

No. 56/3 THE FUTURE OF THE CANADIAN INDIANS

Speech by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Mr. J.W. Pickersgill, to the Canadian Club, Ottawa, March 28, 1956.

When the first Europeans came to North America, there were about 200,000 Indians in Canada

Until early in the twentieth century, the Indian population declined steadily, and it was generally assumed they were a vanishing race. But the trend was reversed and, as a result of improved medical services and improved welfare services, the Indian population has increased rapidly in the last two generations.

The Indian census of 1949 showed a population of just over 135,000.

In 1954 there were over 150,000 in Canada: an increase of more than eleven per cent in five years.

Today the Indian population of Canada without any immigration is increasing faster than the rest of the population with the very considerable addition resulting from immigration.

This increase in numbers is just one of the many reasons why a new policy for the Indians simply had to be devised after the Second World War.

It would not be unfair to describe Canadian Indian policy before 1939 as a mixture of benevolent segregation and habitual oblivion.

The broad terms of our new policy were set out by the present Prime Minister in November 1949.

Mr. St-Laurent said it was our aim: "to have the Indian affairs branch administered in such a way as to bring the original inhabitants of Canadian territory to citizenship as quickly as that can reasonably be accomplished."

In explaining why Indian Affairs were combined in the same department of government with Citizenship and Immigration, Mr. St-Laurent said:

"It was felt that it would have some psychological effect to say that these three activities dealing with human beings, and which are designed to bring those human beings to the status of full citizenship as rapidly as possible, were under the one head.

"Having citizenship, Immigration and Indian affairs in the one department would indicate that the purpose of the activities of that department was to make Canadian citizens of those who were born here of the original inhabitants of the territory, or those who migrated to this country."

Technically, of course, the Canadian Indians were already citizens of Canada.

But they are citizens with a difference.

The Indians have privileges which other Canadians do not have, and other citizens have privileges and responsibilities which are not shared by the Indians.

No sensible person wants to change that situation by any form of pressure or coercion.

But, since the Department of Citizenship and Immigration was established in 1950, we have been trying to make our common Canadian citizenship so much more attractive to the Indians than their special status that they will be encouraged to seek enfranchisement.

I think perhaps I should pause here to explain just what the enfranchisement of an Indian means, because I know there are many well-informed people who are somewhat confused by the term.

Enfranchisement does not mean just giving the vote to Indians.

It means changing their legal status from the status of Indians under the Indian Act to the status of ordinary citizens in all respects.

Under the present Indian Act, it is possible for an Indian to retain his status as an Indian and to secure the vote in Federal elections.

It is also open to him to apply for full enfranchisement, and when he does so the Superintendent General has the responsibility of deciding whether that particular Indian is sufficiently advanced to look after himself and his family without the protection and the assistance afforded under the Indian Act.

In the six years since the Department of Citizenship and Immigration was established, well over 4,000 Indians have been enfranchised, either as individuals or as family groups.

There is also provision in the Indian Act for the enfranchisement of whole Bands of Indians.

Up to now, no band has been enfranchised as such, but at the present time applications for enfranchisement from two complete Bands, the Metlakatla Band in British Columbia and the Michel Band in Alberta are receiving active consideration.

Indeed I do not believe that any Canadian should be fully satisfied with our Indian policy until the day comes when all the Indians from coast to coast and from the American border to the Arctic have been integrated with the rest of the population and the Indian Affairs Branch and the office I now hold become merely a part of our history.

But enfranchisement cannot be forced.

The Indians have to be encouraged and helped to prepare themselves for enfranchisement so that, when they are enfranchised and on their own, they will be able to hold their own on reasonably equal terms with other Canadians.

And that, unfortunately, far too many of the Indians could not do today. Far too many of the Indians in Canada have a standard of living below that of most of the rest of the population.

And, what is even more serious, the traditional means of livelihood of the Indians have not expanded as fast as the Indian population.

Indeed, these traditional means of livelihood are not capable of much expansion and, in some areas, far from expanding, they are actually contracting.

That is true even in the North where the Indians do not usually live on reserves but are still mainly nomadic, and where their customary livelihood is derived almost entirely from hunting, trapping and fishing.

Only a limited number of people can make a living from these occupations, even in huge areas.

That is why we have to face the problems of finding alternative means of livelihood for part of the growing population of Indians in the North unless we are prepared to let these Indians become mere pensioners of the Government.

I certainly hope no one is going to be satisfied to have a large proportion of our Indian population living on relief, even for part of every year.

When the means of earning a livelihood are not available, relief must be provided, and it must be provided on a reasonable scale, and I don't believe most Canadians object to paying the cost of that relief.

But we do not want to contemplate a continuing state of relief and dependency for the Indians.

And our experience is that the Indians themselves - most of them - really want to work for their living, though in many cases they cannot see much sense in going on working to earn extra money after their ordinary needs and wants have been met.

In seeking new occupations for Indians, there are two problems to be met.

One is to find useful and gainful employment for the Indians who can no longer make their living in traditional ways: and the other is to give the Indians the incentive to work regularly and continuously when work is available.

The only way I know to meet both problems is to encourage the Indians to improve their standard of living.

Even in the more settled parts of Canada, Indian housing, speaking generally, is far below the average level of housing of the rest of the population, and housing perhaps is the most accurate of all indexes of living standards.

In the last few years, we have given encouragement to Indians - and financial assistance where needed - to improve existing houses or to build new homes.

Since 1945 well over 8,600 new houses have been built on Indian reserves and nearly 18,000 houses repaired.

Some of this housing has been provided out of welfare funds voted by Parliament, but a considerable part of it has been financed by the Indians themselves through their Band funds, or by individual Indian veterans under the Veterans Land Act.

At the present session of Parliament the Government is proposing amendments to the Indian Act and the National Housing Act to provide additional facilities to enable Indians to finance new homes and improvements of existing homes.

Our experience has been that Indians who get new houses or improve their old houses like to keep them in good condition, to furnish them nicely and to look after their homes in the same way their neighbours do off the reserves.

And the need for higher incomes to support better homes is usually the strongest incentive to the Indians to seek and to keep regular employment.

The improvement of Indian housing is a nationwide problem.

But the problem of ensuring new kinds of employment for the Indians is not a single nationwide problem. It is a series of local problems - problems which vary greatly from one region of Canada to another, and even from one Band to another within the same region.

In some of the more settled parts of Canada, particularly in southern Ontario and western Quebec, most Indians work away from the reserves at a great variety of urban occupations.

That is also true in the Vancouver area in British Columbia.

In the more settled parts of the Prairies, many of the Indians are showing an increasing interest and a growing aptitude for farming the lands of their reserves.

On the Pacific coast, the Indians are among the leading fishermen, and an increasing number of Indians are engaged in various types of forestry and lumbering.

In New Brunswick a considerable number of Indians have been employed in the development of the great new military camp at Gagetown.

In the North it is not so easy to find new forms of employment, though more and more Indians are being employed in the construction of defence works, including the early warning lines, in logging operations, in mining, and in the construction of pipe lines, roads and railways.

In many of these activities, the Indians have proved to be more dependable workers than workers brought in from other parts of Canada, because the Indians are at home in the North and are used to its rigours and hardships.

Indian labour can make an increasing and a substantial contribution to the stabilization of logging, lumbering and mining operations in northern areas where it is often difficult to attract workers from more settled parts of the country.

I now make it a practice, whenever employers from any part of the country come to see me for assistance in securing immigrants for particular kinds of work, to ask them if they have tried to use Indians.

I have found that the first response is, quite often, surprise at the question, but that in most cases that response is quickly followed by a constructive interest in the possible use of a new supply of labour ready to hand, right here in Canada.

Now, of course, we in the Indian Affairs administration recognize just as much as employers do that it is not going to be easy for adult Indian workers to adapt themselves to new and strange types of employment, but we believe that the young people coming out of school can be trained just as effectively as other Canadians, and it is for the growing numbers of young Indians that we have the most pressing need to find a new place in our economy and in our society.

But no matter how rapidly we find new avenues of employment for our Indians, it is of the utmost importance to preserve for the Indians the trapping, hunting and fishing areas so many of them depend on for their living.

Despite all the new employment that has been offered in these post war years, more than half the Indians of Canada still depend on trapping for all or most of their cash income, and on game and fish for much of their subsistence.

And that will probably continue to be true for a good many years.

For the past seventeen years, the Indian Affairs Branch has conducted, in co-operation with the Provincial Governments which were willing to participate, a programme of rehabilitation of trapping areas and conservation of fur-bearing animals, which has given some measure of economic security to the trappers in those Provinces.

But I think we have to face the fact that, so long as the Indian population continues to grow, some northern Indians will have to move southward if they are to be self-supporting and to contribute to the economy.

Now it is usually pretty hard for the Indians to move in one single generation from nomadic life in the North to industrial employment in large urban areas.

We are seeking, therefore, to find a transitional stage.

This year we are actually giving a number of young Indian boys short courses in the agricultural schools in Alberta with a view to encouraging them to take employment on farms where they can learn farming in a practical way.

There is, of course, a shortage of farm labour in Canada, and I am convinced that this is a long-term shortage and one that we cannot hope to meet through immigration.

That is why I believe there is an exceptional opportunity here, both for young Indians and for farmers, if we can train suitable young Indians to become farm workers: and we naturally hope that eventually some of the Indians will become farmers themselves.

We intend to take the greatest care to place the young Indians who have taken these courses with the kind of farmers who will guide and encourage them, and be prepared at times to overlook the lack of skill and experience which will be inevitable while they are learning.

The promising beginning we are making this year in Alberta is arousing interest in several other Provinces, I hope that later this year and next year this training in farm work can be developed considerably.

We are also, in Alberta, training Indian girls in the rudiments of household science, with a view to equipping them to take employment as domestic workers or as workers in hospitals and institutions.

Here again we are going to try to place the trained workers in rural areas and small communities, because we believe the transition from nomadic life will not be so difficult as it would be in large cities.

And we are going to take the greatest possible care to select sympathetic employers for these Indian girls.

There is no question in my mind that the most important of all the activities of the Indian Affairs administration, so far as the future is concerned, is education.

Traditionally, Indian education was carried on in residential schools, conducted under the auspices of the churches, and I cannot find words adequate to praise the devotion of the teachers in these schools over the years.

Residential schools still have a large place in Indian education, and they will continue to have a large place as long as many of the Indians live nomadic lives, as long as the standard of living of many Indians is low, and as long as there are many Indian children who are orphans or whose families have been broken up.

And, unhappily, there are far too many of these. I am pleased to be able to say that we have recently concluded an agreement with the Government of Ontario under which the Children's Aid Societies in this Province will assist in promoting the welfare of these children.

And one thing that I hope may be possible over the next few years is to have many of these Indian orphan children adopted by other Canadians.

For them, as for other orphan children, adoption into good homes would be much preferable to even the best of institutions.

But for Indian children - and they are the majority - whose parents are living together in good homes, we believe the children are happier in day schools, and we believe, too, they will be better able to face the adult world if they have enjoyed normal family life during their school years.

We are convinced that, wherever circumstances make it possible, it is better for Indian children to attend the same schools as other Canadian children, and to associate with other Canadians in the same classrooms and on the same playgrounds.

We already have a great many agreements with local school authorities to have Indian children educated in the ordinary schools under Provincial auspices.

In 1949 there were 1,300 Canadian Indians enrolled in non-Indian schools.

The number is now over 4,800 about one-eighth of all the Indian children attending school.

I am pleased to say that next month I am meeting with the Minister of Education of Ontario to discuss a province-wide extension of the education of Indians in the ordinary Provincial schools in Ontario.

In recent years there has been a very gratifying increase in the number of Indian children attending secondary schools and vocational schools.

Indeed, I was told when I visited the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford that a higher proportion of Indian children from that Reserve were attending high school than was the case in the surrounding rural townships.

And I would like to see the standard of education of the Six Nations today become commonplace tomorrow among Indians in all parts of Canada.

We are placing increased emphasis at all stages of Indian education on vocational training, and that will become steadily more important if Indian children are to be prepared for new types of employment.

Education appears to be the main key not only to useful employment but also to the eventual integration of the Indians.

But during the period of transition, which will be a long one and will be full of difficulties, the existing rights of the Indians must be upheld, and we believe the Indians should be consulted about all changes in policy and law and persuaded of the advantages of the changes before they are made.

Before the Indian Act was revised in 1951, my predecessor, the Honourable Walter Harris, invited representative Indians from all across the country to meet with him and officials of the Department in Ottawa to discuss the proposed changes.

We are proposing some amendments to the Indian Act at the present session of Parliament, and last December I arranged a meeting with representative Indians from every part of Canada to discuss the changes we are considering.

On this occasion, the Indian representatives were not selected by the department; they were elected by the Councils of the Indian Bands.

These Band Councils are elected by the Indians themselves, and it was gratifying to all those who had been present at both Conferences to see what a great advance there had been between 1951 and 1955 in the capacity of the Indians to express themselves, to deal with the business before them, and to present the views of the Indians who had elected them.

There is no doubt that the great advance in local self-government on the Reserves, which was instituted by Mr. Harris in 1951, has already been amply vindicated.

The Indians, of course, will not have achieved the full citizenship to which the Prime Minister referred in 1949 until they have the right to vote in Federal elections.

At the present time, Indians who are veterans of either of the great wars, and their wives, have the right to vote, and any Indian may acquire the right to vote by renouncing his right to exemption from certain taxes on his personal property and on income earned on the Reserve.

A considerable number do waive this exemption every year.

I think most of us feel that, just as there should be no taxation without representation, so also there is something repugnant about the idea of representation without an equal obligation to bear the burdens of citizenship.

This is one of the problems that will have to be solved in the future.

Every year more and more Indians are leaving the reserves and the numbers will increase as the years go on.

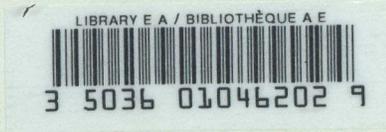
There are Indians today engaged in many different occupations all over the country.

Some of these Indians, of course, are enfranchised, but many of them retain their Indian status and their freedom to go back to the protection of the reserve whenever they wish.

The status of these Indians who do not live on the reserve and who are not yet enfranchised is, in many ways, similar to the status of immigrants who have not yet become citizens, and we are doing all we can, all the time, to encourage these Indians to accept the full responsibilities of citizenship whenever they seem able to do so.

If our Indians are to have their rightful place in Canadian life, I am convinced that they must be encouraged to accept just as much responsibility as they seem able to bear, and that the more responsibility they can accept for their own affairs, both individually and as Bands, the happier they will be and the greater will be their contribution to our common Canadian life.

And I hope that if we continue to encourage them to accept more responsibility, every year more and more of our Indians will become fully integrated into Canadian life, and that eventually there will be no such thing as Indian Affairs in Canada.



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