

Dene and Inuit seek political voice in NWT

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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 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 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 \$650,000 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 has 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.



Dene children will be faced with serious decisions on the direction the Northwest Territories will take in the coming decade.



In the predawn mist, a lonely highway winds toward the Zama oil fields of Northern Alberta and the south terminus of the Norman Wells Pipeline.

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' as such 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 representatives in the Territorial Assembly have begun the decolonization of Territorial politics.

Dene band 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 programs in 1982. This was \$500,000 less than requested, while the Territorial government's net income from liquor taxation was over \$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 in their own way, their culture will be destroyed by the century's end.

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