

NOTES FOR SPEECH

BY

JAMES J. WAH-SHEE

PRESIDENT

INDIAN BROTHERHOOD OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

TO

NATIONAL CONFERENCE

OIL, CHEMICAL AND ATOMIC WORKERS INTERNATIONAL UNION

TORONTO

SEPTEMBER 15, 1975

RECENT HISTORY OF THE DENE IN THE N W T.

In 1899, and again in 1921, when Treaties 8 and 11 were signed, the Dene of the Northwest Territories were recognized as nations by the Canadian government and the Queen. The Dene were not aware of the secret purpose of the government at that time -- to rob the Dene of their land and resources -- and were happy to sign what they saw to be peace treaties. The treaties guaranteed the rights of the Dene in return for peaceful passage on their land. At the same time the Government of Canada undertook a constitutional obligation to protect the interests of the Dene.

As awareness of the value of Dene lands grew, the government conveniently overlooked its side of the bargain and the Dene found themselves voiceless in the face of increasing invasion of their rights and theft of their land and resources. In the late 60's, it became necessary to organize to protect those rights and the land the Dene depended on. The Indian Brotherhood of the N.W.T. and the Metis Association of the N.W.T. were formed in the early 70's and the struggle intensified as the federal government consolidated its colonial grasp by imposing foreign institutions on the Dene -- the Territorial government, compulsory schooling and so forth.

The Dene became aware of the government version of the Treaties which claimed the Dene had sold their life - blood, the land, for \$5 per person per year, and they were shocked. It was clear that the government not only was not keeping its side of the bargain, but was actively engaged in undermining Dene rights and Dene society. The Chiefs were forced to go to court to establish their right to file a caveat on their traditional lands and the Supreme Court upheld that right in a famous decision in 1973.

The government continued to ignore the legitimate position of the Dene and fought the decision on technical grounds. In addition they implied that all that remained was for the Dene to take reserves for the bargain to be finalized.

At Fort Good Hope in June 1974 the Dene met and stated their position that they had never relinquished their right of the land and that they wished their rights as original owners and inhabitants of the land to be formally

recognized before any further development was allowed to proceed. This was and is a legitimate and heartfelt position.

The federal government has rejected it - rejected our reality - and persisted in ignoring the most vital fact of all - that the Dene as a people are inseparable from their land, and their survival is therefore the chief motive behind their present position. The government has persisted in treating land as a commodity to be bought and sold and has implied that a land settlement is merely a commodity exchange.

This confusion could not be allowed to continue, and in July of this year at our second Dene Assembly, representatives of all 25 Dene communities, 300 people in all, decided to publish the Dene Declaration of Rights. This Declaration was intended to restate a reality which was recognized at the time of the Treaties, though conveniently overlooked since, that the Dene are **a people**, a nation with a distinct world view, with an identity tied to their relationship with the land. The land settlement issue is not a matter of commodity exchange, but a question of national survival for the Dene. We cannot be bought off. We will not melt away.

THE DENE DECLARATION IS NOT A SEPARATIST STATEMENT

The Dene Declaration is a statement in English of the way the Dene have always viewed themselves. We are a nation. This is not a wish but a reality. We know it or be true and the government must face up to it. What the Dene Declaration seeks to establish is our right to survive as a nation.

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. Through such an agreement we seek;

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 lands and our affairs whatever future political and economic developments 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 Artic 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. For example, it is ridiculous to pretend that only white people are equipped to "educate" the Dene. This situation must change.

The Dene Declaration and the kind of land settlement proposed by the Dene represents an unusual creative possibility for the government and people of Canada to avoid the errors of the past.

THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES ARE A COLONY

The Dene are a colonized people. This is an uncomfortable reality the government of Canada cannot escape. Pious claims that the federal government represents the interests of the people of the north, let alone the Dene, are illegitimate insofar as we are not governed by democratic choice.

The federal government cannot create the pretense of democracy by imposing its will upon us, by forcing us to adopt its institutions and its development goals. We must be allowed to negotiate the terms of our participation in this country. We must be allowed to negotiate as equals, not from a position of inferiority. We are Canadians, and we seek equal rights.

MINISTER BUCHANAN HAS BETRAYED OUR TRUST

From the beginning of our struggle to establish our rights, the Dene have attempted to achieve their aims through legitimate channels. We have been patient. We have spoken from the heart. We have sought to avoid the mistakes of the past. The response from the constitutional guardian of our rights - the federal government - has been disappointing and most recently, under Minister Buchanan, it has been devious.

As long ago as June 1974 we stated our negotiating position. The federal government chose not to respond and instead pretended that the heart felt view of Indian people was not a serious negotiating position! What could be more serious?

We have pointed out that any settlement which sought to extinguish our rights would not guarantee our right to survival. We pointed to the lesson of history where such settlements have been genocidal in their effect on the Indian peoples. We pointed to the creative developmental possibilities in our approach.

The poverty of the federal government's response has been disconcerting. Government response has been limited to a continuing insistence on extinguishing our rights and promises to involve us in such destructive projects as the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline. Could the government which pretends to speak for us really be intent on destroying us?

Most recently, our trust in the federal government has been completely shattered by the Minister of Indian Affairs, Judd Buchanan. Following the approval of the Dene Declaration by our Dene Assembly in July I wrote to the Minister, on August 6, explaining the intent of the Declaration. I assured him that it was not a separatist document. On September 1st the Dene land claims committee, including representatives from all regions of the Mackenzie District met with the Minister to clarify unambiguously the positive purpose of the Declaration. Again, we assured him that we sought self-determination within Canada. Furthermore, we issued a press release following that meeting emphasizing this point.

Last week in Yellowknife Minister Buchanan held a press conference dull in every respect except one - it was clearly his objective to represent the Dene Declaration as a separatist document. The picture emerged of this valiant guardian of Canadian integrity saying "no" to northern native separatists! The minister also had the effrontery to call for "trust and mutual respect" in land settlement negotiations! We have no alternative but to conclude that the minister is indulging in crude, and deliberate misrepresentation of the position of the Dene. Quite apart from the questionable future of negotiations with this man, the damage done to the faith the Dene have expressed in legitimate processes for achieving their aims will be hard to repair.

WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO NEGOTIATE ON OUR TERMS

We have put forward our position on a land claim as long ago as June of last year and told the Government we were

prepared to begin on what everyone knows will be the long and arduous process of negotiating a settlement. The Government response has been to say that they don't like our claim and that we should make concessions prior to negotiation. It is as if you as a union had one thing that really mattered to you and management told you: Sorry, that's not negotiable. I don't imagine you would tolerate that and neither will we. Surely a minimum right that we should have is the right to have our position taken seriously, and not be required to hopelessly compromise our position before negotiations even begin. That right is something that we are asking people in the south to support us on. We need your help to pressure the government to go to the bargaining table and break an impasse that is of its own making.

NO PIPELINE BEFORE A LAND SETTLEMENT

The Government also engages in misrepresentation with respect to the need for a gas pipeline and with respect to the costs that would be imposed on native people by building one without respect to our wishes. Understandably, we are not prepared to simply let the government and the pipeline companies ride roughshod over our rights as the original owners and inhabitants of the land through which a pipeline would run. We have hunted, fished and trapped on this land since time immemorial. We react to the companies wanting to seize this land to get oil and gas and minerals the same way as people in Toronto presumably would if we Dene marched south and said we were going to tear all the buildings down so that we could hunt and trap here.

To put it bluntly, we do not want a pipeline for we have good reason to fear the disruption of our lives and the possibility that we shall be virtually destroyed as a people. But our position is a realistic one -- "no pipeline before a land settlement". Our land claim says that we Dene have the right to decide what goes on on Dene land. To permit a major project like a pipeline to proceed without a land settlement would be in complete contradiction of our claim and is intolerable to us. Let us instead have a just and equitable land settlement made between ourselves and the government, and the decision about a pipeline would then be made in the context of the rights that we Dene would then have.

Government misrepresentation with respect to the need for a pipeline consists of giving the official stamp of approval to the propaganda of the oil and gas companies. That propaganda is now so heavy that we are compelled to expose ourselves to it in order to watch the Saturday night hockey game.

We are told that northern gas is urgently needed for southern markets, but there are serious people who have serious doubts both about the urgency of the need in the south and about how much gas there really is in the north.

If you read the newspaper, you know that the final decision about a Mackenzie Valley Pipeline will be made by Gerald Ford, who wants to do something dramatic to improve his chances of re-election. I can only say that we Dene deeply resent being pawns in that particular game. The Canadian Government, through the Minister of Indian Affairs, has a constitutional obligation to protect Indian people. They have no similar obligation to help re-elect Gerald Ford.

This is not to say that we do not recognize that many Canadians are genuinely concerned over the so-called energy crisis. We recognize that energy is needed to heat your homes and provide jobs for you in factories. But what I want to say to you is that I hope you will not let the government and the companies whip up fears at the expense of our rights as the original inhabitants of the North. We are not an unreasonable people. Negotiate with us. Do not simply destroy us.

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

In the North today a mighty struggle is going on between the big developers on the one side and we native people on the other side. To the big companies, -- like Imperial, Gulf, Shell, Cominco, Falconbridge and Brascan -- the North is a new frontier to exploit for profit. They want to determine the course of northern development, politically, socially and economically, just as they appear to be doing successfully in the rest of Canada. To we native people, the North is our homeland, and we want it to be a place where we can live, and our children and our grandchildren. We want to have the right to determine the course of northern development, politically, socially and economically.

When all is said and done, what I am saying to you and generally to the people in the South is: which side are you on?