Saimaqatigiingniq means “when past opponents get back together, meet in the middle, and are at peace.” For almost a decade, the Qikiqtani Inuit Association (QIA) and the Qikiqtani Truth Commission (QTC) have been working to facilitate healing for Inuit about the past relationship with government and its agencies. The QTC was created in response to a desire on the part of QIA’s members (its board of directors, Elders and beneficiaries) to understand and analyze their common experiences in their interactions with the federal government, beginning in the post-war period. Beneficiaries have asked, and QIA agreed, that the Government of Canada has a responsibility to acknowledge that its policies, laws, and actions contributed to the confusion, pain, and suffering of Inuit and that the consequences have been felt by subsequent generations. The most recent results of this important and on-going work by the QIA have been made available online as drafts for public education and use.¹

For many years Inuit Elders spoke of hurt and anger at the loss of their qimmiit (sled dogs) at the hands of authorities, as well as the immediate and lingering impacts of events related to families moving into permanent settlements during the post-war period and into the 1970s. While history shows that many government representatives, including RCMP, undertook their duties with deep regard for Inuit, evidence of the unlawful killing of qimmiit, the withholding of social benefits, and intimidation tactics used to bring Inuit into settlements, demonstrates that authorities acted without regard for the law or the impact that actions would have on Inuit. The lack of respect for Inuit knowledge, culture, and economic conditions reflected unwise demands and expectations of politicians, the general public, and bureaucrats about the extent to which Inuit should be forced to conform quickly to new economic, cultural, and social practices brought from the South. Some examples include: education programs, designed for children more likely to live and work in urban and industrial Canada; housing programs that were unaffordable for people without long-term employment; health services that ignored language differences and existing knowledge; and families threatened with losing family allowances if their children did not attend full-time schooling. As many Inuit and other researchers have shown, the federal government also experimented with and changed programs regularly. Language and cultural barriers made it very difficult for Inuit to understand and take advantage of some of the services that might have been of benefit to them before the programs were changed or taken away. Not surprisingly, families were skeptical about government promises and took steps to resist intrusions in their lives. The changes came so rapidly and with so little consultation that it should not be surprising that the benefits to Inuit, especially in the areas of health care and eventually education, were generally only appreciated after much time had passed.

The impacts of historic events, such as the killing of qimmiit, the socio-economic realities of settlement life, inadequate housing, and poor nutrition have been felt across generations. Levi Evic told QTC how his family was worse off after moving into Pangnirtung and having to hunt on foot because they lost their qimmiit:

Looking back today, that has affected me a lot, and also to my parents. When they moved us there were changes in us, even in myself, I changed…

Our hunting practices were disrupted, looking for food by our fathers, they even lost some of that and experienced hunger when we were living in this community, whereas in the camps we never experienced hunger…

The written and oral records, taken together, suggest that the police might have killed more qimmiit than necessary and might have over-reacted when the brought almost everyone of the land. People who remained did not starve, and those who were evacuated were almost entirely cut off from country food and were hungrier, colder and more demoralized than those who stayed behind in their qarmat.

The decision to listen to and absorb these stories was made several years ago. Recognizing common themes in the stories told by Qikiqtalungmiut² about this period, QIA began to conduct interviews with Elders in 2004. In 2005, with the help of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI) and Makivik Corporation in Northern Quebec, QIA approached the Government of Canada to request an inquiry into
the effects of past government decisions and policies on, and affecting, Inuit in the Eastern Arctic. In particular, these organizations called for an independent inquiry into the loss of sled dogs in Canada’s Eastern Arctic.

The federal government chose not act on this request, and instead instructed the RCMP to investigate the matter itself, culminating in a 2006 report entitled, *The RCMP and the Inuit Sled Dogs.* QIA was not satisfied with the methodology or analysis in the RCMP report. The RCMP had been dismissive of Inuit memory and experience. In addition, the report failed to gain the trust and cooperation of Inuit, thereby missing the opportunity to develop a broad understanding of the impacts of losing dogs. Finally, the report did not meet professional standards with respect to the collection and identification of sources. In short, the RCMP seemed to be focused on determining whether any laws had been broken, rather than on trying to understand the complex relationship between Inuit and sled dogs, or Inuit and government authorities, and the impact that changes to these relationships would have on Inuit families and communities.

As a result, QIA independently established and funded the Qikiqtani Truth Commission. The overarching goals of the Commission were to give Inuit the opportunity to speak of their experiences, to deliver a more balanced and inclusive history of the effects of government policies on Inuit during the QTC period, 1950 to 1975, and to determine what reconciliation between Inuit and government (both at the federal and territorial levels) might look like.

To achieve these goals, the QTC recorded the history of Inuit experiences during the important period of transition into permanent settlements in Qikiqtani region using a wide range of reliable sources, including existing archival records, scholarly works, and most importantly, testimonies from the people who lived through the period. In total, the Commission interviewed 300 witnesses in their own languages in the spirit of listening and gaining understanding of peoples’ experience at the same time as professional historians conducted extensive archival research using thousands of documents. QTC visited all 13 Qikiqtani communities and Ottawa at least twice: first to collect testimonies and second to reflect on what the Commissioner had learned and to draft recommendations. The findings and recommendations included in the final report of the Commission were not the result of detached research by outside ‘experts’, but reflect what was heard from witnesses who testified.

The QTC is a rare example of a comprehensive social justice inquiry designed and led by an Aboriginal organization in Canada. The approach of the Commission was one of deep respect; Qikiqtani Inuit who testified were given the space and time to speak in an open and respectful environment about the issues that mattered to them. The Commission was different from a forensic truth commission or an academic study in that it was established by Inuit and driven by their interests into understanding the past and its links to the present, rather than reflecting questions and issues of interest to outside researchers and/or government officials.

The Commission’s 2010 final report and the recently released historical studies emanating from QTC’s work help explain why government decisions were imposed on Inuit, and help to illustrate the contradictions inherent in many of the government policies at the time. The Commission’s work has also helped to shed more light on the impacts of these poorly conceived, designed, and implemented programs on individuals and families.

In October 2010, the QTC presented its final report and recommendations to QIA. In late 2011, QIA developed an implementation plan, which identified priorities among the recommendation. The implementation plan influences QIA’s current social policy work. At the same time, QIA began preparing a complete set of QTC reports to be made available to the public. These reports include: histories of the 13 Qikiqtani communities; historical reports about specific policy areas including housing, education, qimmiit, economic development, mobility, policing, and healthcare; and special reports about the “official mind” of the bureaucracy (the beliefs, values, goals, knowledge and fears shared by officials) and a response to the RCMP’s 2006 report on the killing of *qimmiit* in the territories and Northern Quebec.

With the help of professional historians, a team of community reviewers, and translators, a set of 22 different reports that weave together witness testimonies with thousands of archival and secondary source documents were officially made public during QIA’s Annual General Meeting in Iqaluit in October 2013. Soon these reports will be published, in English and Inuktitut, as a two-volume set both in print and online to anyone who wishes to read and learn from them. QIA has also produced a four-part DVD depicting the work of the Commission, summarizing its key findings, and outlining the recommendations of the final report. The DVD is also available in English and Inuktitut.

QIA is proud to share this great accomplishment with beneficiaries and the public and to continue the work of implementing the Commission’s
recommendations. Because many of the recommendations are directed toward different levels of government, QIA has met with organizations, departments, and agencies that have a part to play in the implementation of the QTC recommendations. These organizations have been invited to join a new inter-agency working group, which will be responsible for measuring progress on implementation of the two dozen recommendations put forth by the Commission in 2010.

QIA recognizes that although many of the programs and policies examined by the QTC originated in the federal government or were assigned by the federal government to the Government of the Northwest Territories, the Government of Nunavut now must play a vital role in the implementation of the Commission’s recommendations if they are to be successful.

Some progress has been made on several of the Commission’s recommendations as a result of the work of QIA and other stakeholders, including ITK, NTI and the Governments of Canada and Nunavut. For example, significant progress has been made by the AANDC-led Nanilavut [meaning ‘let’s find them’] working group on the recommendation regarding locating and visiting burial sites of family members who were sent south for medical treatment. However, some recommendations are in need of refinement. One of the first tasks of the working group will be to update the recommendations strategy, which will involve developing consensus within the above-mentioned working group on priority recommendations, and identifying benchmarks to measure progress and success of implementation.

The release of the complete set of QTC reports is a milestone to be celebrated. It is expected that this body of work will serve as a springboard for more research with Inuit and allies about Canada’s Eastern Arctic, relationships between Aboriginal peoples and government, and other fields of research. Most importantly, for Qikiqtani Inuit and the association that represents them, this work represents another necessary step in the long process of understanding and healing the relationship between Inuit and government, with the goal of eventually achieving samaqatigiingniiq.

Bethany Scott is the Policy Analyst at QIA and manages the ongoing QTC work. David Joanasie is the Media Advisor at QIA. Julie Harris (Contentworks Inc.) directed the research and writing for the QTC and the QIA historical reports.

Endnotes
1 The two QTC books, which include the complete set of reports and the 2010 final report, are available on the QIA website, www.qia.ca. Also note that the QTC’s research work was initially managed by the Commission’s Executive Director, Madeleine Redfern, on behalf of Commissioner James Igloliorte. The senior historians on the project were Julie Harris and Philip Goldring, who also led the writing of the reports for the QIA based on the research and testimonies collected for the QTC.
2 People who live in the Qikiqtaaluk region.
3 The unpublished internal report (2006) documenting the RCMP’s work on the killing of sled dogs is titled The RCMP and the Inuit Sled Dogs (Nanavut and Northern Quebec: 1950–1970). A copy was provided to the QTC by the RCMP as a courtesy. A very brief version titled Final Report: RCMP Review of Allegations Concerning Inuit Sled Dogs is available online at: www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/pubs/ccaps-spcca/sd-cd-

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People who live in the Qikiqtaaluk region.

Cover of the Qikiqtani Truth Commission Community Histories 1950-1975. Also available in English.