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THE ESKIMOS: A CANADIAN HUMAN RESOURCE

An address by the Minister of Resources and Development, Mr. R.H. Winters, delivered at the Annual Convention of the Canadian Construction Association, Montreal, January 19, 1953.

... In the Department of Resources and Development we administer the affairs of the Yukon and the Northwest Territories and, therefore, have a certain responsibility for all people living there. In this capacity we look after the welfare of Eskimos, most of whom live in the Northwest Territories. We're also responsible for the education of the 2,000 Eskimos in Northern Quebec, and through the Newfoundland Government we provide relief, when necessary, for the 850 Eskimos in Labrador.

Eskimos - Fellow Canadians

The Eskimos are only a fragment of our total population - 9,500 out of 14,500,000 - but we who come in relatively close contact with them know that they are a most intriguing segment of Canada's population. They, together with the Indians, represent the original inhabitants of Canada, and they have fired the imagination of many people by maintaining their existence against a harsh unrelenting climate in a region where food, being almost entirely fish or animal, requires great skill to obtain, and is most unpredictable in its availability. Caribou, for example, which are a staple of the Eskimo's economy, have a most exasperating habit of changing their migration routes from year to year. In a country where there are only a handful of people scattered over regions of thousands of square miles, a small variation in the route of the caribou can spell the difference between plenty and starvation to the families which are dependent upon them for food.

These people have the privilege of voting; they are given Family Allowances, old age pensions and other benefits of Canadian citizenship. This would not be understood abroad having regard to geography, climate, human characteristics and habit, and a variety of other considerations, it is our problem to see to it that these Canadians - the Eskimos - derive the benefits of Canadian citizens and that they are integrated in the most useful and appropriate way into Canada's life.

One characteristic of the Eskimo which has perhaps contributed more than anything else to his survival in such trying conditions has been his innate ability as an engineer - and particularly, you may be interested to know, as a construction engineer. Take the case of the snow house, the igloo. Architects and engineers have given

a great deal of study to this and have found it impossible to devise, with the materials that are available, a better shelter against the Arctic climate than the igloo. Remember that, when the igloo is completed, it represents a perfect dome, proof against all local stress and strain. By the simple expedient of using a spiral method of construction, the Eskimo fashions his dome without any interior support. An igloo can be built by one man, and, if only a small shelter is required, in the space of half an hour. The arch of the Romans and the dome of the Byzantines have been regarded as miracles of architectural design. So they were, but the design of the igloo can be considered just as great an achievement.

Another example of the Eskimo's engineering ingenuity is the development of his sled. The flexibility of structure given by fixing the cross-bars to the runners by thongs instead of pegs permits the sled to ride easily over the rough ice; but most important of all, the use of mud as a coating for the runners produces the lowest co-efficient of friction on the snow that it's possible to obtain. Here again, modern science cannot improve on the methods developed by the Eskimo hundreds of years ago.

You may be curious to know, as I was, where the Eskimos get the mud for this purpose. I'm told that they get it during the warm weather from swampy grounds and let it dry. Then in the cold weather they make it into a paste with water from melted snow, coat their runners with it, and let it freeze. They then smooth the runners off. An Eskimo going on a long trip always carries some of this dry "powered mud" with him, just as we carry a spare tire. If part of the mud coating chips off the runner he unloads his sled, turns it upside down, mixes up some mud paste and repairs the damaged coating of the runner.

Then take the traditional walrus-harpoon. The head is detachable and comes loose from the shaft when the walrus is hit, thus saving the spear from being broken as the animal thrashes around. The head, however, is tied to the shaft by thongs, which prevents the shaft from getting lost, and it's also tied to a large inflated bladder. This bladder, as well as serving as a marker, tires the walrus out when he tries to pull it through the water as he dives.

The engineering instinct of the Eskimo is not by any means limited to the evolution of devices necessary for his existence. He has a mechanical ability ingrained in him. General Young, the Deputy Minister of Resources and Development, told me a story of what happened to him when he was a young subaltern in the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals, stationed at Aklavik in 1924. His alarm clock stopped and he did what the white man usually does when faced by such an emergency. If it had been merely the alarm I'm sure there would be nothing more to this story, but it was the clock itself, so he shook it violently, thumped it on the table, and then, when this "Immediate Action" failed, gave up. A young Eskimo boy who was watching said he could fix it. General Young, feeling that the clock was useless anyway, gave it to the Eskimo. I think that any of us faced with this clock would have quickly undone two or three screws, a spring would then have flown loose and half a dozen small wheels would have jumped all over the place. Not so with the

Eskimo. He studied the clock very carefully, then took his screw-driver and removed one screw. This he examined slowly and thoroughly, looking both at the screw and the place it came from. He then put it down neatly so that he would know exactly where it was to go. He followed this slow methodical procedure with each screw he took out. It took him six hours to dismantle the clock and to put it together again, but when he was finished every piece was in its right place, and above all - the clock was running: People who have lived with Eskimos can tell you numerous stories like this of incidents where Eskimos, without any technical training, successfully repair motor boat engines or delicate instruments such as chronometers.

Recent Stories and Myths

Probably many of you have read some of the recent books and magazine articles about the Eskimos. In these you will have heard how the coming of the white man, with his strange food and modern inventions, has seriously dislocated the Eskimo's way of life. There is, no doubt, much truth in that. One thing the white man has done was to improve means of transportation and thus make it possible for him to visit Eskimo country with comparative ease; to stay there for a few months or weeks, or even days, and then to return to take advantage of that other great invention, the printing press, to produce a book. Some of these authors, who have spent many years among the Eskimo, have made most thoughtful and valuable contributions to our knowledge of the people, their way of life and their problems. To them we're deeply grateful. Others, unfortunately, have become "experts" on the basis of a too short experience and have written stories which are dramatic and colourful, but remarkably lacking in factual accuracy.

Perhaps I might take a few minutes to discuss some of the Eskimo "myths" that have developed in recent years. One is that the Eskimos are a declining race, rapidly dying off. This appears to be based on conversations which visitors have had with Eskimos who tell tales of their ancestors living among groups of 30,000 or 40,000 natives. The evidence is not available to refute these statements conclusively, but equally there is no reliable evidence to support them. If we search the records left by explorers, some of them 300 years ago, we find that they all spoke of the sparseness of the Eskimo population.

Authoritative figures for the Eskimo population of Canada became available only with the census of 1941, when nearly every Eskimo was reached and given a numbered identification disc to overcome the difficulty of counting people who are nomads and whose names are in many cases remarkably similar. The official 1941 census total of Eskimos in the Northwest Territories and northern Quebec was 7,178 but because some of the returns were not received until after the compilation was made, this figure should be raised to about 7,700. The 1951 census for the same regions shows 8,646 Eskimos, a gain of slightly over one per cent per year for the 10 years. Supporting evidence for this increase is given by the vital statistics records which have been kept since Family Allowances have been paid to the Eskimos. They show population of 8,378 in 1948 - 8,437 in 1949, 8,550 in 1950, and the census figure of 8,646 in 1951. To this should be added the 847 Eskimos in Labrador, who had become Canadians since the census of 1941.

That the Eskimos have in the past been a declining race may be open to argument, for proof one way or the other is not available, but that they are not now a declining race is shown by these figures.

Two other misconceptions are closely associated with this one. One is that the change in the Eskimo's eating habits from caribou and seal meat to bannocks made out of flour and other "white man's food" has greatly weakened his resistance not only to the scourge of tuberculosis but to other ailments such as measles and the common cold. It's stated that deaths from these diseases, particularly from tuberculosis, have greatly increased. The second misconception is that this change to "white man's food" has resulted mainly from the payment of Family Allowances.

There are several points I should like to make. In the first place, it's by no means clear that tuberculosis and other diseases are on the increase among the Eskimos. The Deputy Minister of National Health and Welfare, recently pointed out that federal health authorities who deal with tuberculosis among the Indians and the Eskimos are not in a position to demonstrate whether the disease is increasing rapidly among the Eskimos or not. While they know what the situation is at the present time, they have no reliable previous figures for comparison. It is known, however, that the death-rate from tuberculosis of Indians and Eskimos together has been cut in half within the last few years as the result of increased health services. It must also be remembered that a more aggressive programme of case-finding among the Eskimos is being carried out today than ever before. This obviously means that a larger number of cases of tuberculosis are being discovered and treated, but it is certainly not evidence that the disease itself is increasing.

It's by no means certain, too, that the resistance of Eskimos to disease has weakened. There have been cases on record, going many years back, of disease wiping out whole settlements of Eskimos. It is quite probably true that epidemics spread more rapidly nowadays than formerly, but that can well be explained by the increasing ease of contact between settlements arising from improved transportation. It should also be remembered, on the credit side, that improved transportation has made it possible to deal far more effectively with the epidemics if and when they occur.

I should now like to say a few words about the effect of Family Allowances and other forms of social benefits on the Eskimo. It isn't true that the trend of the Eskimos away from their natural food to "white man's food" came as a result of Family Allowance payments. The trend is probably not as widespread as is often suggested, but to the extent that it exists it started long before Family Allowances. At certain times it resulted from the Eskimo receiving a large income when prices for white fox and other furs were high, and finding that it was easier to trade part of this income for "white man's food" than to go hunting for his more traditional food. On other occasions the trend has been due to the opposite cause; to a scarcity of game making "white man's food" the only alternative to starvation. By a fortunate coincidence, however, Family Allowances came into being at a time when white fox prices were low and Eskimos were experiencing hard times.

It's sometimes said that Family Allowances lead to improvident spending-habits on the part of the Eskimo, and the story is told in a recent newspaper article of one Eskimo who is supposed to have acquired 22 alarm clocks, all purchased out of the proceeds of Family Allowance payments. Such an incident could not happen, because since their inception Family Allowance payments have been made to Eskimos in kind and not in cash. They are made from a carefully selected list of items designed primarily to benefit the children. It could be true, of course, that an Eskimo, finding that as a result of Family Allowance payments he had a surplus of earned income, spent part of that surplus to buy 22 alarm clocks. I don't know if it's true that an Eskimo has had such an alarm-clock buying-spreed, but if it is then he was spending his own money and is free to do with it what he chooses. Family Allowance money was certainly not directly involved.

I wish to assure you that all the Government officials who deal with the Eskimo are impressed with the importance of ensuring that payments of Family Allowances and of relief do not have the effect of encouraging indolence on the part of the Eskimo and reliance on government assistance. For example, steps are taken to curtail Family Allowance payments to families where the father is using these payments to avoid hunting. Other social security payments are likewise watched carefully. I think in general it's quite fair to say that this objective has been achieved.

It's sometimes suggested that Eskimo affairs are administered by "remote control", by officials sitting at desks in Ottawa and therefore out of touch with problems as they arise. The Federal Government is responsible for administering the area in which the vast majority of the Eskimos live, and it is logical, in the interests of economy and efficiency, that the centre of administration should be in Ottawa. But our officials make regular and frequent visits to the majority of Eskimo settlements, and I, myself, have made two visits to Eskimo settlements in the two years that I have been Minister of Resources and Development, one to the Eastern Arctic and one to the Coppermine area on Coronation Gulf. Both were extremely interesting and I obtained much first-hand and valuable information.

Recent Conferences

To help clarify and co-ordinate thinking on Eskimo problems I called a conference last summer of all organizations, government and private, that are concerned with the Eskimos. Represented at this conference, which lasted for two days, were the Departments of Resources and Development, Mines and Technical Surveys, National Health and Welfare, Transport, National Defence, and Public Works; the R.C.M.P., the Anglican missions, the Roman Catholic missions, the Hudson's Bay Company, and individuals with special knowledge of or interest in Eskimos. The meetings were "off the record". Frank and free discussion was encouraged. No decisions could result from a meeting of this nature, but a most useful interchange of views took place.

As a result of this conference a continuing committee was set up to study Eskimo problems and to recommend appropriate action where it was considered necessary.

The Deputy Minister of Resources and Development is Chairman of this Committee which includes representatives of the Department of National Health and Welfare, the R.C.M.P., the Anglican missions, the Roman Catholic missions, and the Hudson's Bay Company. At about the same time, an Eskimo Research Section was created in the Northern Administration and Lands Branch of the Department of Resources and Development to study Eskimo problems and to work in conjunction with the Committee which I have just mentioned.

I should like to mention, also, that eighteen months ago Parliament enacted legislation to enlarge the Northwest Territories Council to include three members elected by residents of the Mackenzie District, and to specify that the Council should hold one session a year in the Territories. The first three elected members are now serving the interests of their constituents. The Council has little direct connection with Eskimo problems, which are a federal responsibility, but it does have jurisdiction over regulations concerning the trapping of fur-bearing animals. This has a most important bearing on the welfare of Eskimos as well as Indians, since fur trapping is their principal source of revenue. Furthermore, the fact that there is on the Northwest Territories Council an elected representative from Aklavik, an important Eskimo settlement, is a further assistance to the Administration in keeping in touch with Eskimo problems.

Conclusion

In closing this speech I would like to speak briefly about Eskimo education. This is a vital matter, because education is the main ingredient in whole formula designed to help the Eskimo to adapt himself to changing conditions. In the past, the education of the Eskimo was entirely in the hands of the missions, who have done yeoman service. To supplement their work, the Government, since the end of the war, has built eight schools primarily for Eskimo children. These schools are spread across the top of the continent from northern Quebec to the Mackenzie Delta.

There isn't time available now to describe to you our detailed plans for improving Eskimo education, but in broad terms our intention is to bring the schools to the Eskimos rather than the Eskimos to the schools. In the past it has been the custom in many cases to teach the children at residential schools. Because the Eskimos are essentially nomadic people this often meant that these children were separated from their families for several years at a stretch. As a result they found themselves unaccustomed to their native way of life when they returned to it. It's now the intention that, where the children have to go to residential schools, they should return to their families for several weeks each year.

In some cases we contemplate changing the time of the school term so that it will coincide with the period when the Eskimo families are normally in the vicinity of the settlement. We have given thought to the possibility of housing the Eskimo children in tent hostels instead of wooden houses, so that the conditions under which they live will not be too different from their normal way

of life. Interesting experiments have been undertaken in having a school teacher follow the Eskimos around from camp to camp during their winter hunting trips.

We are also making plans for occupational schools and for giving technical training to Eskimos with special capabilities. We hope that eventually most of the school teachers and most of the mechanics in the Arctic will be Eskimos instead of white people.

In the course of these remarks it has not been my intention to give the impression that everything is being done that possibly can be done to help the Eskimos. We are certainly not self-satisfied in this matter. Problems still exist.

I do hope, however, that I have shown you that the government is keenly concerned about the welfare of the Eskimos; that we have taken many steps, and are proposing to take more, to assist them in improving their conditions of living.

The Eskimos are Canadians; part of our human resources. A country's human resources are the most important of all its resources. No country, however well blessed it may be in climate, minerals, forests, fertile soil and running water, can prosper unless it has a fine people to develop these resources and to use them wisely. In a period of rapid development it's particularly important that we should think of our people and their well-being as well as our engineering projects. No country in the world has a finer people than has Canada, and one section of this people - a section of which we can be proud - are the Eskimos. We will continue to do all we can to help them integrate themselves into the Canadian economy and to overcome those problems which face them by the fact that they have been literally translated from the Stone Age to the Atomic Age in a period of 40 or 50 years.

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