

# Indian women push for equal rights

The fight for women's rights has now been joined by Alberta Indians. The present Indian Act does not just shaft the Indian population in general but the female Indian specifically. The Act revokes the treaty status of an Indian woman "... who marries a person who is not an Indian...". Hence, an Indian woman marrying a white ceases legally, to be an Indian. Ironically, if the Indian woman just lived "comman law" with a white, she would retain her Indian status. More ironic yet, if a white woman marries an Indian, she "becomes an Indian" entitled to any treaty rights possessed by her husband's band. It is the Indian woman, legally married to a white, who becomes discriminated against. How about this for racism tinged with sexism?

Why should Indian women worry about retaining their treaty status? It is well known that Jean Chretien of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development hasn't missed a chance. Keep "the natives in their place". Better yet, let them "integrate" and save the Canadian taxpayer millions of dollars (mainly paid,

anyway, to bureaucrats in the Department).

The fact is the Indian woman want to maintain contact with their people on the reserves. It is a question of maintaining their Indian identity, a precious commodity now that so many aspects of the White culture are proving disastrous-pollution, inflation, unemployment and all the rest. They also want their children to receive the benefits of their Indian heritage. For, the Indian Act denies the children any hereditary rights possessed by their mother's band. In most cases these rights aren't much, but in some cases they could amount to something. Witness Hobbema for example. It's the culture factor that is the most precious commodity lost by Indian women and their children forced to assimilate into white society. Indian women and their children who are disenfranchised also lose the free health and education that is provided by the federal government to treaty Indians.

The section of the Indian Act resented by Indian women has already been fought in the courts by Mrs. Jeanette Lavell who maintained that the section

of the Act contravened the Human Rights Act. Mrs. Lavell, an Ojibwa Indian, won her case in a federal Court of Appeal but now has to await a decision by the Supreme Court of Canada. The 28-year old Ojibwa from the Wilwemicong Band had her treaty status revoked after she married a white. She'll get back her lost status if the Supreme Court upholds the decision of the Appeal Court.

In Edmonton, Indian Women in Mrs. Lavell's position have organized themselves into an Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of Indian Women. This group has already prepared a brief that was sent to Justice Minister John Turner and Indian Affairs Minister Jean Chretien. The women are now circulating a petition supporting the stand of Raymond Rock, M.P. in the House of Commons who has introduced a private member's bill to have the Indian Act amended. The Lachine parliamentarian wants, specifically, the revoking of those sections of the Indian Act discriminating against women. This amendment would in effect, allow Indian women married to whites to retain their hereditary rights.

Mrs. Philomene Ross, co-ordinator of the petition

campaign said that she feels that the best place to begin to gather signatures would be the reserves but that some women do not agree because they are afraid to return to the reserves where they have been persecuted for marrying whites.

Mrs. Ross said that she was not told when she married that she was signing away her treaty rights. She had to fight for five years for the enfranchisement of her oldest son; it was just last year that he regained his complete education rights.

The Edmonton committee itself is headed by Mrs. Nellie Carlson. She and her associates plan to keep pushing for equal rights for Indian women, and if Mrs. Lavell loses her case on the Supreme Court they will be taking each of their own cases into court.

When asked if granting treaty status to Indians married to white men might not weaken the economic position of Indians now on reserves, Mrs. Carlson replied that the many thousands of Indians now denied their treaty claims would add to the political strength of the Indian electorate. The larger number of status Indians would have a better chance of gaining a fuller recognition of their treaty claims by the federal government. Jean

Chretien might try to use the larger number of status Indian as a lever to promote integration schemes but would be faced with a larger and more militant Indian constituency which would tend to thwart his attempts.

Mrs. Ross said "It's the women without husbands who suffer the most and whom we are really concerned about. They don't really belong anywhere. The Indians do not recognize them nor are they wholly accepted by white society"

The Ad Hoc Committee is preparing a brief which outlines its case to the public and Canadian government. Mrs. Carlson is looking for assistance in the preparation of this brief. Any U of A students who are interested in helping out in doing research for the brief can phone her at 479817. This research will be of an anthropological, historical and legal nature.

By Bill Askin  
Department of history

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Date: January 20, 1972  
Time: 12:30 p.m.  
Place: Room 142 SUB

\*former volunteers will be on hand for talks

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