Arctic Athabaskan Council — Written Evidence (ARC0014)

Introduction Thank you for the invitation to deliver testimony to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Arctic. We would be pleased to respond to questions that arise from our testimony, either in writing or in person.

The Arctic Athabaskan Council (AAC) was formed in 2000 and represents internationally Athabaskan peoples resident in 76 villages totaling approximately 45,000 individuals in Alaska and northern Canada. Please see our web site for further details (www.arcticathabaskancouncil.com). AAC is a Permanent Participant to the eight-nation Arctic Council.

The Permanent Participants While there is considerable solidarity between Indigenous peoples in the circumpolar world and we often work together, we sometimes have different perspectives on issues which reflect our unique cultures, historical experiences, and geographies. Athabaskan peoples are particularly concerned with terrestrial species of wildlife such as barren-ground caribou, rather than marine species, such as whales and seals. All of us, however, are committed to protecting the natural environment upon which we all so closely depend, and ensuring that development in our part of the world accords with principle of sustainability as articulated in the 1987 Report of the World Commission on Sustainable Development. We bring these values to the Arctic Council, the region’s premier body to promote international co-operation in the region.

The UK Arctic Policy We are impressed with the UK Policy toward the Arctic which correctly in our view characterizes climate change as a key driver of economic, social, cultural and environmental change in the region. Moreover, we greatly value the UK commitment to research in the Arctic and its track record as a constructive observer in the Arctic Council. While the UK intervenes infrequently in the Council, its interventions are always to the point and professionally carried out.

Climate Change Four years in the making, the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment published for the Arctic Council by Cambridge University Press in 2005 is the Arctic Council’s premier report. It projects very significant energy and mineral development and trans-Arctic shipping in the region in coming decades as the Arctic “opens” as a result of sea ice ablation caused by climate change. UK scientists contributed significantly to this assessment, as did scientists from Germany, France the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe.

In the early stage of this assessment, Permanent Participants approached the Polar section of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) for assistance in getting Dr. Mark Nuttall, then at the University of Aberdeen, involved in the assessment on behalf of Arctic Indigenous peoples. This is indeed what happened, and provides a compelling example of how the UK can be helpful in Arctic matters. We meet in the Arctic Council—a “high level forum”. In this vein, it is worth recalling that in 2002 the UK and the Netherlands jointly organized a highly successful
two-day Arctic Council related meeting at Wilton Park to discuss Arctic policy and the evolution of the Arctic Council. Here is an example of “you” convening “us

The Arctic: the World’s Barometer In the ACIA projections lies an important lesson. Key drivers of change in the Arctic are the result not of actions in the region, but actions and decisions outside it. Emissions in tropical and temperate lands of heavy metals, including mercury, persistent organic pollutants such as insecticides, by-products of industrial burning processes, black carbon from inefficient diesel engines and, of course, greenhouse gases, eventually have a direct and accelerating impact in the circumpolar world.

In 2003 the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) adopted a resolution that effectively characterizes the Arctic as the world’s barometer of environmental change, and urged states worldwide to look north and to heed the barometer’s reading. Of course, we see ourselves as the mercury in the barometer. This metaphor is accurate as well as compelling, and might usefully inform your report and recommendations to the Government of the UK.

A key challenge facing northerners and all who profess to have interests in the region, such as the UK, is to bring Arctic perspectives to bear on international and global decision-making. This won’t be easy but we have done it successfully in the past. The 2001 Stockholm global Convention on POPs singles out the Arctic and Indigenous communities and characterizes the issue as one of human health and culture as well as environment. European observer states to the Arctic Council were helpful and constructive in supporting language to this effect, eventually included in the Convention’s third preambular clause. In 2005 the eight Arctic states and five European observer states to the Arctic Council issued a joint statement at the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change that occurred in Montreal. With the support of the Permanent Participants, the statement addressed the ravages of climate change in the Arctic and the importance globally of what was taking place in our region. ”I Michael Meacher, when UK Minister of State for the Environment, visited the Canadian Arctic in 2002 with his Canadian counterpart, David Anderson. Mr. Meacher returned to the UK where he spoke and wrote eloquently to the English speaking global audience about the international importance of the Arctic. His efforts were widely appreciated.

The Arctic Council

It is our view that taking Arctic perspectives on transboundary issues to the world is the key challenge facing the Arctic Council as the United States assumes the chair in April 2015. This is why AAC fully supports the application by the European Union to become a full observer to the Arctic Council. As you are well aware, Canada has not supported this application. As a result, an entirely enigmatic clause was inserted in last year’s Kiruna Declaration signed by the Arctic states that allows the EU to attend meetings but, quixotically, denies formal observer status. It is our hope and expectation that the UK, the world’s most northerly non-Arctic state, will press
the EU to reflect Arctic circumstances in international negotiations that address emissions that harm the Arctic.

The Arctic Council: the 20th Anniversary

The Arctic Council celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2016. The Arctic Policy of the United States opens the possibility of a Heads of Government meeting of the Council to mark this occasion. This provides an opportunity to seriously look at what the Council has accomplished and what it should seek to accomplish in coming years and, more broadly, how Arctic perspectives can and should inform global decision-making. Such an occasion can take us out of the constraining politics of two-year rotating chairmanships established through the 1996 Ottawa Declaration that set up the Arctic Council. It would be most helpful if the UK and other observer states were to support such an initiative and signal their willingness to participate in it.

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