

THE BRITISH COLUMBIA INDIAN LAND QUESTION

AN APPEAL FOR ACTION

ADDRESS OF REV. CANON TUCKER
BEFORE THE MINISTER OF JUSTICE
AT OTTAWA, 15th APRIL, 1913

I wish to say a few words today, not by way of giving information, as I have done on previous occasions, but as an earnest plea on behalf of speedy action, looking to the final and satisfactory settlement of this difficult question.

My first plea is drawn from the Indians themselves. For forty long years they have pleaded and prayed and waited for a settlement of their claims. And they have waited through all those trying years without committing any act of violence, though they have often been under severe provocation. And they have persisted in this peaceful course mainly because of their sublime, their invincible faith and trust in the British and Canadian Governments. It is pathetic, at times, to see them show a child-like confidence in British justice. And they are gradually being overwhelmed by the inrush of settlers through the policy of the Provincial Government. Action should be taken to do them justice before it is too late, before they are brought to see that they have pleaded and prayed and waited in vain.

My second plea is drawn from the Canadian Government itself. They are the guardians of the Indians and in the last resort any responsibility arising from the care of the Indians must be brought home to them. Forty years ago the Government took a strong stand on behalf of the Indians. The late Government did the same; they instructed their agents to assure the Indians that their claims would be submitted to the Judicial Committee; and Sir Wilfrid Laurier gave them public assurances to the same effect. And he told a deputation, of which we were members, that courts existed for the settlement of just such differences as had arisen in British Columbia; that it was the part of good government to see that no portion of the population lay under a grievance, and that he would do all in his power to bring the question before the Judicial Committee. Forty years ago it would have been easy to settle the question. It is ten times harder now. It will be ten times harder still in ten years from this. There is no time to be lost in bringing the question to a final issue.

My third plea is drawn from the Moral and Social Reform Council of Canada, which I have the honour to represent here. They feel strongly that this troublesome, perhaps even dangerous, question should be settled without delay. Under the best advice given them they are convinced that it can only be finally and satisfactorily settled by a reference to the Judicial Committee. They recommend that, before the matter of the reserves be proceeded with, the more fundamental question of Indian title be disposed of. And they are in full accord with

the view that the work of the recently appointed Commission should be only one of investigation and recommendation and that its findings should only become operative when sanctioned by the two Governments which it represents.

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And the present juncture is a favourable one for the final settlement of the question. The resolve of the Indians of Naas River to submit their claim directly to His Majesty's Privy Council affords an easy method of settlement; the Government of Canada need only assent to the reference. The agreement between the two Governments for the settlement of the reserves naturally brings up, if it does not necessarily compel, the settlement of the larger question. And the Moral and Social Reform Council of Canada consider that the moral issues involved are more important than the financial or political ones. The Prophets, three thousand years ago, under divine inspiration, taught that justice exalts a nation, and the experience of all nations since then has proved the truth of the prophetic utterance. In recent years it is the settlement of great moral questions, even at great national sacrifice, that has redounded to the highest honour of England and the United States. It is the just and generous treatment of native and conquered races, that has, by the creation of a spirit of confidence and loyalty, proved the mainstay of the British Empire. The Canadian Government has been justly praised for its noble treatment of the Indians from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains. Why not extend that work beyond the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean? The Indians of British Columbia are among

the most intelligent, progressive and manly of the Indians of the Dominion. They are the Indians, if any, that are destined to survive. They will be the first to be drafted into the ranks of Canadian citizens. It may prove a serious blot on the national honour if we fail to carry out our pledges to them at this time. And it may prove to be one of the brightest gems in our national crown if we seize the opportunity of finally settling this question on a just and permanent basis.

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