

16 Bands of N.W.T. Indians Take Action to Protect Rights

The sixteen bands of the N.W.T. represented by the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories on April 2, 1973 took action to protect their rights to land in the Treaty 8 and 11 areas, comprising 320, 000,000 acres.

The action, which was decided upon by the chiefs of the sixteen bands last March 24,

takes the form of a legal caveat against any and all crown land transfers in the area specified in the document.

This constitutes a land freeze in the MacKenzie Delta and part of the Western Arctic. It is believed that if registered the caveat would impose severe limitations upon the north in regards to northern develop-

ment.

This means that until May 15 at least, all crown land in the area cannot be bought, sold, or otherwise transferred.

There are several factors which influenced the chiefs to make this strong decision but perhaps the most imperative one was the numerous changes taking place all around them and

the threat to the foundation of their life-style, the land.

Although Treaties 8 and 11 were signed in 1899 and 1921, respectively, the interpretation by the signers (Federal Crown and the Indian people of the N.W.T.), are radically different. The government contends that these treaties constitute a surrender of land by the Indian

people and all rights to it for the generous settlement of one square mile for every family of five.

We reject this contention and maintain that these treaties were peace treaties and not land cessations and on that basis we have never accepted the terms of the land allocation. It is our belief that we still hold aboriginal rights to this land and are the only owners of it.

It is the belief that we own the land and the special status that the land has in our culture and religion that has led to our confusion and dismay at the treatment that the government has accorded us in relation to our land.

The government has paid less than cursory interest to our requests and demands for recognition of our rights. They have played a sham game of consultation with us. This game consisted of them listening to us when they felt like it but never allowing any real dialogue to be established.

The game has continued long enough. The Indian people of the North know of the responsibility that the Federal Government has to protect and uphold their rights in relation to Indian lands. We also know that the Government has shirked their duty in this matter in pursuit of northern development.

In this quest for northern development land that is rightly, ours has been taken by speculators and entrepreneurs. This has gone on to such an extent, with no government intervention on our behalf, that we are compelled to protect our own property rights as any other group of citizens would.

We are not asking that development of the north stop. We ask that the government recognize our ownership to the land and the way that changes are affecting us.

We want the government of Canada to work with us as partners in the development of North so that we may make the contribution to all of society that we as a people are capable of, but we feel that the government has not adopted this harmonious and amicable attitude. We remind the government that the treaties we signed were peace treaties. We are no longer the enemy.

It is our aim and goal to work in full cooperation with the government for the benefit of our people. We only wish that the government would adopt a similar attitude.

We must have our claims fairly settled before we can determine how we can learn to live with the changes that your society is so rapidly making upon us. For us to move completely in tune with northern development and so that our people will be able to live with it and prosper from it we must have an economic base.

It is our hope and wish that this economic base will be provided by the just settlement of our claim.

When the government decides that they will develop a dialogue and deal with us on just terms than we can move out of the courts and to the more civilized bargaining table.

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