association	48
Cité de l'innovation circulaire et durable	44
Industries Lassonde	43
Enbridge	41
Bruce Power	39
Telesat Canada	38

The above table shows the organizations that filed the most communication reports for activity between January and June listing economic development as a subject for discussion. Based on a search of the federal lobbyists' registry on Aug. 6, 2025.

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moment, we are largely dependent on Starlink for connectivity. There are other options, but Starlink has fast become one of the most widely used internet providers. Without connection through fibre-optic cables, we're solely dependent on satellite internet, and many cases, it's generations behind when it comes to the ability for us to utilize that. I give that example because we are dependent, sometimes on private corporations or other nation states in order to just live sustainably in the Canadian Arctic, and it's something that I don't think is lost on CSIS [Canadian Security Intelligence Service] or on the minister of defence, but as a country as a whole, I don't think that there's been much attention paid to it. In our homeland, we think about this more often than not, especially since our families are in Greenland, Alaska, and the Chukotka region of Russia, each

with their own political realities and turmoil."

You recently confirmed that you plan to run for re-election as the leader of the ITK. That's next month. You'd previously said you wouldn't be running again. What changed your mind?

"Last fall, when the Trudeau government was in its dying days, it just seemed like on the horizon there was a lot of uncertainty in Ottawa and the leadership within Ottawa. It was quite clear that there was going to be a new prime minister, perhaps a new party running government. And also at the time after the election in the United States, with President [Donald] Trump re-emerging as a volatile actor, especially with the U.S.'s sites on the Circumpolar Arctic, but Canada as well, I thought that I still had a contribution here and a lot of new work on the table that seems to me to be urgent and of national interest. I now am a veteran of 10 years of this

work, and I just had reconsidered about the role that I should or could play in Inuit politics. So I thought a lot about this, but in the end, we're living in a pretty dynamic time, and the continuity that I can bring, I hope, will be appreciated by Inuit and by those who will elect me."

Did Mark Carney's election win play into that decision?

"Yes it did. The ability to work with this prime minister and to know that there are huge opportunities on the table, and that reconciliation is still a key contributor to the thinking around the relationship motivates me. It allows for me to imagine how the work will all transpire and how it will happen. It wouldn't be that I would abandon my post if there was somebody, perhaps, who is less likely to be engaging and supportive. But at the same time, I think all of us, when we see a new opportunity that materializes, sometimes it reinvigorates us to double down and continue to do

the thing that perhaps we were drifting a bit from."

"I've always been passionate about representing Inuit, and that hasn't been the consideration. The consideration really was, how long should any one person be at the helm of the national Inuit organization? So I understand that my asking for another term is a departure from what I previously said. It also means that I will, at the end, have served for 14 years, but I feel like I've always led with a respect for all positions, and that I'll continue to try to do that if re-elected."

What's left on your to-do list at ITK if you are re-elected?

"Well, there's always the piece of unity and creating more unity within the Inuit regions. We are held together by our one society, but we are pushed apart by our different governance and our different relationships through treaties with the Government of Canada and our geography. So there's always a standing issue that, in my mind, of building unity

and keeping unity. And that is, for a population of about 70,000 people, our biggest asset when we come to the table in Ottawa. When ITK deliberates and passes resolutions, and I bring those forward to decision-makers, they can be certain that they're hearing directly from Inuit."

"The other big pieces are ones of social equity and building a more sustainable society and a more prosperous society. Our vision here aligns with the vision of this government for building prosperity. How we do it is, unique, I would say, and one that I would like to be a part of, not only conveying the need for distinctions-based work or specific Indigenous work, but also then the how—trying to figure out programs, policies, initiatives, and opportunities to ensure that Inuit across our homeland not only are able to thrive and do better, but also in turn, that it creates more prosperity for Canadians as well."

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