

THE ESKIMO FAMILY

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Address by  
The Honourable Jean Lesage, M.P.,  
Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources,

to the  
WOMEN'S CANADIAN CLUB OF MONTREAL

MONDAY, October 25, 1954.

The north is a frontier for Canada in more than one sense of the word. In part, Canadians have been forced to look north by circumstances beyond their control - because it is the direction from which modern war could come. You are, of course, all aware of the joint United States and Canadian defence activities stretching across the northland - and of the fact that defence is one of the chief aspects of the interest of the Government of Canada in the Arctic.

But defence is by no means the only reason Canadians look north. Among the other new reasons: oil, water power, mineral wealth, all these are present in Canada's northland in quantities that cause feelings of excitement in many Canadians - traditionally a people not easily startled.

There is a further reason too. Canada is a young country and it is only in recent years that we have been achieving a sense of consciousness as a nation and a feeling of maturity. It would

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almost be true to say that it is only in the last few years that Canada 'has come of age'. We have reached the point where we have begun to look at our country as a whole and as something for which we have obligations and responsibilities. There is a new desire to see that something is done about those parts of Canada that have thus far lain neglected and almost unknown. We have a new interest in the regions of the north and the people who inhabit them because we are aware of ourselves as Canadians and of the fact that they are Canadians too.

It is about one group of the people of the North, the Eskimos, rather than the material resources, that I have come to speak to-day.

One of the reasons for the great interest in Eskimos felt by people who know them is that they are warm-hearted, friendly, polite and intelligent. I suppose these arctic dwellers appeal to the imagination of people who lead softer lives. For my own part I find it remarkable that human beings have found a way to live in the barren lands, - where the summer lasts only a few weeks - where no trees grow - where the ground is permanently frozen and one lives in a snow house in winter - preferably placed on the sea ice for the reason, if you please, that a snow house built on ice is warmer than one built on the frozen ground. Well, the Eskimos have not only maintained themselves in this hard land for thousands of years, but they have evolved a culture suited to them - and they have learned that great lesson - how to enjoy life. They are merry and happy, - even in the face of adversity, - which comes only too often to all men, but more often to Eskimos than most others.



The Eskimos are, of course, Mongolian people whose migration from Asia can be traced - spreading from Siberia across Alaska - and Canada - to Groenland. In Canada they inhabit the Arctic sea coast from the Alaska boundary to the shores of Labrador. They live all around the southern islands of the Arctic Archipelago. Traces of them have been found in the far north islands of the Queen Elizabeth group, but probably the darkness lasts a little too long that far north. Three or four months without sight of the sun would seem to be the longest that even Eskimos wish to stand.

In numbers the Eskimos of Canada are almost insignificant - 9500 of them in Canada at the census of 1951, - and they are scattered - about one Eskimo to each hundred square miles. For the most part they are on the coast, but a few hundred live in the central barren lands where their food and clothing comes from the elusive caribou. In the Mackenzie Delta for some years a number of Eskimos have inhabited the fringe of timbered country. Only a few do this because of habits and experience extending over generations. Apparently they dislike being shut in by trees.

On the coast itself, there is a short season of open water in mid-summer but for eight or nine months of the year, the sea is frozen over and travelling thereon seems no different from travelling over flat land areas. In fact, it is often necessary when travelling, if one is doubtful of his location, to dig through the snow to see

whether there is soil or ice underneath. To all intents and purposes, the Arctic ocean itself, for a period of at least eight months, provides a happy hunting ground for the Eskimos: he travels and lives on it as if it were solid ground.

The Eskimos of the Eastern Arctic live in snow houses or igloos in winter and tents in summer. Sealskin, canvas, pieces of driftwood, stone, blocks of turf, and even glazed sash may go to make up the tents or houses. I do not have to describe an igloo. Everyone knows it is the typical winter dwelling, constructed of blocks cut from hard-packed snow, laid spirally to form a dome. The stone seal-oil lamps, which are kept burning day and night during cold weather, raise the temperature just the right amount and make the dwelling comfortable. The temperature can be controlled by means of a ventilation hole in the roof, with a block of snow to move across it.

Travel is part of the Eskimo life. One must move, - the hunting and fishing requires it as the seasons change. Travel is by boat in summer, and by dog-team in winter. Large skin boats have disappeared entirely and today the usual type is the open walloboat, with mast and sail. When the owners can afford it, gasoline engines are fitted. Eskimos are mechanically-inclined and quickly learn to run engines and keep them in repair.

The one-man kayak is still used extensively by the Eskimos and is probably the outstanding article of equipment made by these remarkable people. You have seen kayaks or pictures of kayaks. The



craft is narrow, covered in completely with sealskin and can even be capsized with its occupant who experiences nothing worse than the shock of cold water on face and hands, for he wears a waterproof sealskin parka drawn close around the face and the hem is lashed tightly over the opening in the kayak itself where the boatman sits with his paddle in hand and spear ready by his side.

The dogsled of the Arctic is a large and heavy affair. Pulled by nine or ten big dogs it will support loads of half-a-ton - almost the capacity of the whalboat.

The Eskimos know thoroughly the districts in which they hunt and trap, also the actions of the tides, currents, and ice. Two or three families complete with dogs and equipment crowd into a boat. They seem to travel in the picnic spirit and consider a trip something of a lark. They may, and often do, experience difficulties, but once the difficulties are overcome they are forgotten.

They are intelligent - neither more nor less than white men - but their way of life, which is one of survival, has made them intensely practical. Living as individual family groups the only division of labour is man's work and woman's work. Thus every Eskimo as a matter of course is a hunter, craftsman, artist, singer, dancer. To be ingenious and inventive - able at all times to contribute to the task in hand - is to earn prestige and respect.

Besides being practical, they are also poetic and imaginative - fond of word play and of songs. The experiences of the hunt naturally form a large part of conversation and descriptions are illustrated with pantomime and mimicry for the diversion and information of their audience.

Almost invariably, they are of a happy disposition even while living in what we regard as continual severe hardship. Most travellers have agreed on this: they laugh as much in a month as ordinary civilized people do in a year; and they have all the other signs of contentment and well-being, as long as they have health and food nothing can shake their optimism.

The family is the unit of Eskimo life, - and strong are the forces of family - and group loyalty and responsibility - and the desire to be an honoured member of the community. By family, we mean not only the usual father, mother and children, but the "extended" family which includes grandparents, cousins, uncles, and in-laws. Adoption of children is very common and usually very successful. Among Eskimos there are no waifs in any sense of the word.

There are no Eskimo tribes as the term "tribe" is associated with North American Indians. There are no "chiefs" among them, but there are magic men who claim to have influence with the powers that cause health or disease, scarcity or plenty. Even in this day of widespread Christian missions the old superstitions persist to some extent. Naturally, of course, each group has a leader to whom it is

customary to look for guidance in the daily tasks and major decisions.

The Eskimos are a gregarious people, they love to congregate. In their primitive life it is usual for them to do so about twice a year - in the spring and in the fall. It is at these points of congregation that trading posts have been set up and officers of the administration, usually Royal Canadian Mounted Police, maintain their establishments. It must be remembered, however, that Eskimos cannot live as hunters in settlements of any considerable size. The visit over, traders, administrators and Eskimos like to see the people scatter again to the hunting grounds - so they may obtain food, and furs and live their own life.

The position of women is always of interest and importance in comprehending a society. Unmarried women are rarely found among Eskimos. Girl children are "spoken for" and "promised" by parents while very young. It is axiomatic to Eskimo life that because of the division of labour and the special aptitudes of the sexes, a wife is essential to a man and a woman cannot exist without a husband.

Eskimos say that a man is as good as his wife makes him. Her ability to prepare skins and to tailor his clothing - to make sealskin or canvas kayaks with waterproof seams - these are important. Is she willing to keep his boots soft and comfortable by diligent chewing? If she does these tasks well, her husband can pursue his hunting with a mind free from worry on these scores - and with less danger to life and limb. Danger is never far away - disaster can readily overtake one who is not well dressed.



There may be no Easter fashion parade - but there is much interest in clothes - good tailoring is admired and discussed - the distinction of being among the ten best dressed men - or women - adds to one's prestige - equally on Baffin Island and on Montreal Island.

Once married, a young wife immediately assumes her responsibilities of preparing food and making clothing for her husband and whatever extended family she has acquired. Although she has very little cooking or housecleaning - she is constantly occupied, tending the seal-oil lamp, curing skins, sewing with great skill clothing made of skins and of cloth as well.

The care of babies presents a distinct problem. With the intense cold and the long winter, infants must be carefully protected. The Eskimo mother accomplishes this by wearing a very full and wide parka, usually, as a matter of fact, two parkas, one with the fur turned in and one with the fur turned out. When the mother has to go outside with her child, she slips it quite naked onto her back under the parka. In this way children are carried about for the first two, three or four years. When the child leaves this abode he is provided with a fur suit of his own - which makes him in many ways almost as well adjusted to the outdoor environment as the pups with whom he plays.

The hoods of the women's parkas have a bulge in the back to provide room for the baby's head, so that when it is not too cold, the little one can look out whilst lying across the mother's shoulder, a vantage point from which to see the world.

Most Eskimos do not "punish" children - and almost never by physical force - yet, the children are well behaved, courteous and respectful. Observers speak of the unruffled temperament and the peaceful expression of the typical Eskimo face. Perhaps one of the causes for this serene adjustment to their environment is the lack of youthful conflict. An Eskimo child has the security of feeling himself an important member of the group, and early develops the traits of poise and self-reliance.

The boys busy themselves setting snares, making miniature houses and at the first moment they are big enough to do so, attempt to drive dogs. Usually the pups are made use of for the boys to harness. The normal Eskimo boy of fourteen has a knowledge of animal lore that is nearly equal to his father's. He knows, where, when, and how to set a trap to get results. In addition to that he is a skilled dog handler and, at that age, he is a real asset to his family. In fact, he is being schooled to be the same kind of provider as his father. The only thing he lacks is the physique which he will attain in a few years.

The girls have their fun playing outside just as the boys do, but at the time when the boys go out on the trap-line, the girls stay home and take over a large part of the care of the young children, and in addition to this they learn the art of tanning skins, sewing, and cooking.



In the fall, after the ice has become too thick to fish with nets, seal holes are visited for the purpose of spearing seals as they come up to breathe. The whole family, men and women, boys and girls, assist in the work of catching, transporting or preparing the meat and skin.

The Eskimo is cheerful, easy to deal with, intelligent, quick to learn, and an admirable patient when sick. For generations he has wrested a living, mated, and reared a family in a country where only a hardy and intelligent race could survive. He is making a very good job of slowly assimilating a certain amount of civilization while still retaining his independence, his pride, and his ability to carry on and care for himself.

At first glance, it is easy to look upon the traditional way of life of this primitive group as ideal. Living together in harmony - sharing food impartially - accepting hardship with cheerful resignation, - they seem to have adapted themselves perfectly to their surroundings. If not masters of the climate, the Eskimos are able to temper its harshness through their inventiveness and the long experience of their forebears. For example, the snow house, the wonderful light skin clothing - which is in fact a kind of house for the wearer - the kayak - these are inventions perfectly suited to their requirements.

A certain amount of education is an advantage to him but he should not acquire this at the expense of his practical lessons in natural history and hunting.

Bringing education to Eskimos is a formidable task. We usually think of schools in communities. But if the Eskimos were brought together in large settlements they could not all support themselves by hunting in the same surrounding area; some of them would have to travel hundreds of miles to get the fish and game necessary to their subsistence.

Perhaps we could select fertile lands in the south where Eskimos could settle - raise crops - keep cattle - feed their children and send them to school. This is the kind of radical change in the way of life of a people that gives us pause. Are we justified in suggesting to them that they come away from the northland, even if they were willing to do it? I am afraid that the Eskimo people, and Canada as a whole would lose something. In the North, they are proud, independent and competent in their own life. They are happy and full of joy when things go well. They love their land, though it is the hardest in the world. They love their life: though it is hard, it is full of satisfaction. Their culture is of interest to us as a thing apart, but to them it is vital: without it they could not find the spirit to survive. Moreover, their adaptation to the North is of value to Canada. Further change will come as activities increase in the North, and Eskimos will participate increasingly in the future of Canada.



Government plans for the development of Eskimos fall under two broad headings:

1. Where Eskimos live the primitive life in regions where game is plentiful, they are to be assisted as much as possible in their hunting and trapping by game conservation - by improved methods of hunting - by improved methods of preserving meat and fish - and by bringing education to the children while interfering as little as possible with the progress of that broad and vast education necessary for the hunter and for the wife of a hunter.
2. Where Eskimos have come in contact with civilization, it is our policy to assist them, if they are interested in changing their vocation permanently to wage employment - by basic education - by vocational training - by advice.

It is a wonderful thing for people to be free to do as they wish. Canadians value this among the many freedoms they possess and they hope to see it extended to their Eskimo fellow citizens. As Eskimos become interested in the ways of civilization, and educated and trained, not for menial tasks alone but in accordance with their own interests and abilities, we hope to see them engage in whatever phases of Canadian life they choose.

It is perhaps not the business of other Canadians to plan sociological change for Eskimos. It is, however, a responsibility of the government to ensure the welfare of this group of Canadian citizens insofar as possible. We cannot sit inactive if fellow Canadians need

medical assistance, and if we know that starvation threatens, we must send food to save lives. Our very presence in the Arctic compels us to come to grips with Eskimo problems which may be primarily economic but which bring sociological effects in their train.

Before many years have passed, we hope to see Eskimo settlements governed by councils of their own people - Eskimo men and women trained and serving as teachers, nurses, craftsmen - Eskimos in every activity in the Canadian North - radio, transportation, shipping, mining, fishing. And we hope to see such Eskimos as are interested in doing so, enter into the life of Canada as workers in fields of their choice - in public service, the professions, in business.

It is the task of the government at once to protect the aboriginal Eskimos from ill effects of civilization and on the other hand to create the conditions that will enable them to take a place in the expanding economy of Canada with particular regard to the fact that they are already dwellers in the Arctic, not only used to the country and competent to live there, but loving their country as men the world over love the land they live in.