

Labrador Indians make land claim

Last November the Indians of Labrador presented their land claim to the federal government. To acquaint readers of *Atlantic Issues* with the background to this claim, Adrian Tanner of Memorial University has written a two-part series dealing with the social, political, and economic situation of the Labrador Indians. In this first installment Tanner discusses the impact of industrial development and government policies on the Indians' traditional lifestyle.

by Adrian Tanner

The Indians of Labrador, in a land claim statement presented in Ottawa by Land Claims Director Bart Jack in late November, have demanded their own nation within Canada. The Indians have taken this radical stand after centuries of European colonization of their land. This period has been marked by the neglect of Labrador in general, and by a policy of the denial of aboriginal rights on the part of the Newfoundland government.

The statement of claim implicitly rejects the "James Bay" type of agreement; that is one where the Indians consent to the final extinguishment of their aboriginal title in exchange for cash, limited land grants and a degree of local political control. Moreover, the statement insists that the Newfoundland government should have no part in any negotiations connected with the claim.

The Labrador Indians are not the first native group to ask for their own political jurisdiction within Canada. (Others include the Dene and the Inuit of the Northwest Territories.) But what is surprising is that the claim comes from a relatively small group which only a few years ago appeared to have been resigned to allowing its way of life to be pushed aside, while in the name of development their land was being given away by Newfoundland to the industrial giants.

Had to beg favours

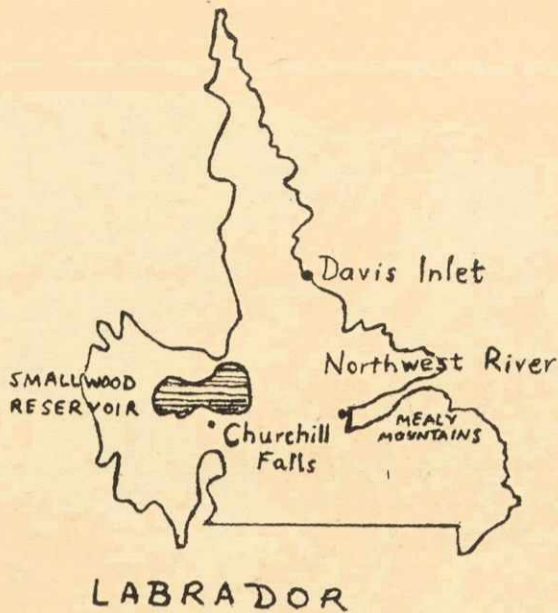
The industrialization of the Labrador interior has provided few benefits as yet for the Indians. Take, for example, the case of the Churchill Falls Labrador Corporation, a former subsidiary of BRINCO now owned by the Newfoundland Government. They hydro-electric project created a huge reservoir covering Indian hunting land. The occupants were not consulted, nor even warned of the time when the flooding would begin. Both the company and the government

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went ahead as if the Indians did not exist. As a consequence the Indians lost thousands of dollars in hunting and trapping equipment, which, following the traditional pattern, was left in the woods when the trappers came out for the summer.

Those that had their property flooded are bitter, but they see no way to communicate their anger to the people responsible. Not, that is, until the land claim. This kind of high-handed behaviour by the whites has, over the years, come to be expected.

After construction was finished the Indians asked the site manager, a highly educated Indian



from Ontario, to let them have seven house trailers which had been used by the company to accommodate workers in some of the construction camps. The trailers were to be used by the Indians to house a commercial fishery in the reservoir, with government financial backing. The company was enthusiastic at first, but later dragged its heels. It apparently had second thoughts about the legal implications of letting the Indians back on land to which it had been given title by the government. They finally sent the Indians an extremely complex nine-page legal document setting out the terms of sale of the trailers and the lease of land. But it required a lawyer to understand it, and long negotiations before it could have been signed.

At the same time, an advance party of Indians camped at the reservoir making preparations began to find themselves no longer welcome in the nearby company town of Churchill Falls. Plans for the fishery were finally ditched when the fish were found to be contaminated with mercury, but by then it was clear that the company no longer wanted the scheme.

This kind of incident helps explain why in the past Indians were forced into a situation of dependence when faced with powerful white institutions or individuals. They had to watch passively while the whites did as they liked, hoping at best for a few handouts. Because the land claim adopts the opposite attitude some will suspect that the claim has been inspired by political strategies adopted by other native groups elsewhere. There are indeed references in the claim to the idea of a "Fourth World" (colonized aboriginal minorities within nation states) of George Manuel. But a recognition of the present sentiment of Indian people in Labrador, and their unique background, is more important for understanding this document than are its resemblances to other recent land claims in Canada.

Fur Hunters

The Indians of Labrador are related, by language, culture and kinship ties, to various Indian groups in Quebec, and together they are part of the widespread Cree language group. The Quebec and Labrador groups are usually called either Montagnais or Naskapi, but their own

name for themselves is "Innu" (not to be confused with Inuit, which is what the Eskimos call themselves). The Innu recognize sub-divisions among themselves, based on the territory that the local group occupies. The Labrador Innu are represented politically by the federally-funded Naskapi Montagnais Innu Association. Formed around 1975, it has engaged in activities like running a trapping programme and a sawmill, and administering a housing program. The Innu live in two villages in Labrador: Northwest River, near Goose Bay, and Davis Inlet on the Atlantic coast of northern Labrador. Each village has a chief and council.

Until recently the Innu were migratory hunters who had been involved in the fur trade since the 1700's. They made the annual journey to one of the trading posts, which by the end of the 19th Century were all located at the coast. The Indians would return to the bush after a short stay, and were thus not around enough to have much to do with the white settlers, who until recently stayed primarily near the coast.

From about 1960 the traditional lifestyle of the Indians was disrupted by factors beyond their control. Most families had to give up the migratory way of life and settle permanently in one of the villages. Some now use the village as a base from which to continue their hunting and trapping, but in doing so they face many difficulties.

The events which caused the Indians to settle on the coast were never part of a stated govern-

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ment policy. The only clear policy proposal regarding Indians during the Smallwood years came from an employee of the Department of Social Services, May Budgell. He had hoped that the government, by making conditions more secure for the Indians, would encourage them to continue and upgrade their hunting and trapping activities in the interior.

Instead of following this advice the government without consulting the Indians built houses, schools, and set up welfare and health facilities, but available only at the coast. The major element in this process was the introduction of compulsory schooling, without taking into account the need of parents to go inland. Thus the flooding of the Smallwood Reservoir at Churchill Falls was just the last straw. Without trapping, with no game meat easily available, with few unskilled jobs, the villages became welfare communities. The whites looked on with disapproval as the communities lost their morale.

Harassed by game laws

Another change that the Indians were up against in their struggle to maintain their way of life was the introduction of strict game laws in Labrador. In other parts of the Canadian north there is either an explicit or an implicit recognition that bona fide trappers have the need to kill

continued on page 5

