

The people of Indian ancestry in Canada

/ Jean H. Lagassé

Ottawa : Dept. of the Secretary of State, 1968

E78
.C2
L33
1968
c. 1

2.07.38 (gen) Doc

2296

E78
C2
L33
1961

THE PEOPLE OF INDIAN ANCESTRY IN CANADA

LIBRARY
INDIAN AND NORTHERN AFFAIRS
CANADA
AUG 27 1991
AFFAIRES INDIENNES ET DU NORD
CANADA
BIBLIOTHÈQUE

A paper prepared

for

presentation

to the

Sixth Congress of the Interamerican Indian Institute

to be held in

Patzcuaro, State of Michoacan,

Mexico

April 15 - 21, 1968

Jean H. Lagassé
Director of Citizenship
Department of the Secretary
of State
Ottawa, CANADA

1595

THE PEOPLE OF INDIAN ANCESTRY IN CANADA

An attempt will be made in this paper to discuss some of the more significant trends and developments affecting or involving people of Indian ancestry in Canada rather than to give statistics about these same people. It is felt that this will give a better understanding of the social, cultural and economic milieu within which that population evolves in Canada.

Thus, after having described in a general way the people of Indian ancestry in Canada, the paper will present some recent events as the participation of people of Indian ancestry in Canada's centennial celebrations in 1967. A special section will deal with the pavilion which the Indians of Canada maintained at Expo '67 and which retained considerable attention and received high praise for the candid and honest way in which it presented the history of Indian-white contacts since discovery.

There will be a section on the Friendship Centre movement which is playing a large role in helping people of Indian ancestry settle in urban areas. Another section will deal with the Indian Act and the changes which are presently being proposed to the Indians for amending the type of policies which guide the administration of the Indian Affairs Branch.

General

Canada has a population of more than 500,000 persons of easily identifiable Indian ancestry. Of this number about half have

acquired a special status by virtue of formal treaties signed with the Crown or by virtue of special benefits which the Government of Canada has undertaken to provide to them. These are generally known as "treaty" or "registered" Indians. The remainder are composed of descendants of Indians who originally refused to avail themselves of these special provisions or have since personally elected to no longer avail themselves of them. An important segment of this group is composed of people of mixed ancestry or Metis who are descendants of the first mixed unions which took place in the period of discovery and colonization.

The Indian people of Canada may be divided into ten basic linguistic groups, subdivided into language groups which, in turn, include many local dialects. East of the Rocky Mountains are the Iroquian, Algonkian, Siouan and Athapaskan. In British Columbia are found the remaining six, i.e. Kootenayan, Salishan, Tsimshyan, Haidan, Wakashan and Tlinkit. Generally speaking, there are considerable differences in the way of life of different tribes based not only on linguistic differences but also on the economic, political and religious factors. In some cases, the same language group is established over great distances. The Algonkian group includes, for example, the Micmacs, in Prince Edward Island on the atlantic coast, and the Cree, to the north of the Mackenzie River on the arctic coast, a distance of some 3,000 air miles. Needless to say the natural resources, employment opportunities and regional economies vary greatly from one area to another which in turn has affected the way each tribe has developed since first White contacts.

In such a widely scattered Indian population affected by divergent social, economic and geographic influences, these Indian groups are to be found in varying stages of development in terms of modern day industrialized development.

By the same token, many Indian people still speak their own language and no other, particularly in the northern trapping and hunting regions. The great majority of the registered Indians speak English and their mother tongue while some 6,000 speak their mother tongue and French. Amongst the Metis, both French and English are used as mother tongues by about the same percentage of families while few have retained the use of an Indian language.

Centennial Celebrations

In the year 1867, Canada officially came into being with the federation of four eastern provinces. Canada is now composed of ten provinces plus the Yukon and Northwest territories. The year 1967 marked the 100th Anniversary of the Proclamation of the British North America Act which gave birth to Canada and Canadians of every walk of life organized all kinds of special events to honor that occasion.

The Indian people came to what is now Canada some 30,000 to 40,000 years ago. Hence the more recent historical developments are generally seen in a different perspective by them. Realizing this, the federal government convened in 1965 a national gathering of Indian leaders to determine what kind of role the Indian people would want to play in the celebrations. The participants were successful in identifying several meaningful themes around which Indians could rally as being of

special interest to them and helping them to make more progress as a people during Canada's second century. The goals were set as follows:

- (a) there should be greatly improved communications among the Indian people of Canada;
- (b) Indian culture and folklore should be preserved by providing assistance to Indian celebrations, pageants, etc.;
- (c) a national Indian Dance troupe should be formed.

In the area of communications, the federal agency for centennial programmes, the Canadian Centennial Commission, helped to launch a number of new Indian organizations while existing organizations received help to rejuvenate or reorganize themselves. In addition to this, the Canadian Indian Youth Council, a national youth organization, held two youth workshops on contemporary Indian affairs aimed primarily at college and high school students. Studies of Indian culture were also included as were programmes designed to help young Indian people in a rapidly changing world to find themselves and in that way increase their self-confidence and their ability to cope with their own problems.

There were also two national meetings of some 26 editors of Indian publications and newsletters. These editors met, exchanged ideas, learned about new equipment and techniques. Because of the geographic distances mentioned earlier, use of the printed word in communications has become of utmost importance in creating and maintaining awareness of Indian people about other Indian people as well as of any developments that could be of interest to people of Indian ancestry. It is hoped that eventually a good Indian press association will develop perhaps with facilities to act as an effective clearing house for

information and programmes.

Celebrations took various forms: Indian dancing, pageants, canoe races, water games and tournaments for games of Indian origin such as la crosse and snow-snaking. The Centennial thus provided an occasion for a kind of renaissance of Indian dances, legends, folklore and languages. Most of these celebrations involved large gatherings of Indian people from various parts of the country and lasted three or four days of dancing, singing, games, etc. Also of interest were the numerous showings of works by Indian painters and sculptors and other art forms throughout Centennial Year.

As for the resolution to form a national troupe, a troupe as such did not come into being. There were, however, two meetings of national Indian representatives from all across Canada to discuss the issue. The venture would have been extremely costly and it became apparent that it would also require considerable time. What in fact happened was the formation of numerous smaller localized dance troupes generally confining their repertoire to one cultural or even one tribal area. It is from these revitalized local groups that a national dance group may eventually arise.

There were also a number of restorations of old Indian sites in order to preserve for future generations the history of the Indian people which is so much a part of Canada.

Perhaps one of the most colorful and imaginative projects undertaken by Indian people during our Centennial Year was that of two canoes peddled by Micmac Indian people from the eastern coast of Canada

in Nova Scotia to Montreal, the site of our Expo '67. They paddled a distance of some 1,200 miles following the water route their forefathers followed when making treaty with the Mohawk and Iroquois along the St. Lawrence River.

The Friendship Centre Movement

There has been a marked increase in the last decade in the number of native people moving from rural communities or reserves to urban areas. In this transitional process, the people involved must make many changes in their way of life and, inevitably, some are not able to cope immediately with their new environment. The frustrations experienced by these individuals eventually become expressed in terms of poor housing, poor health, alcoholism, delinquency, unemployment, etc.

Observing this development, a number of interested and concerned citizens, Indian and non-Indian, initiated discussions and studies from which emerged the concept of some kind of half-way house which would serve as a "bridge" between rural or reserve life and urban living.

The Indian and Metis Friendship Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba, was the first such centre established in 1958. Some twenty centres have been established in different cities to which Indians have converged. These centres provide referral and counselling services as well as recreational facilities. They advise in housing, employment, schooling and generally try to provide help in adjustment to urban life. It should be noted, however, that the aim of these centres is not to de-Indianize the people nor to change an Indian person into a non-Indian or a white man.

Rather these centres work in a cross-cultural situation and it is just as important for the non-Indian to understand the Indian values and way of life as it is necessary for the Indian to understand the non-Indian one.

There are four stages in the development of a Friendship Centre:

1. Urban migration - Until recently, most Canadian cities, even those located close to Indian reserves, saw very few Indians wishing to live in them. The Indian population was small. The country side being less populated produced more wild game, fish and fur-bearing animals. Most Indians were still seeking to make a living from the traditional occupations of their ancestors. However, the situation is now changed. In both Winnipeg and Toronto more than 5,000 Indians have migrated in the last ten years. In other places, the movement is just starting. This is not to say that the reserves have less population than before as they have a high rate of natural increase.

2. Public concern - Once the number of newcomers is high enough to create a visible minority, the different groups in the community began to notice that the Indians experience some problems. Groups are formed to help and eventually they learn about the Friendship Centre formula and try to organize one in their city.

3. Friendship Centres - The first kinds of services to be provided are those of counselling and referral. Adult education and recreational programmes are close seconds. One of the conditions of government financial support is that a centre provide persons of Indian

ancestry with an important or significant role in its programming and management. This has resulted in orienting each centre into becoming the focal point for Indian organizations and for the voicing of Indian aspirations.

4. Indian culture - Not all the centres have reached this last stage. Normally, however, Friendship Centres should become cultural centres in which group expression and pride is as much important, if not more, than the solving of individual problems. Thus, studies in Indian history and culture have been sponsored in those centres.

Indian Organizations

Indian people in Canada have always found it very difficult to organize themselves into effective associations primarily because of the geographic distances mentioned previously and the lack of financial resources for travel and communication. Nevertheless, many organizations were started and tried to maintain at least a minimum of contacts and programmes. In more recent years, they have gained momentum and a greater awareness of the value of united action. Differences between linguistic groups are gradually being replaced by a sort of pan-Canada Indian feeling where the main factor is the fact that one is a descendant of the first inhabitants of the territory.

There are eight provincial Indian organizations, each at a different stage of development and focusing on particular problems. The British Columbia Indian Brotherhood on the west coast evolved as a fisherman union, the North American Indian Brotherhood started as a concern about the land question, and the associations in the three prairie provinces

first started as a result of concern for the provisions of the treaties. The Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick unions are interested in understanding and obtaining better services from both federal and provincial agencies.

One of the stronger organized provincial organizations now has a number of Communication Officers in the field whose job it is to inform the people as to what project and programme aids are available and to help them avail themselves of this assistance. Ability to speak to Indian people in their own language has been a definite advantage in the work of the Communication Officers. This has helped them to receive local grievances and concerns to relate them to the competent government agencies and obtain their cooperation. At the same time, local communities are encouraged to organize their own programmes. Experience is showing that one of the most important contributions is that of providing a good atmosphere for Indian people to plan and administer their own programmes, learning from their experience and skills with each new venture.

In the area of national organizations, the National Indian Council has, for a number of years, attempted to fulfill the role of an umbrella-type organization to which all provincial and local ones could affiliate. However, it never really received the "grass-root" support which is so essential for a national organization if it wants to be an effective representative organization. It did achieve a number of things such as the National Indian Princess Pageant, an annual selection of a "Miss Indian Princess". It also helped form the Canadian Indian Youth Council which has been in existence for some four years. One of the most

significant projects of the CIYC is the Canadian Indian Youth Workshop on Canadian Indian Affairs patterned after the American course in Boulder, Colorado, and providing young adults with higher academic achievements with the opportunity to acquire a similarly high level of understanding of their own culture.

Realizing the hesitancy expressed by many towards its structures, the National Indian Council invited the eight provincial Indian organizations to meet and form a more acceptable substitute. The result was a new organization, the Canadian Indian Brotherhood, for "registered" Indian people, as well as a provisional executive for a national non-registered Indian organization.

In conclusion, Indian people have become much more mobile in the last decade. They are attaching more importance to meetings, to exchanges of ideas and, perhaps no less importantly, to listening to other Indian people with some problems in the hope of finding some common ground in mutual aid and mutual support.

Indians of Canada Pavilion - Expo '67

From the time the initial steps were taken to have a World Exposition in Montreal, Indian people in Canada, through various means and avenues, expressed their desire to have a pavilion of their own that would represent their views, their aspirations, their goals, as they themselves saw and felt them. Indians sought to have a special pavilion wherein their story could be told.

It was decided that the Indian Affairs Branch would look after the financial aspect of erecting and staffing a pavilion and

that the Branch would appoint Indians to plan, administer and host the pavilion. A Mohawk Indian was appointed Commissioner General of the pavilion and a national advisory board of Indian leaders was formed to be its governing body.

A group of Indian artists were invited to submit ideas and sketches for the overall design of the pavilion. The building took the shape of a stylized teepee, the traditional conical plains dwelling. Different Indian artists were retained to execute the three exterior murals of welcome and the fine circular murals on the interior of the pavilion. A Kwakiutl totem pole from British Columbia was placed in front of the pavilion while artifacts of different tribes decorated the interior. Indian girls were selected from all parts of Canada to act as hostesses.

A series of meetings were held in various parts of the country to solicit Indian people's views as to what they would want to say, through the pavilion, to the people of Canada and the world coming to Expo '67. The ideas expressed during these meetings together with some contributions from the National Advisory Board and the Indian artists provided a storyline for the pavilion. The result was a presentation which could have struck a resonant cord with indigenous peoples throughout the world. It started with the way the land was, the birds, the animals and then the people, their values, their philosophy.

For example, "Every man was a brother in spirit and each had the right to be heard with respect around the council fire. Each man needed another for his food, his shelter or his honor. Each had a right and a duty to share with his brother." The next phrase depicted the

coming of the European to Canada: "During his thousands of years of existence on this continent, the Indian no doubt thought of himself as the only human being. Then a much paler man came. He loved the man. Understanding and communion with people, that is what he had to offer ... There was no such thing as an Indian. He was only a man with love." On the treaties: "For the Indians, treaties were less a legal instrument than an act of trust. Few could read English or French ... He understood how to pledge his honor but he could not sign his name. He was certainly not in a position to judge whether these contracts were equitable, either for himself or his posterity."

The storyline then moves to the present and refers to religion, government, reserves, work life and education and the effects of these on the life of Indian people.

As the theme projects into the future one senses that Canadian Indians have a vision of an Indian society which would combine the best of Indian and European civilizations. North American technology paired with traditional Indian philosophy and moral values: "He is grasping the future with one hand while, with the other, he is holding on to the values he wants to keep from his past. If he is going to adapt successfully to modern life, he will have to pull as hard with one hand as with the other." In effect, to participate in the mass technology of the modern age while preserving his personal integrity and the virtues of his fathers.

The pavilion was regarded as one of the better ones at Expo '67 because it presented a candid uninhibited statement about a people's feelings and aspirations. It is now being incorporated into the permanent Expo which is succeeding Expo '67.

A New Path

As mentioned earlier, most legislation of specific application to Indians is embodied in the Indian Act. This Act is revised periodically and far reaching amendments are now being proposed. They have been discussed with the National Indian Advisory Board, and Advisory Board to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. Consultations will now take place with each band to see if the proposed changes will meet their aspirations.

It might be useful to describe a few of the proposed changes as an indication of the trends emerging in Canada in the administration of Indian affairs. It should be borne in mind, though, that these proposed amendments have yet to be discussed with the Indian people at the local level and that the content of the new legislation will depend on the results of these consultations.

In a booklet distributed by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development designed to serve as a discussion handbook for the Canadian people in studying the proposed amendments, the objectives of the government are described in the following way:

"A main objective of the government is that the Indian people shall have full equality of opportunity in society, in education, in employment and in health.

It will take a tremendous effort on the part of the Indian people to reach this goal. Help will be needed from the rest of the Canadian community and from the government. The government's role will have to be quite different from the part it used to play. At one time

almost all of the Indian people's business was done for them by the government. People do not easily learn to manage their own affairs under such a system.

Today there are some Indian bands who manage almost all of their band's business. Many bands are ready to undertake full management of their business and in the years ahead they, and many more, will do so.

While the old days are gone and new attitudes prevail, the new ways have not yet helped all the Indians to do things for themselves. There are some things the government may have to continue to do in the next few years, things which will eventually be done by the Indians themselves.

Equality of opportunity means that housing and community conditions must be such that they will not hold people back from using the opportunities of Canadian life. Full equality of opportunity means that Indian people should be able to mingle freely with their fellow countrymen; that they should enjoy equal political freedom and privileges and should have the full benefit and responsibility of Canadian citizenship."

Amongst the steps proposed to reach this goal are the following:

1. A change in the name of the Act from one which designates the ethnic group (i.e. the Indian Act) to one which would designate the function of the legislation it contains.

2. An increase in the number of people to whom the Minister may delegate authority thereby rendering more decentralization possible.

3. A liberalization of the regulations that define how a person achieves or loses official Indian status thereby enabling more individuals to have whatever legal status corresponds most to their own cultural identity.

4. Amendments in the regulations affecting land ownership and tenure and possession of real estate on the reserve thereby facilitating a more independent economic enterprise by each household.

5. Transfer of authority for the management of estates from the federal minister for Indian Affairs to the individual Indians operating under the estate laws of the provinces.

6. Removal from the Indian Act of regulations concerning the sale of cereal produce and domestic animals leaving each owner to sell on the competitive market.

7. Deletion of the federal regulations concerning alcohol consumption leaving each community to function under the liquor regulations of the province in which they reside.

8. Increase in the authority and independence granted each band council for managing the affairs of their community thereby diminishing federal controls.

The reader will have quickly sensed the central theme permeating all these changes, namely that of leaving as much autonomy as possible to each local unit of administration. Many of the present regulations made at a time when Indians may have needed more protective legislation are now judged to have served their purpose and to be no longer necessary. Self-determination and self-government were the declared goals of the earlier administrations. These goals are well on their way to being realized and the new legislation will represent an impressive new step in that direction.