

# A PEOPLE IN PERIL

## Northern development and paternalistic governments threaten the Dene nation with cultural extinction

by John Morton  
Reprinted from the Arthur  
by Canadian University Press

Contrary to popular belief, the most interesting political scene in Canada is not that of two Montreal lawyers vying for the country's leadership. In Canada's north, a far more basic struggle is occurring.

Few people are familiar with the concept of fourth world nations. The term describes an ethnic entity surrounded by the geo-political boundaries of one or more sovereign states. Canada contains several examples of fourth world nations, with the two most active and vibrant in the Northwest Territories. The two indigenous groups striving for self-determination there are the Inuit, traditionally residing north of the tree-line, and the Dene, occupying lands south of that natural boundary.

These two groups are struggling against the paternalistic attitude of white technocratic society. This socio-cultural

war, marked by the introduction of small pox and rubella plagues and the conversion to a wage economy, has steadily eroded Dene culture and social values.

And this erosion is accelerating. The problems confronting the Dene people stem from a basic difference in societal structures. The imposed European system of government is hierarchical, with authority resting with those in power. This system, whether

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communist or democratic, is characteristic of cultures that have tamed and regulated their natural environment through technology. In contrast, the Dene people have an anarchistic structure; a system that evolved in an untamed, harsh environment where mutual support and individualism necessarily exist without conflict.



For the Dene people, the loss of traditional values and the imposition of alien values has produced some grim statistics:

- the rate of deaths due to accidents, violence and poisoning among the Dene currently runs between 20 and 30 per cent, more than twice the national rate;
- between 1978 and 1981, total social assistance payments to Inuvik region residents went from \$605,000 to \$1,118,000 while the population remained between 7,300 and 7,500;
- in 1981, the incidence of confirmed cases of gonorrhoea for Dene was 25 times that of the national average;
- in 1982 about 36 per cent of the Inuvik region population were Dene or Metis, but 64 per cent of all sentenced inmates were Dene or Metis.

Attempts to find solutions to social problems has caused the Dene people more harm than good in the last twenty years.

The Canadian government's relationship to the Dene people always lacked understanding. This attitude stems from an inability to distinguish simplicity from ignorance in Dene people, and from the assumption that what is 'good' for southern Canadians is 'good' for all people within Canadian boundaries.

Characteristically, the federal government each year supplies the city of Yellowknife with fireworks to celebrate July 1st. And each year the city protests that fireworks are a waste of money as there isn't any 'night' at that time of year to make the fireworks visible.

To date, federal initiatives have completely missed their mark. For example, the need for educational facilities was met with the creation of boarding schools from which an estimated 90 per cent of Dene students never graduate.

Dene children are taken from the close kinship of their communities and isolated in centralised schools where they are exposed fully to white society, and where they have no access to the community support so important in such high stress situations. They leave as soon as they can, return home, and find they have neither enough southern education for participation in a wage economy, nor enough traditional skills to live off the land.

The subsequent poverty is dealt with through social assistance. A traditionally proud and self-reliant people now find themselves on welfare. Personal value to the community, once measured in active contribution, is gone, and in its place is passive acceptance of foreign values.

Of late there has been some progress in rectifying the problems caused by cultural imperialism. Elected Native

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representatives in the Territorial Assembly have begun the decolonisation of Territorial politics.

Dene chiefs and sub-chiefs may be given a legitimate political voice if an ordinance introduced this fall passes in the Assembly. It would also legitimize representatives from Native political organizations and the Hunters and Trappers Associations.

Elections held in September for the Dene national executive saw the defeat of Herb Norwegian, who some associate with the bureaucratization of that group, in favour of Steve Kakfwi, who favours decentralized and stronger community

input into decision making. These and other developments should help speed present land claims settlements, leading to the eventual partition of the Northwest Territories into two distinct political entities. But if political developments have been promising lately, economic developments have been anything but.

Northern oil exploration and development is receiving massive federal aid, and it's obvious the needs of the Dene people do not rank high on the government's list of priorities. While \$3 million was granted to social and economic programs initiated by the Dene in 1981 and 1983, federal incentives to the petroleum industry operating in the Beaufort Sea during the

same period was almost \$400 million.

The government is also helping step-up oil development through highway construction.

Another example of blatant contradiction is the \$1 million allocated for community alcohol and drug abuse

**Attempts to find solutions to social problems have caused more harm than good.**

programs in 1982. This was \$500,000 less than requested, while the Territorial government's net income from liquor taxation was more than \$8.3 million that year.

The completion of the Mackenzie Highway to Inuvik, expected by 1990, will directly and irrevocably link the isolated Mackenzie Valley communities with southern society. If the future repeats the pattern of the past, the sorry tale of Pond Inlet will be the story of the last traditional Dene communities:

- 1972, Pond Inlet per capita alcohol consumption is 2.2 ounces per month;
- 1973, Pan Arctic Oil arrives and recruits labour;
- 1974, per capita monthly alcohol consumption reaches 30 ounces;
- 1975, a jail is built in Pond Inlet.

Unless the Dene people are given the opportunity to manage their own lives their own way, their culture will be destroyed by the century's end.

## Native struggle spans Americas

by Sandy Hamelmann  
Reprinted from the Muse  
by Canadian University Press

Movements may come and go, but Vern Ballancourt represents a movement more than 490 years old, spanning the North, Central and South Americas.

Ballancourt is a member of the central committee of the American Indian Movement (AIM), or, as he introduced himself to a St. John's audience Feb. 1, "a representative of one of the most misunderstood and distorted movements around today."

Dressed in traditional clothes with his hair in two long pony tails, Ballancourt said many AIM members have rediscovered their old tribal religions and rituals, and are struggling to keep them alive, despite pressure to conform to North American mainstream society.

It's important to resurrect the past, Ballancourt said, especially since native history is distorted in American history

books. There is little mention of the history of the Indians, a history that is thousands of years old, but only the limited history of colonial exploitation, Ballancourt said.

Ballancourt retold the story of Columbus's discovery of America. A disoriented, starving, sick man "floundering in the seas" landed by a stroke of luck on what he thought was India. When the natives discovered him on their beaches, they fed him and his crew and nursed them back to health. In gratitude, hundreds of natives were sold into slavery.

People ask why AIM doesn't just forget the past. But Ballancourt said "We can't forget this past. It shows us where we stand today, because the war is continuing."

Guatemala is one country where the war continues. Between 30,000 and 40,000 have died in Guatemala since 1980, most of whom are full-blood Indians, who comprise 65 per cent of the population.

In Nicaragua, AIM supports the

Sandinistas despite the relocation of 10,000 Misquito Indians. Ballancourt said the move was necessary because of the danger of counter-revolutionary attacks at the Honduran border supported with military aid and personnel by the United States.

Nicaragua has more respect for native rights than most countries, such as Canada, where land rights are constantly being extinguished, he said.

As with any oppressed people, Ballancourt said Indians are "subject to one of the largest behaviour-modification programs ever undertaken. From sovereign nations we have become so-called dependent wards of the federal government."

In the United States, Navaho and Hopi Indians were relocated from their reserves to desolate land at Big Mountain, Arizona. Now that coal and uranium deposits have been discovered there, Indians are once again due for resettlement in 1986. But the Big Mountain Indians will resist the move from their sacred land, Ballancourt said.

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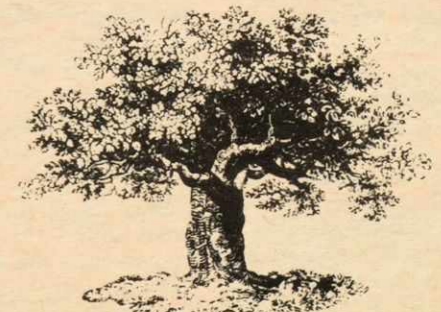
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