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by Indian Brotherhood  
of Northwest Territories  
Dene Declaration Colonialism  
Land Claims

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I wish to thank the Native Students of Western Ontario and the University Students Council of Oxfam for the opportunity provided both Phoebe and myself in inviting us to address you. The Dene people of the Mackenzie District are involved in along and difficult struggle in obtaining a land claim and tonight would like to tell you about the land claims, the Dene Declaration and about our position with respect to the proposed natural gas pipeline.

My task of speaking to a southern audience is made easier because of the increasing interest in the North that has resulted from recent activities. The Caveat case of 1973 ruled that we, the Dene, have a right to claim the land; as of today, the appeal of the Crown against that decision has been in favour of the Federal Government on the grounds that no caveat can be filed on unpatented lands. It is important to remember that this appeal was mainly on technical grounds and does not question the Aboriginal rights of the Dene.

As well, the Berger Inquiry is now in full swing and has meant an unprecedented opportunity for our people to present their views, not only on the proposed pipeline, but on our land claim and on the future society we would like to have.

The Dene Declaration has also been in the news and is a statement in English of the way the Dene have always viewed themselves. We are a nation. In using the term nation we are asserting our right to choose the correct English word to describe the way we see our situation.

We believe that this can be accomplished within Canada through negotiation of an agreement with the Federal Government whereby the minimum conditions for our survival will be secured. This is what a land settlement means to us. Though such an agreement we can seek:

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- (1) Self-Determination - We wish to govern ourselves through institutions of our own choice, which we understand and can use to meet our needs.
- (2) Guaranteed long term Political Security - If we are to survive as a people, we must be assured of continuing control over our land and our affairs whatever future political and economic development take place in the North.
- (3) Economic Independence - We cannot have true self determination if we do not have sufficient resources under our control to make our political will effective. A resource base is also necessary to preserve our right to choose economic alternatives designed to meet our own development needs. The Arctic Gas Pipeline is not development in the eyes of the Dene.
- (4) Cultural Survival - We must be recognized for the distinct people we are, and our right to determine the course of our own development must be assured.

The central issue for we Dene is our Land Claim, and we want to take this opportunity to discuss with you some aspects of it which we think are new and exciting. We are saying that we have occupied and used from time immemorial some 450,000 square miles of land, and that therefore we own this land and are entitled to decide, as owners what use should be made of that land. We are saying that when developments do take place, and many already have, we are entitled as owners of the land to receive revenues, or royalties. These royalties could then be used to fund community enterprises and thereby create a viable and long term economic base under the Dene control.

This view of our claim is certainly valid, but it creates certain ambiguities and is, in fact, too narrow a view. Words like "land", "ownership" and "nation" have different meanings to different people.

We have in mind and in particular the different meaning they have to native people and non-native people. Within European society, land means property, or real estate. It is a commodity with a price that can be bought and sold. But to Dene people, land is the essence of our way of life, of our very being and existence. It is not something alien to ourselves but something we must live in harmony with.

These different conceptions of land matter greatly, because they lead to very different actions. We say we own the land, the response of the government, representing the powerful developers is to say: even if you do, that simply means we will pay you money to buy away your aboriginal title and that is, in fact, what happened in both Alaska and James Bay. They find it difficult to understand us when we say: to sell your land would be like selling your soul, and if you force us to do that, you engaged in an act of cultural genocide.

The problem that we Dene have is that these two different concepts meet, and clash, in a highly unequal way, for one is the language of the dominant society and the other the language of a small and beleaguered minority. Because we are the weaker party, we have been forced to attempt to deal with that situation by translating our demands into your way of thinking. So we say: recognize our aboriginal title, and give us title to the land within your European system of property.

But that does not really resolve the situation for the price we have paid to think in the white man's terms and use his language, is that we risk giving up our own way of thinking and doing.

And let there be no mistake about it. European people, their institutions, and their system are radically different from the Dene and their institutions and system. The differences are such that just as a Dene is confused and mystified by the European system, so few Europeans have any real understanding of the Dene system. European people talk of private property and competition. The Dene talk of community and sharing. European people talk of investments which will pay off in five or ten years and have little regard for long-term consequences. The Dene think of their children and their grandchildren. These examples only scratch the surface of differences that run deeply.

We do not mean, of course, that all white people think that way, but there is little doubt that the most powerful do. Nor do all Dene still relate fully to our traditional way of thought, but that is only to say that our values are already being eroded by those of the dominant society.

But what is striking is that the Dene system has survived in spite of decades of blatant attempts to destroy it. And something that is coming our

very clearly in the community hearings before Justice Berger is that Dene both young and old, are not just saying "stop development" in a negative way. They are calling in a very positive way for the restoration of any cultural values and traditions which they have already lost.

Our land claim grows out of an evolving and dynamic situation. For when we say "we own the land" we are making a fundamental statement about our identity as a people and about our rights as a people.

For us to be compatible with our people, we must go beyond property rights and talk of human rights. We must go beyond talking of our rights as owners of the land and talk of our rights as a people to self-determination. We must go beyond talking of the Dene as a minority within a European system and talk frankly of colonialism.

Now we are all aware of colonialism when we see it outside of Canada. We know that in the last three decades there has been an awakening of colonized people around the world and that today there is a Third World that is struggling for self-determination and throwing off the yoke of colonialism.

But just as there is a Third World of poor and oppressed people, so there is within many countries, including Canada, native minorities that are oppressed and colonized. They constitute what George Manuel of the National Indian Brotherhood calls the Fourth World, the world of internal colonialism. We too want, and are prepared to struggle for, self-determination and recognition as a distinct people.

We know it may be difficult for some Canadians to admit this internal colonialism, so let me take a moment to spell out some of the ways in which it manifests itself. It consists, in the first place of years of effort by the dominant society to destroy our language, our culture and our institutions. Other men's truths are taught to our children. Our way of life is said to be irrelevant to the modern world. The wisdom of our old people is ignored. In short, our essence as Dene people is degraded and we are made to feel the inferiority of the colonized.

Or consider the mundane matter of oil and gas, and the proposed pipeline. When the Dene try to protect our rights we are told by the companies and

Government that we must not stand in the way of projects that will benefit all Canadians. Well, let us assume for the moment that the gas is really needed in the south, and that is a very big assumption given the way in which the companies manipulate figures. Let us further assume that the companies and a government which listens to them very carefully, is really able to define the public interest, and that is another very big assumption. What would still be true is that the rights of the Dene would be pushed aside for what is at best the convenience and minor comforts of an affluent society. That is surely colonialism of a very real nature no matter what rhetoric is used.

Some people are now willing to admit that Dene land was stolen in the past but they have difficulty seeing that it is still going on. Father Rene Fumoleau's book "As Long as This Land Shall Last" shows very clearly that the treaties which were signed with us historically, with some fraud on the part of the government were motivated by a very particular conception of the public interest. Treaty 8 was offered to us in 1899 in response to the discovery of gold in the Yukon in 1896. Treaty 11 was offered to us in 1921 in response to the discovery of oil near Fort Norman in 1920.

The object of the Treaties was to extinguish aboriginal title and open the way for exploitation of the land. In return for \$5 each and the promise of reserves the government claims we gave up our land. We Dene know that we never agreed to extinguish title. The Treaties were not land cession Treaties but peace and friendship Treaties. The Dene version of the Treaties was found by Justice Morrow to have sufficient substance to justify the filing of the caveat.

Now in 1975 the government wants a land settlement with us, a kind of modern version of the Treaty with more than \$5 for each Dene but still with the same object of getting our land. This time it is in response to the discovery of oil and gas at Prudhoe Bay in Alaska in 1969.

Nothing has really changed and the colonialism of the past persists as the colonialism of today.

Another clear manifestation of colonialism is when a distinct people have alien institutions imposed upon them. Yet that is exactly what has happened to the native people of the North as Canada has unilaterally extended her

sovereignty over us. A clear example is the present Territorial Council with its Sergeant-at-arms and points-of-order and first, second, and third readings and so on. Dene and Inuit Councilors from the settlements may be initially confused, but they soon become frustrated and angry. For what does it mean to have a native majority on the Council--a matter of which the Government of Canada now boasts--when the institution itself is utterly foreign to the native mode of thought and action?

But this colonialism in the political institutions of the North is even more obvious. For the Territorial Council really doesn't have any power anyway it is an arm of the Federal Government. The government probably figures it's not much of a risk to let natives run a puppet government. What the North is about to the developers, and the Canadian Government, is it non-renewable resources, and control over these remains securely vested in Ottawa.

For the Dene, like ourselves, the N.W.T. Government is illegitimate in many areas. It pretends to have authority over native people and tries to deal with the issue of land claims which is not their prerogative.

Even that is not the end of the story about the nature of colonialism. When we look at the Third World, we quickly see that real power still often lies with big companies, and they often engage in very exploitative practices toward people who are poor and oppressed. It is therefore of some interest to discover that the very companies who sometimes engage in very reprehensible practices abroad are also operating in the Canadian North. And that the Government of Canada which helps these companies in their foreign operations also helps them in their operations in the Canadian North, notwithstanding objections from concerned citizens.

Let me give you a couple of examples. The first is Falconbridge Nickel, a company with large Canadian operations, though it is ultimately controlled by Superior Oil in Texas. In the Mackenzie District, Falconbridge owns Giant Yellowknife Mines which has become infamous for producing arsenic as well as gold with predictable bad effects on the native people and the workers. As well, Falconbridge's sister company, Canadian Superior Oil, is a member of the Arctic Gas consortium that wants to build the gas pipeline.

When it comes to the Third World, Falconbridge has a record that we know some of you in this audience know of. It operates in the Dominican Republic, the Union of South Africa, Southwest Africa and Rhodesia. I suppose a company that practices that kind of racism abroad doesn't find it too burdensome to its conscience to put a little arsenic into the drinking water of the Dene people of the Yellowknife Band.

A second example is Brascan. Though it's a Canadian company, it's biggest operations have been and still are, in Brazil. They presently include a big ranching operation on Indian land or Deneland. And neither Brascan, nor the Canadian Government, seems to have gotten at all upset about dealing with a country which has been known to practice literal genocide against Indians.

That bothers the Dene in the North, not only because we have a feeling of solidarity with aboriginal people throughout the world, but because Brascan has recently begun to operate in a bigger way within Canada and in the process is penetrating the North. Already Brascan owns minority interests in the Hudson's Bay Company, in Elf Oil which has oil and gas rights in the Western Arctic, and in Magnorth Petroleum which holds 14 million offshore acres in the Arctic Islands.

We think that all this demonstrated pretty clearly that colonialism is alive and well in the north. There are, in fact, two Norths. On the one hand there is the North as the last frontier of the big developers for whom the name of the game is resource exploitation, and to whom we Dene are a nuisance and a relic from the past. On the other hand, there is the North that is the homeland of the original people, now struggling to assert our right to self-determination and resolved to build a world in which we can flourish indefinitely. Are we not entitled to ask: which side are you on?

As we move to assert our rights, we are increasingly asked just as oppressed people elsewhere in the world have been asked what do you want?

To begin with I am sure that if the Dene were given a choice we would choose to be left alone, and to be allowed to relate to the rest of the world on our terms. We are a separate and distinct people, who were made Canadians by degree and not by free choice, and our first choice would understandably

be to be a sovereign people.

But we are few in number and have some understanding of power, so our present range of choice must be tempered by realism. It is our fate to be part of this country, but we live in the last part of Canada where native people are still in the majority and what we want is maximum self-determination within the context of that unique situation. We want the Northwest Territory to be seen not as the last frontier of the white man, but as that part of Canada where native people can be given the opportunity to create their own institutions, including political institutions. When all is said and done that is what we mean when we say we own the land and that we want a just and equitable settlement of our land claim.

We Indian people are constantly told that we must change, that we must not resist progress. But it sometimes seems to me that it is the white man who resists change, and insists on going on in the same old way plundering resources with little regard for the air, the water, the land and the animals and ultimately, the rights and welfare of people. Hopefully it is not too presumptuous, at least to this audience, to suggest that it is the white man who must change and who must cease to resist the progress being made in the movements of oppressed people in many parts of the world. For we know that what we are doing in the N.W.T. is moving toward liberation from the clutches of the colonial system and toward the time when every native woman, man, and child will be responsible and self-liberated.