

Berger Report-presents natives stance

By PETER ARCHIBALD

The release of the first part of the Berger report, "Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland" has collected a respectable if not magnitudinous amount of favourable comments.

The successful debut is credited in a large part to the ability of the report to truly present the situation of the Northern natives stance on themselves. A view of themselves as a people and nation different than the "colonizers", (i.e. us), is well defined. Their basic demands: for the right "to be in charge of our lives and our future."

The Northern natives of the MacKenzie Valley, particularly the Dene who are the most politically conscious, have given a true focus of their problems in Berger's report: A report with intellectual credentials that has not been in evidence for almost forty years.

Subsequently, Berger's central recommendation carries a great deal of drag in Southern Canada:

"In my opinion, a period of ten years will be required in the Mackenzie Valley and Western Arctic to settle native claims, and to establish the new institutions and programs that a settlement would entail. No pipeline should be built until these things have been achieved." [Berger: pp. xxv]

The Native people had substantial control over the procedure and the bearing of the inquiry, "which did not seek to impose any preconceived notion of how the hearing should be conducted."

This gave the inquiry a purely native orientation, allowing their ideas to surface loud and clear to the Southern populus of Canada.

Clearly, the native people demand recognition of their most basic rights, both in principle and working practice, before any northern development should proceed. As Berger noted:

"The native peoples do not believe that any recommendations this Inquiry may make for the pipeline project will be carried out, even if the government finds them acceptable and even if industry says they are acceptable, unless they are in a position to persist upon them. And they will be in that position only if their claims are settled, if their rights to their land are entrenched, and if institutions are established that enable them to enforce the recommendations". [Berger: pp. 192]

With nearly as much significance is the directness with which the demand was presented to Justice Berger. In Fort MacPherson, July of 1975, Philip Blake told Berger:

"If your nation becomes so violent that it would tear up our land, destroy our society and our future and occupy our homeland by trying to impose this pipeline against our will, then we will have no choice but to react with violence. I hope we do not have to do that, for it is not the way we would choose."

There is somehow a very large tinge of justification in this when we take a step back:

"However, if we are forced to blow up the pipeline, I hope you will not only look on the violence of Indian action, but also on the violence of your own nation which would force us to take such a course. We will never initiate violence but, if your nation threatens by its own violent action to destroy our nation, you will have given us no choice." [O'Malley: pp. 51]

Northern "Frontier, northern

homeland" seems appropriate for the two opposite factions and interests that are battling in the north. Our frontier is their homeland.

Hopefully the report will be forceful in swaying the unknowing indifference that our impressions of northern natives prefer to take.

Unfortunately, we know too well that the persuasiveness of the report will lessen when the concerns of those who privately control a significant portion of the Canadian economy are brought to bear on the pipeline matter.

It is an illusion that the Canadian people can have a hand in shaping the destiny of our country through our present 'democratic' political structures. As long as U.S. owned corporations have such a strong influence in Canadian manufacturing, petroleum and natural gas, and mining and smelting sectors of the economy, then the Canadian

people will not have the control over their destiny.

The Dene's struggle reflects ours, and a new vigour has been instilled in their ambitions for an identity as a people.

The truth of the matter is those people who say that this inquiry is our last hope are accepting the fact that the Dene have been colonized and they believe that only the colonizers can act and that the hopes of the Dene are in those same people who are colonizers. That is not true: that can never be true of any oppressed people. It is only we the Dene that can guarantee our future." [O'Malley: pp. 264]

These words are those of George Erasmus, the president of the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories.

If even uttered, in a different context, by a politician in our society, we might have finally gained a leader we could all admire.



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