

## THE INDIAN PROBLEM

*Pull your minds out of Biafra, Vietnam and Chicago, Canadians. Focus on Desmarais, Moose Factory, or any area of settlement by the native peoples of Canada.*

*There is an Indian problem in your country that has been allowed to grow for over a century. The white society had some responsibility for creating this problem. It is generally agreed that it has the same responsibility for helping to solve it.*

*This article defines the problem.*

# The Indian

Our "wicked" neighbour to the south cannot boast the only "Invisible Man." The Indian continues to exist in the shadow line of society. "Our problems are so many, so varied, so intense, that we hardly know where to begin," stated the Indians of the Kenora area to the Kenora Town Council, Nov. 1965.

How? Why? we ask. So do they, and they are asking more loudly these days.

They insist constantly that non-Indian ignorance of Indian culture is an obstacle to action for future justice. The charge is valid. Remember your "education" about Indians? An investigation into what Canadian students are taught about Indians by the Port Credit University Women's Club revealed either a complete lack of attention to the fact that Indians had social and political organization, religions, values, ethics, and aesthetics, or else over-all impression that Indians

Well he did get around that bend, and says Currie, it resulted in "100 years of misdirection, misguidance, mishandling, and lousy ineptitude."

Contact with the white civilization caused complete disorganization and near-complete disintegration of Indian cultural organization, creating an enduring social problem almost impossible to correct.

A long evolution, in which psychological and historical factors played the major role, shaped for the Indian a life of partial responsibility in a group where the cares of each were shared by all. They did not accept real communism, but were definitely non-competitive. The average Indian household was neither self-sufficient nor self-supporting. Indian values have not customarily included the amassing of valuables for private benefit. Economics as we know it did not exist.

The ultimate political unit was the tribe and the ultimate social

unit was the family. There were no written laws, merely rules handed down by word of mouth. Public disapproval was a strong deterrent from crime.

The League of the Iroquois had an elaborate clan system, an administrative council, and a treasury.

It was a virile culture, but with the influx of white settlers, came a great upheaval in social organization, and periods of constant unrest initiated by the fur trade.

The economy broke down. No longer was each tribe a self-contained and self-supporting unit — instead it became emeshed in an economic system imposed from without. The herds disappeared. The government tried to transform the Indians into agriculturists on the wheat lands, and cattle and horse ranchers on the plateaus.

Lagging far behind in material progress, they seemed unable to

nant new culture.

One attitude still causing difficulty today is that towards land. To the Indian, land is not a commodity for sale. Land is a gift from the "Maker". Conflict arose when white settlers dealt with unauthorized groups or individuals for land concession.

Right now the Indians want back Quebec and British Columbia, which they claim they never signed away.

So the Whites swept a people used to seasonal work and a land base, into a cash economy based on mechanization, mass production, and competition.

The untrained Indian finds work as a labourer only. The unsuccessful attempt to convert them to the protestant ethic only served to stigmatize them with race and poverty.

With the advent of heavy government subsidies, societies were

banded together on reservations and became sedentary and socially enclosed within themselves.

Most reserve Indians are provided with income without work. They live in circumstances where the possibilities for work are so insufficient that the entire group lives in extreme poverty.

A parallel development to this breakdown of the economy was the breakdown of the social order and the systems of law, government and religion, on which it rested. The whole structure of their lives, occupations, housing, diet, clothes, health and educational needs was altered.

Both economic and social conditions had changed. It was the white man, not the supernatural beings of the old-time Indians' world who now controlled many of the necessary and desirable things of

were "savages" and whites helpless and civilized. A very sanctimonious attitude on the subject of reserves results in such statements as the Indians were starving so then the white man decided to give the Indians separate pieces of land and money. The study remarks grimly, "There is no explanation of how the white man had come to possess the land, and to have the right to give it away." The textbook authors are "most guilty of the sin of omission."

Walter Currie, Assistant Superintendent of Ontario schools, Curriculum Board, says: "In the school nobody teaches us why we have a right to be proud of being Indians. Textbooks refer to us as savages and there is nothing that teaches an Indian youngster that he comes from a proud race. He isn't told that without the Indian, the white explorer wouldn't have been able to get around the next bend in the river."

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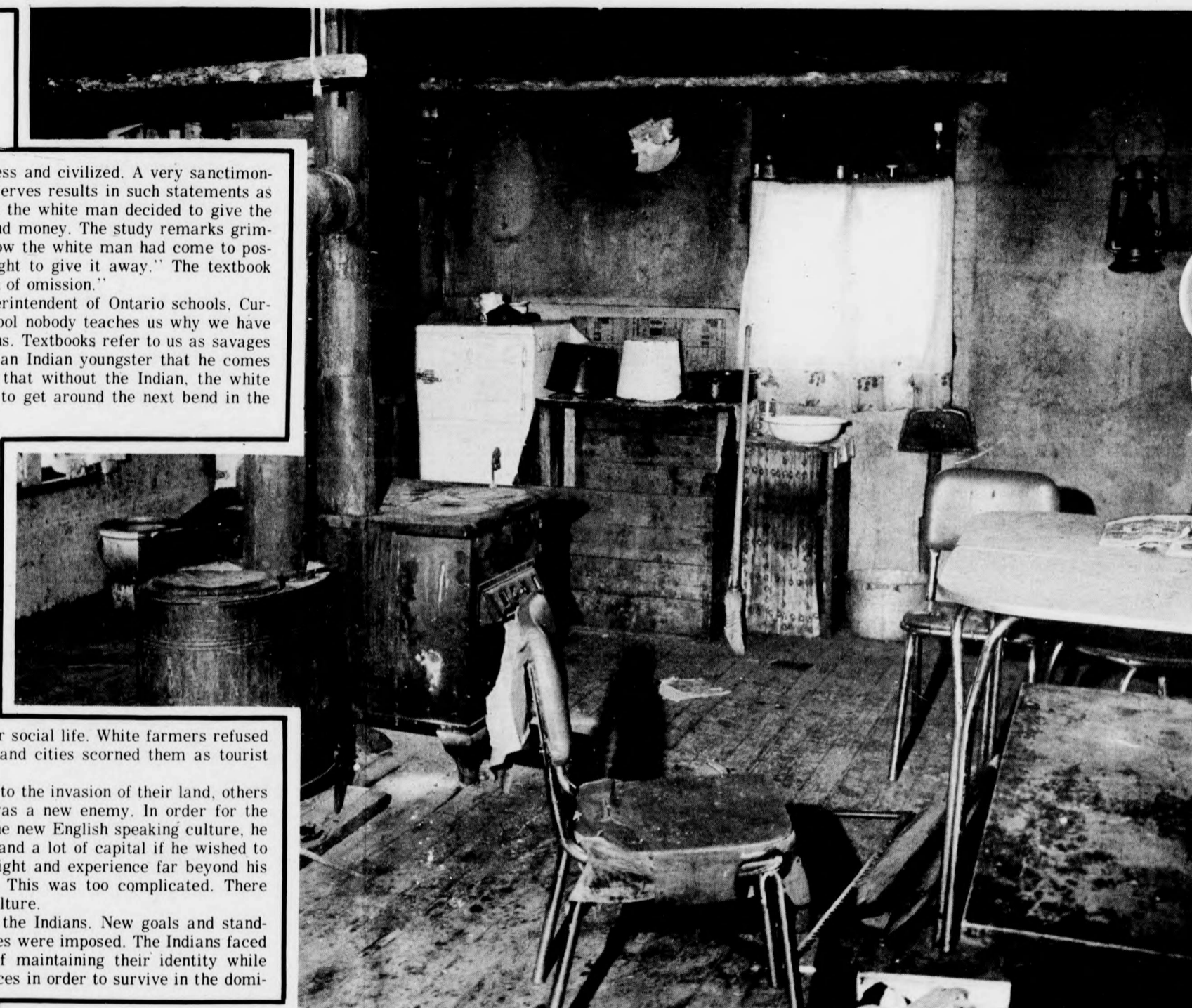
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life. The Indian who followed in his forefathers' footsteps seriously handicapped himself in the competition with his fellow tribesmen who imitated the dress and customs of the new rulers, and for self-interest embraced Christianity.

The unity that was necessary for political action under the whites was contrary to their traditional method of acting in small groups, and when unity was imposed, with the help of puppet chiefs, authority was lost and community spirit and tribal life evaporated. Although the Indian was a politician in his own society, skilled in the arts of electioneering and statesmanship in the councils, when he came in contact with the whites his power was lost, and he became a ward of the government.

But the biggest obstacle to successful integration of the Indian



This house on the Stony Indian Reserve at Morley, Alberta, is typical of the old homes being abandoned by the Indians as new housing projects go forward on the reserves.

photo by Department of Citizenship and Immigration

into white society, has been his very personality structure. The Indian lived in communities where it was not customary to look forward to the future life with concern. Their inclinations and faculties were solely directed to the enjoyment of the present day. Therefore, fundamental personality changes would have to be effected before they could take over white personality traits and meet the protestant ethical demands of frugality, punctuality, and systematic neatness; with a value-attitude system that rewards money-grubbing, with a culture that runs by the clock, is measured by the dollar and is laid out by surveying instruments.

The Indian learned the white values and motivations, but failed to incorporate them into his culture. Our society destroyed and made impractical his old culture, made it impossible to turn back, but did not replace it with anything workable for the Indian.

Indian institutions were not developed to fit white institutions, and no attempt was made to encourage Indian thinking and Indian choices. Everyone looked at the Indian and his problems from the one-sided standpoint that he must be made to adapt to white culture.

The proud and prestige-conscious Indian had no means to acquire wealth and merit. A deep sense of fatalism grew.

### LOW MAN ON THE TOTEM POLE

The Canadian Indian today has one of the lowest standards of living in the world, in a country which has one of the highest.

Statistics from the Dept. of Indian Affairs show that almost half Canada's native population is on welfare, compared with 3.5% of the general public.

How do these people live on their reserves? 60% of the homes are 3 rooms or less; 90% are without indoor plumbing, 85% are without

running water; 50% have no electricity, 47% of the Indian families earn less than \$1000 per year, 25% earn less than \$2000. Yet sociologists say \$3,000 for a man, his wife, and 2 children is the "poverty line." Most Indian families have more than 2 children.

"Reservation communities are at the bottom of the economic totem pole," says Walter Currie. The people on these reservations have a culture, but they live under a culture of poverty. Join this poverty to isolation, add a substandard quality of education, subtract economic growth, bracket with 100 years of paternalism and you have a math problem too tough for the Indian alone to answer. The people of Canada, through their governments, must find a solution."

Currie holds "legislated discrimination" "the major cause of this shameful mess." This legislated discrimination is the hotly disputed Canadian Indian Act.

This legislation defines a people. "Am I an Indian?" ask many. There are so many kinds it is sometimes hard to know. There are Treaty Indians — those whose ancestors signed a treaty with the crown or the government of Canada. Registered Indians did not, but signed away their land. Non-registered are those who just sat tight, and enfranchised Indians are those who chose to give up their Indian status and leave the world of the reserve to go out and try to make a living in white society. Then there are the Metis.

Legally, an "Indian" is a "person who pursuant to this act is registered as an Indian". If you fit this definition your name is entered on the roll in Ottawa and you even get a number. If your mother and father were Indians and you do not fit the definition — too bad — you are not an Indian.

Sound like nonsense? It gets worse. If an Indian girl marries a non-Indian she can never return to the reserve, loses all her rights as a member of the band, and legally ceases to be an Indian. Yet, if an Indian man marries a non-Indian girl, that girl becomes an Indian — complete with number.

This act was unilaterally passed in 1951. The Indian people were not asked if they approved it or not. In 1951 the Treaty Indian of Canada could not vote in federal elections. This right of a Canadian citizen was not given to them until 1960. Treaty Indians of Alberta could not vote in provincial elections until 1965, although Mr. Gladstone, a Blood Indian from a reserve in Southern Alberta was made a Senator in 1958.

Under the Indian act, the Minister of Indian Affairs is the Great White Father in all affairs. The Indian does not own reserve land — the band council administers it but cannot sell or buy it without permission. Reserve land can be expropriated at any time. Equal rights and opportunities for free enterprise such as the sale of reserve grown crops, exist only with consent of the Minister. Even into the grave the Dept. of Indian Affairs runs the life of the Indian. A will can be declared void in whole or in part.

The act is considered by many to be "an insult and a suppression." Questions of Indian status are one sore spot. The fact that this one act is meant to govern 2060 reserves all over Canada is another.

It has existed uncorrected for a long time. Every now and then hopes are raised by headlines such as that which appeared in the Globe and Mail of February 20, 1967, "Laing Announces overhaul of Indian Act". It made the Globe, but never the House agenda. Said Dr. Wilson Head, Director of Toronto Social Planning Council, "So many, doing so much, and so little happening."

He compared their lot to that of the US Negro, saying they were enclosed in physical and psychological ghettos. There is a tremendous amount of buck-passing by the federal and provincial governments.

Head predicted possible blow-ups and violence here, saying "the winds of freedom are blowing among oppressed, dispossessed, the poor and the manipulated." The public sees and forgets, but "they will no longer be ignored."

The days when a theater in Chatham can reserve a section for coloureds only have had to go.

### FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

Well, a new headline appeared in the October 2 edition of the Toronto Daily Star, "Indian Act Revisions in Spring: Chretien". I guess somebody gave him a copy of the plea for government action by the Earl of Elgin, Governor-General of Upper Canada in 1854. This is proof that the neglect of the native people is not a result of ignorance of their plight.

The revisions will be based partly on the findings of Robert Andras, Minister without Portfolio. He attended the Sept. 27-29 Conference of the Indian and Eskimo Affairs Association held at the Lord Simcoe Hotel in Toronto.

Canada's failure to honor its treaties, provincial reluctance to concede its responsibilities to the Indians and inequality before the law were key issues.

These are not merely moral claims calling for charitable treatment, said Kenneth Lysek, Professor of Law at the University of British Columbia, but legal rights, which must be acknowledged so that finally the Indian people may be recognized in their own country.

But the Indian people want to be responsible for their own destinies from now on. They want to make their own choices, follow their own ideas, and reclaim as much authority from the Indian Affairs Branch as possible, asserted Chief Walter Dieter of Saskatchewan.

The trouble is that many Indians on remote reserves do not even know what the Indian act is. Further misunderstandings arise when it

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**low man on the totem pole** story by Eleanor Copeland