



Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories

P.O. Box 2338,
Yellowknife, N.W.T.

EXECUTIVE OFFICE

August 11, 1975

Memorandum to: Dear People of the Dene Nation

From: George Erasmus

Re: The Dene Declaration and the Land Settlement

Please find enclosed material for your information as follow up to the recent Joint General Assembly in Fort Simpson. The information is centered around the Dene Declaration with particular reference to our struggle for a just Dene Land claims settlement.

We know the Dene are not white people. We know that the Dene way is different from the white way. We, the Dene, think differently from the way white people do. Although there are many differences between the Dene themselves (for example, the Loucheux and Dogrib speak different languages), we know that these differences are small compared to the difference between the Dene and white people. The Loucheux, Slavey, Hare, Dogrib and Chipewyan have always lived together without interfering with each other's way of life. Trouble for the Dene began with the coming of a very different people, a different "nation"; the white people.

Although the white people recognized the Dene as a nation when they signed the peace treaties with them in 1899 and 1921, they soon forgot. The white people who entered the North not only did not accept the ways of the Dene, but they took away the rights of the Dene by forcing them to accept white ways - white laws, language, education, and government. Finally, the white people began to destroy the very life blood of the Dene - our land.

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This is why a land settlement is necessary for the Dene. When we Dene talk of "land settlement" we are talking of our right to survive as a nation, living according to our ways on our own land. It is because the government does not understand this, or will not accept it, that they see the land settlement differently. The white people want our land so they can continue to develop in their selfish way. They see land differently. They see land the same way they see ski-doo's - something they can buy and sell, something they can "own."

The biggest difference between the land claims issue. Too many people have misunderstood what the land settlement was all about. They think that the difference between the Dene and the government positions is that the Dene are asking for more land and money than the government will give us. This is not the real problem. The truth is that we want to survive as a people, the Dene nation, with the right to govern ourselves (make our own laws), to educate ourselves, to develop ourselves on our own lands. This is what the government will not accept. They will not accept the Dene way and its right to survive.

It was to make this point clear to everyone that the delegates at the Fort Simpson Joint General Assembly agreed to the Dene Declaration of Rights. In that declaration they made it clear that the land settlement is truly "our struggle for the recognition of the Dene nation." The kind of land settlement we are talking about is one which will guarantee the Dene "independence and self-determination within the country of Canada."

The Dene Declaration is therefore a very important statement about the land settlement. It will help other Canadians understand us better. It makes it clear that we are asking only what Canada supports elsewhere in the world. Canada claims to support the rights of nations in Africa, for example, to self-determination. What the Dene Declaration does is to challenge the government of Canada to practice what it preaches at home. The Dene are a nation and as more people realize this they will come to support our land settlement position.

But the Dene Declaration of Rights agreed to in Fort Simpson is just the beginning. As a nation, the Dene must begin to work out together what this means for their future after the land settlement. How will we govern ourselves? How will we keep our nation strong, as a whole, and still recognize the differences between regions, tribes and communities? What kind of education would we give our children if we got back control? What kind of development do we want on our lands? These are questions the Dene nation must answer in time.

The Dene Declaration will grow from this first statement agreed to at Fort Simpson to include many statements about what we Dene believe in. These statements will help explain to others what the Dene nation is. We will change and add to these statements as we gain more experience. They will become a living history of the development of our nation. For one thing is clear, the Dene nation is not a return to the past, but the building of our own society, firmly rooted in our past, but developing under our control to meet the new needs of all our people, both young and old.

Included in this envelope for your consideration is the short Dene Declaration that was approved in principle at the joint general assembly in Fort Simpson - but, also a long version with some specific possible Declaration on terms like Development - ideal and goals of the Dene Nation etc.


Please find the time to go through this material and discuss it with others in your community. Our nation must be preserved and constructively changed or moulded from the communities. Only with direct movement from individuals like yourself will we grow in time with the wishes of local people.

If enough community peoples read and discuss this paper by this October with community meetings etc, perhaps we may bring the long version of the Dene Declaration at the next Indian Brotherhood general assembly - planned for this fall.

If you or others have questions or which more information on the Dene Declaration and how it fits in with our land claims work - or any other question around the concept of the Dene Nation please feel free to contact myself or others at headquarters in Yellowknife - we will be more than pleased to do what we can to explain things to the best of our knowledge. Please call collect or write a letter, what ever.

Take care.

Yours in unity through a strong Dene Nation,


Georges Erasmus,
Community Development.